

Sermon

“Marriage and Resurrection”

This sermon is here, even though it is largely based on Bishop Randerson's Sermon, as food for thought, and encouragement to many in need of such support.

To read his complete sermon, go to:

<http://www.stmatthews.org.nz/nav.php?id=1291&sid=574>

Luke 20:27-38

38 “Now God is God not of the dead, but of the living; for to God all of them are alive.”

First I want to take this opportunity, as many gay couples wait to be married here, and may be disappointed again by the decisions of the High Court, to reflect on marriage.

The understanding of marriage proposed in the Sadducees story, seems to have no relevance whatsoever to today, and they didn't even believe in resurrection, which is another matter. Their concept of marriage is based on a very different understanding, that marriage is for the production of an heir, and by implication, that sex is for procreation. It was a very different society. Women were protected by their relationship to the men in their lives.

Our understanding of marriage has changed a lot over the years.

Richard Randerson, retired Assisting Bishop of Auckland in a sermon preached in September last year in response to debate in New Zealand over gay marriage, said:

'This morning I want to share with you why I feel a gay marriage can be consistent with Christian principles, and how I have come to this point of view over a period of many years.'

I agree with what he has to say and feel it is relevant to us in the ACT to hear right now.

Bishop Randerson continues,

'At the same time I want to emphasise that this is my personal view, and that I have every respect for those who hold a different view, or are in the process of thinking through their own views. There are diverse views, conscientiously held, within the Body of Christ. We need to listen carefully to the views of others. I believe God is leading us all in a new journey of discovery, and strident claims of 'right' and 'wrong' are not appropriate to the debate.

Such claims are also very damaging to gay and lesbian people who have suffered centuries of rejection, with painful consequences. It was only in 1986 that homosexual relationships between men were decriminalized in New Zealand, and not until 1993 that the passing of the Human Rights Act made discrimination against homosexuals illegal.' He says.

Some churches have condemned homosexuality as sinful, with messages such as “hate the sin but love the sinner”. Some such churches have offered programmes for gay people to “cure” them of their “sin”. Just this week there has been the case of an Australian doctor, a member of the Exclusive Brethren Church, who has been struck off as a GP for prescribing a chemical castration drug to suppress a man's homosexuality. Other churches have kept silence lest they upset parishioners. Often I have found that the parents of gay and lesbian offspring have suffered by association in the face of church silence or condemnation.

There is a broad spectrum of types of sexual relationships, everything from promiscuous and abusive relationships at one end of the spectrum to a sexual relationship at the other end that arose from a deep love and ongoing commitment to another person. What matters is not so much where we might currently be on the spectrum, but what we aspire to, viz. a committed relationship grounded in love.

There are two key principles of marriage set out in the Prayer Book: first, that marriage is a gift of God so that “husband and wife should be united in heart, body and soul...and in their union fulfil their love for one another”. And second, “marriage is given to provide the stability necessary for family life, so that children might be cared for lovingly and grow to full maturity.”

The definition says clearly “husband and wife”. But we should note that the Anglican definition of marriage has changed over the years. In the 1662 Prayer Book, for example, there were very different reasons stated for marriage. The first reason was for the procreation of children. The second was as a “remedy against sin, and to avoid fornication”. And third, it was “for the mutual society, help and comfort that one ought to have for the other, both in prosperity and adversity”. Additionally, the woman promised that she would not only obey her husband, but also serve him. So the relationship was not one of equality, and the union of husband and wife came in as the last of the three purposes, whereas today we regard it as the foundation of everything else.

If the Church’s understanding of marriage has changed along the way, can we now modify it again to be inclusive of gay and lesbian couples? Can same-sex couples be “united in heart, body and soul...and in their union fulfil their love for each other”? Can same-sex couples “provide the stability necessary for family life, so that children might be cared for lovingly and grow to full maturity”? The answer to both questions is Yes, based on the evidence of the number of same-sex couples in long-term committed relationships, and on the basis of research that shows children may be cared for equally well in same-sex families as in heterosexual ones.

It has taken me some years to come to this position, and I have done so on the basis of my personal friendship with gay couples in committed relationships. As the Rev’d Glynn Cardy stated in the Auckland Synod on Friday: “In our time and place, given what we know about homosexuality not being an aberration, given that many gay and lesbian people are and have long been faithful members of our church, given that many gay and lesbian couples have shown in their lives the fruits of grace, aroha, and service, and given that some gay and lesbian couples are now asking for marriage, let us re-consider what we – in the light of God’s Spirit – think is the essence of this marriage rite”.

A very important part of the debate centres around what the Bible says. Many opponents of same-sex relationships believe they are clearly prohibited by scripture. There are several problems with this view:

There are only a handful of biblical texts quoted with regard to same-sex relationships, and in some it is not at all clear such relationships are the subject of the texts quoted.

While same-sex relationships appear to be condemned in passages such as Romans 1.26,27, the context is one of debauched behaviours that belong to people who “refuse to keep in mind the true knowledge about God” (v.28)... “who have no conscience, and show no kindness or pity for others” (v.31). Faithlessness and debauchery are not the marks of the gay and lesbian couples I know.

Nowhere in scripture is the concept of loving, committed same-sex relationships envisaged. One cannot find a biblical text on this subject any more than one can find something about nuclear bombs or genetic modification. Reference must be made to more underlying biblical principles.

Even if a text could be found, scripture always needs to be interpreted in the light of current knowledge. Thus St Paul’s very clear statements that men have authority over women are a reflection of the patriarchal culture of the day. It is a concept seen as inappropriate in today’s context where the biblical principle about equality in Christ is seen as the deeper and overriding truth. Although sadly the former Archbishop of Sydney still believes wives should promise to submit to their husbands in their marriage vows.

Part of our current knowledge about sexual orientation is that homosexuality is not a sin or aberration, but is as natural for many in our society as hetero-sexuality is for others.

If we look to scripture for deeper principles that might underlie all relationships, they are ones of love for God and love for neighbour, and the belief that in love for God and others we might come to maturity in Christ, and have a care for the well-being of others. Within these general parameters there is the special relationship that can exist between a man and a woman, a relationship that can be paralleled in a same-sex context.

Archbishop Rowan Williams established at Oxford University in the 1980s an institute for the study of Christianity and sexuality. His research led him to conclude that biblical teaching on sexual relationships puts as much emphasis on bonding, with its essential ingredients of love and fidelity, as it does on human reproduction. There are many gay and lesbian people in the Church around the world, including clergy and doubtless some bishops. They are people of integrity in living and conviction in believing. Archbishop Williams' emphasis on bonding as a central criterion supports the view that faithful and committed same-sex relationships are also acceptable in the eyes of God. The ethical criterion is to do with the quality of the relationship, not the orientation of the partners.

A final question: why have same-sex marriage? Aren't civil unions effectively the same? To quote Glynn Cardy again: "For Anglicans marriage is a holy sacrament. Marriage has the potential to acknowledge and strengthen stable, committed relationships. Good marriages benefit the community and for many express values of long-term loving mutuality and faithfulness. I hope that we will have the grace to recognize that some couples of the same gender also exhibit these qualities and want to partake of this sacrament. To continue to deny them is to weaken the integrity of the sacrament itself".

Randerson concludes:

'The world is in constant change, and we change with it. Change is seldom easy; it is often marked by controversy and pain. But if we allow our thinking to be guided by the grace of God, and with love and respect for one another, then I believe God will lead us to an understanding that may well lie beyond where any of us have yet got to, one that will be life-giving and inclusive of all.'

Jesus answers the Sadducees,

38 "Now God is God not of the dead, but of the living; for to him all of them are alive."

God continues to care so that there is also no end to being the focus of that care. Such a theology forces an agnosticism about death. The same theology needs to re-engage issues of sexuality and the values which have controlled it.'

loader

On Friday night, Nikolai and I watched again that wonderful Swedish Film

As It Is in Heaven. It is a story of people being released to be themselves through love. It is about really singing. It is about being alive.

It focuses on a lonely but gifted conductor, whose yearning is to create music that will open the heart.

Daniel Dareus is a famous and respected international conductor who has concerts lined up for the next eight years. But following a heart attack, he decides to change the speed and direction of his life. He heads back to the small village where he grew up. Daniel moves into the old primary school and becomes the church choir master.

The famous outsider gives these amateur singers a real workout with a series of vocal and physical exercises designed to teach them how to truly listen, how to tap into their own distinctive tones, and how to work together and not compete with each other. The people of that choir come alive, including a young man with intellectual disabilities, a gifted singer who is regularly beaten by her husband, an elderly woman who is hard of hearing but open to

adventure, and the sexually repressed minister's wife. The one member of the choir who is convinced that Daniel is a malevolent man who is using everyone for his own twisted needs is Arne's wife, a Puritan whose Christianity has made her into a very critical and judgmental woman.

For Daniel, the biggest surprise is that his love for these quirky people enables him to at last fulfill the mission of his life: "to create music that will open a person's heart."

Daniel composes a song for Gabriella, the woman who has been living in a violent abusive marriage with a husband who regularly beats her. She is finally convinced to sing it at the village concert. She comes alive, and gains the strength to leave him, because of singing this song:

<http://lyricstranslate.com>

Gabriella's Song

It is now that my life is mine
I've got this short time on earth
And my longing has brought me here
All I lacked and all I gained

And yet it's the way that I chose
My trust was far beyond words
That has shown me a little bit
Of the heaven I've never found

I want to feel I'm alive
All my living days
I will live as I desire
I want to feel I'm alive
Knowing I was good enough

I have never lost who I was
I have only left it sleeping
Maybe I never had a choice
Just the will to stay alive

All I want is to be happy being who I am
To be strong and to be free
To see day arise from night
I am here and my life is only mine
And the heaven I thought was there
I'll discover it there somewhere

I want to feel that I've lived my life

God's desire for us, I believe is that we are truly, fully alive, and know we are unconditionally loved by God, always.

Susanna Pain
10 November 2013