

'A gift of God in creation' - a theology of inclusion and grace.

First of all, thank you to John for the invitation to speak here today and to St Mark's for hosting us all. It is good to be here and to know that there are places like this across the Church of England, places that are passionate about their faith, and passionate about justice and equality. And it is good to be with you - people who love mercy, seek justice and want to walk humbly with our God. People who are willing to pray for and to work for the change that we long to see.

I'm here to talk to you about the Campaign for Equal Marriage, and why it is necessary, and how it can, I believe help the Church of England rediscover some of the integrity that it has lost.

Stephen Parsons, a Church of England vicar and blogger, wrote recently that:

'integrity' is one which has many facets. It is closely aligned to another word 'wholeness'. Both words speak of human flourishing in terms of health, honesty and goodness. Integrity has a special link with the idea of moral trustworthiness. A person of integrity is someone who can never betray moral principles in order to preserve their own interests or those of another party, such as an institution.'

So let me tell you a story.

A friend was recently licensed to a parish and prior to that licensing they had an interview with their new bishop. This friend is in a relationship with a person of the same sex and inevitably the Bishop, clearly deeply embarrassed asked my friend whether they were having sex. My friend, with admirable swiftness of thought, replied 'Not at the moment, Bishop, I am having coffee with you.' The Bishop looks uncomfortable and didn't pursue the conversation.

Now, whilst amusing as an anecdote as to the absurdity of the Church of England's current patterns of behaviour, what does the exchange do to the integrity of both of them?

The Bishop can, of course, claim that he has asked "the question" - as he is currently required to do - and been given a satisfactory answer. The priest can console themselves with their wit, that they didn't lie, and that the Bishop was left in no doubt as to the reality of their relationship with their partner. Both are in different ways compromised and their integrity devalued by a Church that puts them in such a situation.

The Bishop's integrity is lost because he knows what the real answer is and is none the less pretending to himself and importantly to anyone who asks that it isn't what he knows to be true. The priest's integrity is lost because they know that the rules of the Church are clear that they should be celibate, and that they are breaking those rules with the full knowledge of their Bishop and expecting that nothing will be done about it.

The Church of England officially regards any sexual relationship outside of the marriage of one man and one woman for life as sinful and wrong, as wrong as that of an adulterer. That includes everyone in a Civil Partnership and everyone in a same sex marriage. (I think it's best not to go into the convenient fictions surrounding 'for life'). The priest, and countless others who have been encouraged into Civil Partnerships in recent years could, if it were proved, be liable to a Clergy Discipline Measure being brought against them. Though it is hard to imagine how such a case would be brought and arguably no Bishop would want such a charge to be made. But maybe one day an angry ex-partner will bring such a case. Angry people can do nasty things.

Now, to be clear, I intend no criticism of my friend or of any priest placed in this situation by the Church of England. They are faced with an unenviable choice between honesty and some form of dissembling if they wish to exercise a priestly ministry, and many are content to allow the truth to remain known but unspoken. Few, I think, would want to condemn them for this game of deceptions and half-truths that they are forced to play with the full knowledge of the hierarchy. Not everyone is in my situation where I could walk away and lose my home, my job and community and still know that there would be food on the table and a secure old age. I am fortunate to be married to a man who can provide.

But as a consequence of the fear behind all this, the lack of integrity is widespread across the Church at all levels. It is there in the meetings between gay and lesbian prospective ordinands and their DDO's, in theological colleges and at ordinations every summer where newly minted curates celebrate with their lovers and partners and at licensing where clergy are introduced to parishes, often with their partners known but sadly unacknowledged in public.

It is a fear and a lack of integrity that lies at the heart of the ministry of the Church of England and the policies governing it. A fear and a lack of integrity that the Bishops encourage and know to be damaging but which they regard as a convenient if it saves them from addressing the truth of the lives of many of their clergy. It enables them to hold onto an imagined loyalty to a regime in the Church of England that they believe that they

must value above the truth even as they know it lacks integrity, and the cost that it brings to many of their clergy.

The House of Bishops contains many allies who are aware of the impact of the current practise on the integrity of the Church of England, and as has been said 'Integrity has a special link with the idea of moral trustworthiness'. There can be no doubt that any society will question the moral worth of any community that knowingly allows such a fundamental lack of integrity to corrupt its very heart.

The Campaign for Equal Marriage in the Church of England is working to restore integrity on this in the Church. We have three simple goals. They are simply that

- We believe that same-sex couples should be able to be married in Church of England parishes.
- We believe that people in such marriages should have the same opportunities for lay and ordained ministry in the Church of England as anyone else.
- We believe that the consciences of everyone should be protected – no member of the clergy should be forced to conduct a marriage they disagree with. No member of the clergy should be prevented from celebrating a marriage involving a same-gender couple.

Once it is possible for gay couples, clergy and lay, to marry in Church this fear, this lack of integrity, and with it all the lying and the hiding all go away. The Church of England doesn't need to pretend that everyone agrees, because we already don't on a host of other issues. We admit difference of opinion over the ordination of women, over the remarriage of divorcees and even over the use of vestments in Church. Some members of the Church believe in the Communion of Saints, prayers for the dead and the Real Presence of Christ in the Eucharist. Some seem to believe in the subordination of women and complementarianism. We manage, poorly it has to be admitted, with these differences, but we do manage. There is no good reason, that I can see, other than yet more fear, for not managing over this issue.

The need for that change is obvious to everyone, an increasing majority see nothing wrong in faithful, monogamous, and lifelong gay and lesbian marriage and our leaders are out of step, and they are giving away their moral authority in ignoring this. And change has to be not simply change in the way that LGBTI people are treated. Gender, sexuality, mental health, disability, ethnicity, and in our response to the poor and those in distress

the Church of England is simply not leading the search for either a moral or a Christian response to the great social challenges of our age. And right at this moment the Independent Inquiry into Child Sex Abuse is exposing the Church's failings in the abuse of power, the use of silence and the scapegoating of victims.

Those failings are all our failings, because the consequences of hiding of abuse, the protecting of abusers and the demonising and failing of victims affects every one of us in the Church.

Those failings influence the way that the wider public views the Church of England and have implications for our mission and our ability to serve the communities in which we are placed.

Those failings are a source of concern and of shame because we believe and have hope in God and that message of hope is being lost, and in being lost it we are losing the opportunity to share that message of hope.

But we are people of faith, we believe in the grace of God and the possibility of change, so we must have hope for change. Harvey Milk, a gay activist in San Francisco who was murdered for his sexuality reminds us – 'You cannot live on hope alone. But without hope, life is not worth living.'

So, today is about going beyond hope, whilst holding onto it, and finding our ways through to action and work. Our focus is on LGBTI issues and gender but the principles and approaches that we are looking at today aren't simply about finding a response to the presence of gay people in the Church and in the wider world. Nor is it just about understanding the connections between the continuing search for equality for women and the struggle for the acceptance of the lives and loves of gay people. What we are exploring today will be tools for examining and responding to all the different challenges that the Church faces. Hopefully at the end of today you will go away inspired and full of ideas, and with determination and confidence for the struggle in which each of us is involved. Because just as marriage is 'a gift of God in creation and a means of God's grace' so is the gift of our sexuality and the gift of our gender, and until the Church understands that that it will not be fully whole, it will not be fully itself, and it will not be the Kingdom of God.

At the start of the day I want to lay out a three principles which I think are important is helping us shape the theology of grace and hope that we need to release the gift of God that is in us.

The first principle is that we who seek change and integrity must fight against the idea that the debate on marriage equality is between 'revisionists' who want to abandon the Bible and replace it with the views of

wider secular society and those who are faithful to the plain sense of Scripture.

That said, like the priest and author Marcus Green, I am happy to be called a revisionist. I am happy to claim it, as Marcus does, and as people before me claimed the term gay and queer and made them badges of honour rather than shame. To be a re-visionist is to be someone who is engaged in 're-visioning' the Church, in seeking a new confidence, and a bolder hope. I am a proud, gay men, a queer Christian and a re-visionist.

I want to be part of a movement that has lively vision and wants to use that vision to shape the Church. I believe that seeking that fresh vision is what each one of us is called to do and that we are here today engaged in that is a hopeful and positive sign of life in the Church of God.

As we seek that vision within Scripture we must bring to it the world in which we live and learn to respond to the world around us and engage with that world, so that our faith can resonate with our world as it is now, not simply as we imagine it was when the Bible was written. We will only be able to speak authentically to others about our faith if we can do so with an intimate knowledge and understanding of our world here and now. If we refuse to engage or pretend that we are not part of that world then we can only fail in understanding and inevitably in being understood. We might say a lot, but no one is going to be listening.

But that vision must flow also from the foundations of our faith, and those foundations are in Scripture, as well as in tradition, experience and the use of our reason. As affirming? Christians we must reject the notion that we are not interested in the Bible and what it says. It is our foundational text and without it we are cast adrift from our ancestors in faith and from contemporary Christians around the world who read it as we do every day.

Yes, science and modern medicine and psychology tell us things that our ancestors in the faith could never have imagined or known. It is also true that the culture and world view within which they lived, which formed their thinking and in which they wrote is vastly different from today. But none the less we are people of the Book and we must be able to say with Andrew Davidson:

Holy Scripture, inspired by God's Holy Spirit, and written, compiled and handed down by generations of the people of God, is central to Christian discipleship. We do not contest this claim.¹

¹ Andrew Davison Amazing Love. P 38

What do we need to get across with grace and humility is that we **are** disputing the idea that there is one simple, uncontested and plain sense of Scripture on this subject. Just as the Church has been able to understand that there are legitimate differences of opinion on other major theological issues then it must come to understand that there are legitimate differences of opinion on these issues as well. In that process we will be able to say with Dr Loveday Alexander that we want to:

Stay with the Bible but we have to find a way of making sense of it in a world that is very different from the world (or rather worlds) in which it was written²

I am excited that we have Janet Morely here today to help us discover the roots of this!

I do have a caveat on this approach – I think that there will need to be limits. It is all very well to say that some may wish to think that marriage is reserved for straight people, whilst we celebrate and host them in our own churches. I am less comfortable with any solution that settles on allowing some to say that being gay is sinful, and that we are uniquely an expression of the Fall, which is what I have heard and read in some places. Once the decision is made then the decision is made, and though we should never seek to force clergy and parishes to offer services of marriage if they cannot in conscience do so, I do think that we must draw a line at abusive theology and practise. The official position of the Church of England is that it is possible to refuse to receive the ministry of ordained women. I personally do not think it should be possible to be ordained in the Church of England if one does not believe that women are legally and properly so ordained, even if refraining from receiving their ministry. The same principle should apply to marriage equality and the full inclusion of LGBTI people in the Church of England.

The second principle is that our theology must be rooted not just in Scripture, but also in our experience of God as we seek to find ways of living our faith authentically as individuals in the community of faith.

Liberation theologians argue that theology should be

a theology of the people, undertaken by everyday people within their communities; a theology found amongst the people as it addresses the needs of the poorest in the church and occurs wherever the “people of God” gather. ⁱ

So we must argue that we need to listen to the words of those who experience the Church not as a place of liberation and freedom but as a place of oppression and harm. The Church needs to listen to the experience

² Homosexuality and the Bible. Dr Loveday Alexander in Grace and Disagreement. 2014

of LGBTI people, of the abused and of women. For LGBTI people we must learn to hear what we are saying about our lives, what is the real impact of the Church's teaching and practise on our physical and mental health. The Church must listen to the experience we have of our relationships, our Civil Partnerships and our marriages and of our faith. It means listening to the stories of those who have been through the full gamut of the abuse that the Church throws at us. It means hearing, actually hearing not just listening to, but hearing the damage and harm done by an insistence on enforced celibacy and by conversion therapy, and by 'healing prayer'.

It means taking LGBTI people seriously when we say that we know who we are, and that we know and love God, and that we know that God knows and love us. It means accepting, as the Archbishop of Canterbury said, 'there no problems here, there are simply people'.

Brett Webb Mitchel is a gay minister in the United Methodist Church. The governing body of the UMC recently rejected a motion to affirm the lives of gay people and imposed disciplinary action against its gay and lesbian clergy. This has precipitated a split between the liberal and progressive heartland of the Church in North America and its many sister branches in more conservative sub Saharan Africa. Church after Church in the States is refusing to implement the disciplinary code against its gay and lesbian clergy, and ordinations of gay and lesbian ministers, and the celebration of marriages are taking place. Brett wrote in a recent sermon about the Magnificat saying:

LGBTQ+ clergy are still without power, and are considered the lowly, vulnerable, who hunger and thirst for equality and safety within and among their other non-LGBTQ+ UMC clergy colleagues and members. But a new day is coming, around the bend, in which those who are proud and powerful, who think they are able to stop the inevitable march towards justice and equality in the UMC, will, sooner or later, be broken and scattered, sent away empty. For God's Spirit of love, mercy, peace, and justice, among LGBGTQ+ and non-LGBTQ+ members is clearly moving within the UMC today. After all, this, too is in the Bible.³

Now, gay people aren't the only ones who can lay claim to Scripture in this way and it would be wrong of me to pretend that we have some unique claim to being heard, and to primacy in the struggles of the Church of England. Every woman in this room can probably hear everything that I have just said and translate it into their own experience of the Church, and there are plenty of people here who can mix up both the Churches struggles with

³ Brett Webb Mitchel <https://www.umi.org/blogdetail/greater-nw-pride-re-hearing-the-magnificat-as-a-gay-pastor-12573574>

gender with its struggles with sexuality, and mental health, disability and so on. The struggle for equality isn't about one just one thing, it is about understanding that the struggle of one, is the struggle of all, and that until all are treated equally and without prejudice then none of us are truly free.

And the final principle must be that for the Church to be truly responsive integrity it must also learn to understand that there can be no discussion about us without us present in the room, and free to say what we need to say and most importantly to help shape what comes out of that room. It is not enough to have meetings with gay and lesbian people, to talk about us and to apologise for past mistakes and then to shut us out when the decisions are being made. That has happened too much in the past and continues to happen even now in the current Living in love and faith process.

One of the major differences between the struggle for the ordination of women and that over the lives of gay people in the Church is that during the long and painful debate over the ordination of women nearly every diocese appointed members of staff to support, encourage and enable women in ministry. Bishops and Archdeacons felt able to be open and honest about their position on that issue and the Church was able to have an open and frank, if still fractious and at times deeply unpleasant argument about it.

Currently there is one official LGBTI officer, in Brighton, and his remit is not to listen and support but to publicly explain the Church's official position to the gay community, as if we are on the outside wanting to understand and be converted to the official way of thinking, rather than throughout the life and ministry of the Church living day in and day out with the consequences of its homophobic policies and attitudes.

The Campaign for Equal Marriage acknowledges the dilemma for the House of Bishops as they seek to lead a Church in which it seems a vocal and powerful minority see discrimination against gay and lesbian people as a "divine command" and the increasing majority who see it as abhorrent and morally wrong. But they have to understand that until they recognise that the current situation is unsustainable, and morally and ethically wrong they and the Church in which we live and work will lack integrity. And without integrity the Church dies a little bit every day as the Kingdom of God.

Thank you.

Additional material, not part of what was delivered on the day.

Stephen Parsons concludes his piece with the following words ‘ The Church will always honour the memory of people of integrity and honour. It will be less impressed by those who followed the way of toeing the party line, even when they knew that line to be false and dishonest.’ That is certainly true of those who have defended and hidden the scandal of clergy abuse, and the current failings of the Church of England to respond to the cry for justice from those who have been hurt.

Theologically, we continue to debate homosexuality and related issues in the church, sometimes positively, sometimes negatively, but such discussions are rarely dull and I trust my contribution here may add to such debates, bringing a new approach for consideration. At the end of the day, the question for each of us as Christians must be, have I loved and served Jesus Christ as well as I could? It was Christ who told us to love God fully with heart, mind, soul and strength, and to love our neighbour as ourselves, explaining that this summed up all aspects of Scripture. He seemed clear that the practice of this included everyone, and gave no implication that

‘neighbour’ excluded anyone. The fulfilment of this command, I believe, sits at the heart of any argument that encompasses inclusion as a tenet of Christian fellowship, and so to practice exclusion must surely raise a serious question regarding how we are fulfilling Christ’s command. ⁱⁱ

It is Elizabeth Stuart who brilliantly, albeit with irony, uses the allegory of a football match to summarize perfectly the current battle faced by the LGBT community when theology has for so long been predominantly written and discussed by white, middle aged, male heterosexual theologians:

“Those of us who are lesbian, gay or bisexual have sat on the sidelines watching scholars tackling each other for the ball of our lives. When the fundamentalist gets hold of it he kicks it into the goal marked, ‘perversion deliberately chosen, explicitly condemned by God’s word, get cured or get out of the church.’ When the conservative gets hold of it he kicks it into the goal marked ‘not deliberately chosen, probably born that way, but activity still condemned by God’s word – it is OK to be it, not OK to engage in genital acts.’ The angst-ridden liberal kicks the ball back and forwards, up and down the pitch; finally he stands in the middle and declares that, whereas scripture and tradition undoubtedly condemn homosexual acts, they did not know as much about homosexuality as we do today; so although the Church has a duty to uphold the idea of heterosexual marriage, because that is what scripture and tradition do, homosexual relationships might be looked upon as falling short of this ideal but not sinful as such because they can’t help it. He then scuttles off the pitch before the crowd and the players can get him. The radical bounces the ball up and down on his head, doing amazing tricks whilst he explains: ‘Yes, marriage is the ideal, but lesbian and gay people are perfectly capable of marriage.’ . . . He awaits the adoration of the crowd but the only sounds are of splatters of rage coming out of the fundamentalist and the conservative, and the anxious perspiring of the liberal in the changing room. He turns to the crowd: ‘What do you want, then?’ he shouts in exasperation. And with one voice the answer booms: ‘Can we have our ball back please?’” [1]

ⁱ Boff, *Introducing Liberation Theology*, p.20.

ⁱⁱ Elaine Ambrose. *Tears in God’s wineskin*. Introduction