

## SEXUALITY AND THE MINISTRY OF THE CHURCH

*A summary of a sermon preached by Fr Roderick Walsh in St Michael's Church, Edgemead, on Sunday 5<sup>th</sup> August 2018*

**Introduction.** Around us, largely unseen, is a world, a relatively small world, of people whose experience of their sexuality is different to that of most of us. When I speak of people of homosexual orientation, and in same-sex relationships, I am not thinking of Gay Bars and furtive meetings in dark places, any more than, when I speak of heterosexual relationships, I am thinking of Brothels and Strip Clubs. Other than their sexual orientation, homosexuals are exactly like the rest of society and share the hopes and fears of us all; a longing for happiness, love, acceptance, security; and a fear of exclusion and rejection.

For twenty years, since the Lambeth Conference of 1998, the Anglican Church has been engaged in prayer and debate, grappling with the diversity of sexual orientation as it impacts ministry, leadership and the reality of same-sex unions, while *"making every effort to maintain the unity of the Spirit in the bond of peace"*. (Eph 4:2, by happy co-incidence part of the reading for the day).

This process of seeking a way forward together is to continue in the Diocese of Saldanha Bay at the Synod to be held in October. A Motion relating to Human Sexuality is on the Agenda, and parishioners have received a copy of it via email. Bishop Raphael has issued a call to parishes to engage in open forums so that their representatives to Synod may be able to articulate something of the views and feelings of the congregations they represent. Accordingly, St Michael's is set to hold such a forum on Sunday 2<sup>nd</sup> September.

**The Aim of this Sermon** is to offer to parishioners some thoughts and guidelines to bear in mind as we approach this forum. I present four key principles which I hope will help us in our discussions together.

1. **People of Same-sex Orientation are a Persecuted Minority.** This has been so throughout history and continues to be so today. Their rejection is based on a deadly combination of ignorance, fear and hatred, each leading to and inflaming the other. Persecution, of any group for any cause, can never be justified by Christians and we therefore need to be all the more careful and cautious, and mindful of our attitudes, as we approach this conversation. We are talking about people, not theories or doctrines.
2. **The Condition of Same-sex Orientation is not well understood.** We have to say that we do not know enough to speak with assurance. Is the condition a matter of choice? Is it genetic? Hormonal? An orientation determined 'in utero'? Does it derive from the environment, or from one's upbringing? We do not know. There is, however, growing medical and sociological evidence that calls into question many of the attitudes and beliefs that we have been accustomed to hold.

One example of this research is a study, "Diversity in Human Sexuality", published in 2015 by The Academy of Science of South Africa (ASSAf). This, and other such papers on the theme, deserve our careful attention. It is a mark of Anglicanism that we hold together people of widely diverse opinions. That is as it should be, but our opinions must be informed opinions. We have a duty to inform ourselves and constantly to subject our attitudes to the influence of deeper truths and wider testimony. Anything less is prejudice, which is the seed of all hatred and persecution. *In Biblical times, people suffering from conditions such as leprosy (a term covering a host of skin diseases) and epilepsy were regarded as outcast or demon-possessed. Attitudes have changed precisely as we have come to understand these conditions more fully.*

3. **Holy Scripture and “The Word of God”.** The phrase “The Word of God” generally evokes one of two innate understandings in Christians. To some, the Word is the Bible. To others, the Word is Christ himself. This subtle but significant variation is at the heart of what we call “Biblical Interpretation”. Is the Bible the Word of God? ... or does the Bible reveal the Word of God? Is the Word of God primarily (A), a Book? ... or (B), a Person? This hardly-noticed difference tends, slowly, to separate Christians in divergent directions and it is important to recognise the trends in each.

If (A), the tendency is towards ... rules, law, religion, rigidity, the passing of judgement ...

If (B), the tendency is towards ... mystery, risk, uncertainty, faith, intimacy, compassion,  
grief, joy ...

The account in John Chapter 5 of the dispute between the Pharisees - *“You are breaking the Sabbath Commandment”*, and Jesus - *“You search the scriptures because you think that in them you have eternal life ... ”* can be helpful to us as we face the tensions inherent in the interpretation of the Holy Scriptures.

Jesus often tells his disciples, and us, “Leave everything and follow me”. What does that mean? I happen to own two motor cars. Are the Lord’s words about possessions? ... or something deeper? If so, what?

4. **Experience.** When I was sent to St Paul’s Theological College in 1984, at the height of the debate about the Ordination of Women to the Priesthood, I was fairly set against the idea of women priests. I suppose that I remembered Paul’s words to Timothy, *“I permit no woman to teach or have authority over a man; she is to keep silent”* (1 Tim 2:12) It was at College that I came to know and share the experience of women who were testing what they believed to be a calling from God to the priesthood. That experience turned what had been a debate about Bible verses and points of view rather than people into a personal journey of discovery and faith. In the same way, the subject presently before us requires not simply debate about homosexuality but the profound engagement with Gay and Lesbian people on a personal and respectful level. To share the journey of a same-sex couple who have been in a covenanted relationship for many years leads one to recognise how closely their relationship reflects the vow in the marriage service, “Will you love, comfort, honour and protect your partner and, forsaking all others, keep yourselves only for the other as long as you both shall live?”.

**Conclusion.** I offer you these four points to serve as guiding principles for us as we approach, and prepare ourselves for, the open forum we shall hold on the first Sunday next month. It is my appeal that we all listen carefully, ponder deeply and think over what we read and hear. Our prayer should be the risky one, “Your will be done”. When we speak, let us express our views gently, remembering that we have been wrong about things in the past and might, in twenty years’ time, need to acknowledge that we were wrong here as well. This is not an argument to be won, nor is it a cause to be defended or a battle that we are called to fight. It is a

conversation about people, not about theories or policies, held in the sight of God and offered to him with the humility and reverence that is appropriate to us all.

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