

Sunday 6th August 2017 Cathedral, Grahamstown 7.30 & 9.30 a.m.		9th Sunday after Pentecost (18th Sunday of the year) Series on 1 Corinthians (Part 2)
Genesis 1:26-31	Ps 139:1-4, 12-16	1 Corinthians 6:9-11
		Matthew 22:34-40
HOMOSEXUALITY – LGBTQI++ - AND THE CHURCH		

“For you have created my inward parts: you knit me together in my mother’s womb... You knew my soul and my bones were not hidden from you... Your eyes saw my limbs when they were yet imperfect... Day by day they were fashioned: and in your book were all my members written...” (Ps 139:12-16)

INTRODUCTION

We continue today with our series on the first letter of St Paul to the church in the city of Corinth (1 Corinthians). Thus far we have explored two themes that we find in 1 Corinthians: Christian Marriage; Singleness (widows/widowers; those who are divorced; single parents; and those living on their own.) Today we embark on what is probably the most controversial in our sermon series: Homosexuality. Or, to put it more broadly and inclusively, the LGBTQI++ community: all who identify themselves as something other than heterosexual – the standard picture of opposite gender attraction and intimacy - boy and girl, man and woman, male and female.

I am very grateful to the team from Inclusive and Affirming Ministries (IAM) who are with us here today. We have invited them to help us dialogue together on this important matter.

1st point – GENDER, SEXUALITY, IDENTITY

We are familiar from early childhood with gender differences. A baby is born, and the first thing that the doctor says is “It’s a girl!” or “It’s a boy!” Adolescents and teenagers, young adults, fall in love, are physically and emotionally drawn to others. It is a time for

crushes and dates, romance and relationships, an unfolding longing for intimacy. The two big questions that our daughters thought about for their matric dances were “what will I wear?” and “who is my date going to be?” And until recently it would be highly unusual, even unthinkable, for a matric dance partner to be someone of the same gender. While girls might take other girls along to a dance as their date, and quite happily dance together, two boys going along on a date, or, say, to a matric dance together, would raise eyebrows. But much of this is changing.

A recent article in *Time* magazine¹ wrote of the growing diversity and fluidity in the experience and understanding of gender and sexuality. Transgender, gender fluid, bisexual, sexual attraction moving between heterosexual and homosexual; the whole question and debate around sexual orientation and gender identity; the move to have gender-neutral bathrooms and toilets. Our younger daughter at university in Stellenbosch is staying in a co-ed res, and is on a corridor with a shared bathroom for male and female students. It takes getting used to. As that particular part of the res had been for male students until the beginning of the year, the girls walked in and immediately requested some urgent alterations - like putting curtains on the shower cubicles!

These changes are part of a wider move away from discriminatory practices, a move that our schools and universities are making. In a recent statement², St Andrew’s College here in Grahamstown, had the following to say, “We are guided by our Christian ethos based on a strong Anglican foundation....we have a diverse group of staff and students, and we embrace and value that diversity....We affirm all people regardless of their age, culture, disabilities, ethnic origin, **gender, gender identity**, marital status, nationality, race, religion, **sexual orientation**, and socioeconomic status.” (my emphasis). We have to take seriously people’s experiences of discrimination, pain and exclusion, whether in our schools, at university, places of work,

¹ *Time*, March 27th, 2017. “Infinite Identities”, by Katy Steinmetz

² *Strategic Thinking Imbizo*. Bedford, Eastern Cape, May 2017. Printed by SAC Printing Unit July 2017

or within the life of the church. The recent furore around events at St John's College, Johannesburg, has underlined this.

While the vast majority of people are born as either male or female, there is a broad spectrum of human sexuality, orientation and identity. And increasingly people are coming out as different from the accepted norm. This is not an easy road. Historically, much of society, including the church, has side-lined, marginalised or actively persecuted those who do not fit into the perceived norm of the "straight" heterosexual male-female relationship. While a heterosexual relationship and orientation is the experience for most people, it is increasingly clear that not everyone is "wired" in this way. This raises a number of questions.

How do we respond to, and live with, difference? Is this wide diversity a sign of unhealthy lifestyle, poor choices, brokenness, sin? Or it is a sign of liberation, freedom, empowerment and choice? Are we in danger, as the church, of being sucked into a destructive, secular lifestyle and practice? Or are we being prompted to recognise the bigger picture and make room?

2nd point – SODOM, GOMORRAH, ETC.

One way we engage with these matters is in the reading and interpretation of scripture. There are a number of biblical texts that are often referred to, when Christians are discussing same sex relationships. Most of us are probably familiar with the traditional understanding or interpretation of these passages. It is easy to find commentaries or voices that argue for "strong scriptural and Jewish condemnation"³ of homosexual – same sex - practice. I am deliberately going to present a different voice. And at the end of it all, I shall be asking the question whether there may in fact be space, within our Christian tradition and belief, for the recognition and acceptance of committed same-sex relationships. In this overview of relevant scripture passages, we are asking – so what exactly are the

³ Dunn & Rogerson (eds.) 2003. *Eerdmans Commentary on the Bible*, 1326

biblical writers talking about? What is being condemned or pronounced upon, here?

Genesis 19:1-29 – the story of Sodom and Gomorrah, where the threat of homosexual gang rape is used as a weapon against foreigners. Lot has taken the two strangers into his house for the night; the men of Sodom demand to see these strangers “that we may know them”; Lot offers his daughters instead – horrific! – but the men of Sodom insist on the strangers being sent out so that they can deal with them. What they are threatening and intending to do, is gang rape.

Judges 19:1-30 – a male Levite and his concubine⁴ (female partner) are given hospitality in the city of Gibeah. A hostile mob gathers outside the house, demanding that the male foreigner is sent outside so that they can sexually abuse him. The host, in desperation, offers women from the household in order to appease the mob. The mob accepts this offer. The concubine is pushed outside, where she is raped and abused through the night, until she dies.

In both instances, the action or intention of these mobs – gang rape, whether male on male, or male on female - is condemned in the biblical witness. Their behaviour is horrific and vile. In both cases, those responsible are destroyed – Sodom by the fire of God; the city of Gibeah by the surrounding Israelite tribes.

To this day, a terrible part of conquest and warfare, defeat in battle, is humiliation: the gang rape of women, girls, and also of men. It is an extreme example of absolute power and control over another.

Leviticus 18:22 & 20:13 “You shall not lie with a male as with a woman; it is an abomination” (Lev 18:22); “If a man lies with a male as with a woman, both of them have committed an abomination” (Lev 20:13)

⁴ Concubine – a woman used as a sexual partner but without a marriage contract

Both these texts may have referred to “male ... prostitutes....The pagan cults that tempted the Israelites during this time in their history involved the activity of female as well as male prostitutes... their worship [practices] ... featured both heterosexual and homosexual prostitution (Deut 23:17-18).”⁵

“...both of these are abhorrent to the Lord your God.” (Deut 23:18). Why? What is being forbidden? What is an abomination? Sex, prostitution – whether by males or females - in the context of worship.

Romans 1:26-27 – “Their women exchanged natural intercourse for unnatural, and in the same way also the men, giving up natural intercourse with women, were consumed with passion for one another. Men committed shameless acts with men and received in their own persons the due penalty for their error.” (Rom 1:26-27)

What was this unnatural intercourse? What were these shameless acts?

In New Testament times, it appears that there was publicly prominent same-sex behaviour, but it was violent or exploitative.

“Military victors raped prisoners of war... Masters took advantage of slaves whether male or female as a demonstration of power and dominance over them. Homosexual prostitution was practiced as part of pagan worship. Within Greek society, young boys provided sexual favours to older men in exchange for training and social patronage. And Roman emperors such as Caligula and Nero claimed sexual victims of both genders, male and female. Caligula publicly shamed and sexually humiliated one of the military officers who would later lead the attack on him [to murder him].”⁶

⁵ Achtemeier, M. 2014 *The Bible's Yes to same-sex marriage. An evangelical's change of heart.* Westminster John Knox Press. 82

⁶ Ibid, 92-93

St Paul saw such same-sex activity “as the product of out-of-control lust...[it was] violent or sacrilegious or exploitative; [it] arose out of huge power imbalances or unbridled lusts.”⁷

“Out-of-control passions have no ability to foster the mutual, loving gift of one’s whole self to another person in accordance with God’s intentions.”⁸

So what is being addressed and condemned is out of control lust, the abuse of power, sex between adult men and underage boys, sexual humiliation.

1 Timothy 1:10 – “...the law is laid down not for the innocent, but for the lawless and disobedient, for the godless and sinful, for the unholy and profane, for those who kill their father or mother, for murderers, fornicators, sodomites, slave-traders, liars, perjurers, and whatever else is contrary to the sound teaching that conforms to the glorious gospel of the blessed God...” (1 Tim 1:9-11)

“fornicators, sodomites, slave-traders” – these three grouped together “may be a ... reference to the sex trade that developed in the Roman Empire, using young boys who were captured and subsequently castrated by the military in conquered territories... fornicators, sodomites and slave traders may... refer to the customers, the victims, and the profiteers who were involved in these horrible human trafficking operations.”⁹

Jude 7 – “...Sodom and Gomorrah and the surrounding cities, which ... indulged in sexual immorality and pursued unnatural lust, serve as an example by undergoing a punishment of eternal fire.” (Jude 7)

The writer of the letter of Jude is condemning the same-sex gang rape behaviour of the men of Sodom.

⁷ Ibid, 94

⁸ Ibid, 94-95

⁹ Ibid, 100-101

1 Corinthians 6:9-10 – “Do not be deceived! Fornicators, idolaters, adulterers, male prostitutes, sodomites, thieves, the greedy, drunkards, revilers, robbers – none of these will inherit the kingdom of God.” (1 Cor 6:10)

Male prostitutes, sodomites – Paul was referring to same sex behaviour that was exploitative, linked to pagan worship, or that involved older men and young boys – the sexual abuse of children.

3rd point – CHRISTIAN SAME SEX RELATIONSHIPS

In the light of all this, is there space, within our Christian tradition and belief, for the recognition and acceptance of committed same-sex relationships?

The Bible is silent on a number of issues. There is no mention in the Old or New Testament to sexual orientation – it is simply assumed that everyone is either male or female. We do not find any specific reference to someone who is gay, or lesbian, or transgender, or bi-sexual. There is no obvious recognition that people of the same sex may love one another (though David and Jonathan come close to this) or seek to be in a committed, mutually loving relationship. We can’t therefore take a particular text of scripture and use it to guide us. Instead, we need to use some general principles, themes, to help us on our way.

What are these principles or themes? I suggest four.

- We are all created in the image of God (Gen 1:26)
- We have all been made by God, formed, “knitted together in my mother’s womb” (Ps 139:12)
- Our relationships with one another, with others, are based on the principle of love – “you are to love your neighbour as you love yourself” (Matt 22:39).

- Our intimate relationships with one another should have mutual respect, reverence, love for one another, “be subject to one another out of reverence for Christ” (Eph 5:21)

There is no room in the kingdom of God for abuse or domination or exploitation. Behaviour which is an expression of the power of one over the other is unhealthy and destructive. We say, in line with the key texts we explored earlier - a clear no to all forms of rape and abuse, we say no to the abuse and exploitation of children, no to sex with under-age teens, no to human trafficking, no to prostitution, no to “blessers” – older men giving money and gifts to young girls, in exchange for sexual favours. The misuse and cheapening of sex, whether hetero-sexual or homosexual, is unacceptable.

On the contrary, relationships which are loving, committed, faithful, stable, are to be encouraged – certainly between heterosexual couples – between men and women. And I suggest that Christians can with integrity recognise such relationships of love, commitment, faithfulness and stability between same sex couples as well.

There is plenty of evidence in the Bible and in our daily life of appalling abuse by men of women; we don’t therefore ban or exclude all male-female relationships. In the same way, when there is abuse in the Bible and in daily life – rape, exploitation – in some same sex behaviour, we don’t need to ban or exclude all same sex relationships.

Wherever we find ourselves in this matter, and whatever our understanding of our own sexuality may be, let’s recognise that those who are different amongst us are our brothers and sisters. How do we include and welcome, and not reject or exclude? Some churches would rather not even talk about these things; some churches have agreed to bless same sex marriages, conduct blessings of same sex couples. Between these two responses is the question you and I need to ask and answer: how do we embrace, rather than condemn? Lesbian women who are victims of “corrective rape”? Transgender students? A gay couple who wish for their relationship to be blessed

in church? Or who bring their adopted child for baptism and a place to belong, within the church family? How do parents respond when their son or daughter comes out as gay or lesbian? Do we reject, throw them out? Do we love and embrace?

CONCLUSION

Let our yardstick, our measuring rod, be that of love. Deep love, that cares deeply, that gives unconditionally, that embraces without judgement.

Let our attitudes to those who are different be full of grace and love.

May God help us and give us grace in our friendships, in our families, in our marriages, in our intimate relationships.

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August 2017