



AUTUMN EDUCATION PROGRAMME 2010

**The Alpha and the Omega – the First and the Last
The Bible Opened for All**

“We need to befriend rather than repress our bodies and dig down to the roots of our calling as fully sexual persons, all of us ... and from there learn to live together in peace!”

Being Biblical, Being Gay

Clare Herbert and Arnold Browne

ST MARTIN-IN-THE-FIELDS

Being Biblical, Being Gay

Lecture 2 in the St Martin-in-the-Fields Education Programme
The Alpha and the Omega, the First and the Last: The Bible Opened for All

Delivered by Clare Herbert and Arnold Browne at St Martin-in-the-Fields, London

Clare Herbert

Thank you for your kind introduction and invitation to speak this evening.

I have asked Arnold to speak beside me on the same platform tonight for two reasons. Arnold is not gay but straight, but believes that the issue of the use of the Bible in an oppressive way to encourage shame and therefore keep us silent over sexual experience is unhelpful – renders all of us “in the closet” if you like, and secondly because in these talks which involve no little degree of self-exposure its quite possible to become so defensive that one either dries up all together or starts to throw things – neither is very useful so I hope Arnold’s wise presence beside me may prevent both!

I look forward to hearing your questions later but meanwhile the question I bring to this evening is “How is it possible to be both faithful to the Bible and out and proud?” What does it mean that I call myself both biblical and gay.

Arnold Browne

How have my gay friends shown me how to take the Bible more seriously?

I am very pleased indeed to be speaking alongside Clare this evening. Earlier in the year we were involved together in a Day Conference on ‘Sexuality and Human Flourishing’. Many of those initiating and enabling the event were gay Christians, but on the day there was a good balance of participants in terms of gender and sexual orientation, and the transgendered community was also well represented. In conversation with one another we learned that for all of us our sexuality has the capacity both to inhibit and to enrich our relationships with God and with one another, and we listened and learned together. I believe that the Bible, with its variety of voices, with its always holding together the Old and the New, also engages us in conversation with God and with one another. We know this through our worship, where we not only listen to lessons Old and New, but where we also use the words of Scripture to speak to God, in the psalms (‘The Lord is my shepherd’), the canticles (‘My soul magnifies the Lord’), and the hymns (‘At the name of Jesus every knee should bend’). And so, arising from such conversations, my question this evening is “How have my gay friends shown me how to take the Bible more seriously?”

Clare Herbert

So to my question – what do I mean when I say that I am biblical and gay?

At the first lecture in this series the Dean of King’s, Revd Dr Richard Burridge made a proposal about what it might mean to be a biblical Christian. His proposal was based on his own in depth study of the ways in which Christians on both sides of the arguments about the abolition of slavery and later the ending of Apartheid remained faithful and obedient as they saw it to the text of the Bible. By his close study of both those lengthy periods of debate in world and church history he

demonstrated how the text of the Bible can be used to back up completely different and widely opposed moral viewpoints by Christians who would call themselves biblical.

He demonstrated particularly how biblical Christians may draw rules, principles, guiding paradigms and world views from the texts of the Bible which are utterly different from one another and may indeed oppose another. So for example let us focus on the use of Biblical Paradigms and take our examples from the hot debates going on over being gay or lesbian in the Church. If we take the figure of Lazarus and use his raising from the dead by Jesus as **paradigmatic** for how we live, then one group of biblical Christians who are trying, say, to be healed of a same sex orientation may say that they see themselves as entombed while engaging in sinful sexual practices from which they hope Jesus will release them. But another group of biblical Christians might well say that for them Jesus has called them as gay and lesbian people out of a tomb of loneliness and fear to live out and proud, in love with the new life God has given them. The same biblical paradigm may be used differently. Or take **principles** drawn from the Bible. One group of biblical Christians might well take the Genesis narrative to indicate that its quite clear to them what principle is being developed here – men and women, following the example of Adam and Eve are to live in complementary roles of husband and wife together in marriage. While another group of biblical Christians might well say what we see to be at stake here is the principle that people should not live alone and endure the loneliness that Adam sensed to be contrary to his nature but in pairings of intimacy and community. Same biblical text, different guiding principles drawn. And the same differences of opinion will exist if we seek **rules** in the Bible or **world views**.

Unfortunately, at this moment in the life of the world wide church this choosing differently and in opposition to one another is causing such acrimonious debate between Christians that even the fabric of existence as one Communion is threatened. It is therefore imperative that we find an enriched texture to this phrase being a biblical Christian so that it enhances both the possibility of lightened suffering for people who are unjustly oppressed, and so that both sides in ethical arguments can grow forwards together as one race, one church, one common humanity – pursuing one vision if in different ways.

Richard suggested that a way forwards – having chosen our rules and paradigms, our principles and world views from the Bible as we will – would be to then examine them in the light of both Christ's words and his actions. We need to put those rules and paradigms, those world views and principles under the spotlight of the careful understanding of his teaching and into the context of our learning together to imitate the ways he treated people. If we do this we may find that Jesus did not make pronouncements about people considered to be outside the stretch of God's acceptance but instead included them in conversation with him about their own history and life. It is from this position of being included in the dialogue with him that they are invited to trust.

My favourite story here is the story of the woman with a haemorrhage in Matthew 9: 18 – 22.

I love this story and so identify with it! Jesus is first of all busy and with an important man. How embarrassing – all his disciples are around him and to cap it all this poor man is in far deeper trouble than she is – his daughter has died for goodness sake! What suffering do I, merely a lesbian Christian, share in the face of death? Yet she has a shameful issue at the heart of her life which is preventing her from full acceptance and from a healthy and flourishing life and she is sick of it, the shame and despair. She tries to get away without engaging with Jesus – I know that one so well – I won't go to that event, don't have to actually face that person in the flesh, I'll leave a note or send an email. But he does not let her get away with it – and turns to talk to her with a direct address – Take heart my daughter!

Or look at Zacheus – the poor squat treacherous tax collector up a tree peering at Jesus! “Get yourself down here from that tree” Jesus calls, “I am coming back with you to talk!”

Sometimes Jesus has to be quite brave himself to carve the space for this conversation to work. Caught with a woman who might be accused of adultery he has to calm the blood lust of the crowd by stooping to doodle in the dust for a moment before addressing the woman herself. Sometimes the dialogue takes him further than he bargained for. About to put down the Syro Phoenician woman who is desperate that he heal her child, it is she who bests him at tit for tat. “I only want the

bits and pieces that your lot don't want!" she roars desperately, and he is brought up short by her plea of faith.

Time and again people deemed outside are brought by Jesus into the light so that they can tell their own story and be themselves invited to trust. In this sense of being biblical life suddenly becomes intensely interesting for a gay or lesbian person! Suddenly instead of being on the outside of our family, or beyond the reach of our church, or not acceptable in our youth club or not fitting in the wedding photograph, instead of always being outside and looking rather hungrily and anxiously in we find ourselves outsiders no longer but invited instead to be INSIDE the circle of conversation with Jesus about our own future and his future, under the spotlight of his gaze, and in this context of attentive inclusion and regard by him hearing his voice. Jesus did not make pronouncements about people considered to be outside but included them in the conversation with him to be able to tell their own story and be invited to trust.

Now I find myself in a very interesting place as a lesbian Christian!

I couldn't take this conversation head on with Christ for many many years. Most of my early life I spent sublimating my own loneliness and lack of self-confidence in looking after others. Clare in the community had nothing in it! I think the cartoon was written about me!

Then my own story bubbled to the surface – and in all the pain and difficulty of that – and all the funny bits too – can you imagine riding a motorbike to Church on a Sunday morning with a navy blue deaconess' cassock stuffed into the panniers before dressing in the vestry! – in all the tortured pain and difficulty of that I never ever let go of a God who loved me intensely. It was my own love for myself I found difficult!

The Women's movement helped a lot with that. While we waited for women's ordination in the Church of England one of the most important things we did to manage the sheer hard work of campaigning was to meet together, often. We were living a Liberation Theology for the women's movement in this country and of course many of the women in that movement were lesbian and saw me through to a new place.

But then Jesus turns and speaks and addresses me as his daughter and asks me to let my faith render me brave. Courage my daughter – your faith has restored you to health.

And now I notice him!

I haven't understood the whole of this yet but I begin to realise that Jesus, the one into whose light and conversation I have been called does not stand in the circle as unharmed and invulnerable but as one who has been led out to injury and death as a blasphemer, an outsider, and irritant to the religious authorities par excellence! He is not like one of those tolerant smiling headmasters or bishops who asks benignly, "now Clare how are you today" while rushing on down the corridor and praying that you won't say! He is more like a friend saying "lets compare war wounds. I warned you, you would need to be brave but I am right here in the same circle as you are." He moves away from invulnerable purity and condescending piety to the place where his back is scored as a scapegoat and his eyes are crying. How then can gay and lesbian people not find themselves at home with him, nor all of us not find ourselves at home with him, both in the places where we are most glorious and the places where we are most sore?

Then I notice what sort of life a biblical Christian is called to in this circle of walking with Christ. And then I really begin to make changes in my life! Because the biblical Christian is called to lay hold on life in all its fullness, to learn to love the self and the other and to bear the beams of love and to show the fruits of mercy.

And here I want to say something two things gay and lesbian people in partnership and my understanding of that from a biblical point of view.

There is a considerable amount in the words of Jesus about being ready, alert, about sensible self estimation and planning so that one is ready for the demands of mission and the kingdom. For me living in partnership is both a school of loving and a being ready and resourced to love beyond myself in a way which I cannot do if I am alone. Some people are called to be celibate, or even to wrestle with singleness because this looks like the best choice for them given opportunities

available or choices already made. But I knew deep down that both celibacy and singleness were not such choices for me but instead a copping out from the challenge to have healed by another much of the pain that had gone before in my life about trying to learn to love and be loved. I knew that I was called to that shared life whereby so much is given in terms of faithfulness, tenderness and trust that I am able to give to others, free of the anxious self-constraint and fragmentariness which haunted my single life. I am a very different person indeed having lived with my partner of 20 years than I was when I was trying to live alone. The deep well springs of my identity needed recognition, acceptance and love by another, as luckily for me hers did too! That profound and steady love no matter what ghastly stuff I get up to – and we are all ghastly – has been the place I have begun to learn in my deepest guts, my body, the whole of my being about the hesed of God, God's faithful and eternal loving kindness towards me because God can be no other and which my life partner has taught me to take for granted as a given. How could I not love you, cries Yahweh to Israel, in the voice of the prophet Hosea? My being loved so much by a human being who needs my love has taught me not in theory but in textured reality of everyday life what the love of God is not in my head or my heart but in the whole of me, and I am changed, reborn if you like.

There is also a good deal in the Gospels about honesty – honesty with Jesus, honesty with God, honesty with self, honesty with others. Where people are trying to live alone not out of some sense of self direction but under some imposition from an external source of authority like the Church, where the deep springs of our identity are not admitted or denied, then pastoral and personal chaos may easily reign. It certainly did in my life! For human beings are not completely rational – they show their likes, loves and needs in a million contorted hidden ways if they are not permitted to be open about who they really are, and I was always finding myself in hot water not realising what I was really up to or others were up to with me! I think the Church of England's call to Christians in leadership positions to be either un-partnered as an obligation, or at the very least silent about their sexual orientation, is a recipe for possible pastoral chaos and contrary to living in the honest, brave and loving glance of Christ who calls us to know ourselves and talk honestly with him and with each other.

To sum up what it means for me to be both biblical and gay:

- As people we make rules, principles, paradigms, world views to live by and as Christians we choose some of them from the pages of the Bible.
- This does not make us a sufficiently biblical Christian to either help new groups deliver themselves from traditional oppression, nor assist individuals with widely clashing opinions to get on together in Christ.
- To be biblical in this deeper sense means for me to find myself, being as honest and open as I can be, in a conversation with Christ, listening to his words and watching how he acts.
- In the circle of that conversation I find him showing me the nail marks of the scapegoat, not least to prevent me making more people to blame of those I happen to oppose. Acting towards them like him I move towards them willing to accept them as they are.
- Yet in that circle of conversation with Jesus I do not find myself called to give up who I am. Last time Richard urged us to realise how in dialogue with other biblical Christians we need always to add the proviso that with regard to our own moral position we, like them, may always be mistaken. I would want to say something rather different from that. I think that that sort of extreme giving up of the self cannot actually be managed healthily by those of us who are very vulnerable and have had to fight to create and own our own identity. And here I speak I think for women and for the LGBT community. We cannot live as right and yet mistaken – that would be a stress for the weak ego far too great to bear. What we can do is to act towards those with whom we passionately disagree with courtesy and care owning our own authority and recognizing their right to think differently yet without damage. For as gay and lesbian Christians we may have judged that we are with care, study, advice, prayer and courage acting aright! We may be reflecting that Biblical strand of human awareness that intimate sexual relating is a well-spring of life and a reflection of divine love.

Arnold Browne

'On the third day he rose again in accordance with the Scriptures'

Clare has spoken about holding together being who she is and being biblical in a deep sense of being in conversation with Christ. Somewhere in my framework is a flexible joint that holds together my obedience to 'the faith which is revealed in the Holy Scriptures' and my freedom to engage as fully as I am able in the process of interpreting those Scriptures. Central to the inheritance of the Church of England is the reading of the Bible in a language we can 'understand, and have profit by hearing' (BCP) so that we can each play our own part in proclaiming the faith 'afresh in each generation' (Declaration of Assent). It seems to me that it is only by holding together our willingness to be obedient to God's call with our responsibility to exercise our God given freedom to think that we can, in the words of the first letter of Peter, be ready to give an account of the hope that is in us (1 Peter 1.15).

My own upbringing was in the Presbyterian Church. I was aware of the high regard in which the Bible was held. It was processed into the Church at the start of each service, and I remember my uncle omitting to stand one morning because he noticed the clerk was empty handed, and he certainly wasn't standing for entry of the choir or the minister. And from an early age I was aware too of the assumption that each of us had something to contribute as we studied together in Sunday school or Bible class. Perhaps this background helped me to hold together my developing faith and my growing interest in the critical study of the Scriptures, at school in 'O' and 'A' levels, and then at university. For example, as an undergraduate I found it exciting to become more aware that in the four gospels we have evidence of the ways in which different Christians in different contexts related Jesus' life to theirs, as they recalled the events of his life and remembered the stories he told in their preaching and healing, their teaching and care for one another. We were fortunate in our Oxford College that very different sorts of Christians identified themselves as biblical and came together for Bible study. This was not the case in my college when I was a graduate student in Cambridge. Given my enthusiasm for Matthew's gospel, which tells the story of Jesus for a Jewish Christian community who carefully read their Jewish Scriptures to find in Jesus even more than the long awaited prophet like Moses, I may, not unusually, have been far too talkative. But I was surprised to be summoned afterwards by the college Christian Union representatives and told that talk of 'Matthew's Jesus' was quite unacceptable and that from hence I was persona non grata. With youthful indignation and energy I set up alternative Bible studies, and soon there were several rival groups in the college being very biblical but not very inclusive. I confess that I still think it very important to be able to talk not only about Jesus, but also about the realities of the lives of those through whose discipleship his story comes to us, of Matthew's Jesus indeed. And perhaps this is even more essential when we listen to some of those now termed the 'new atheists'. Christopher Hitchens, for example, argues that because there are literal contradictions in the narratives the whole Bible must be dismissed as worthless. In *God is Not Great* he points to the inaccuracy of Luke's attempt to date the birth of Jesus not only in the time of Herod of Judea, who died in 4 BC, but also at the time of Quirinius, who initiated a census soon after his appointment as Roman legate in 6 AD. But how much do such details really matter? Luke says that although others before him have written about Jesus, he is writing his own 'orderly account of the events that have been fulfilled among us' (1.1). He places the birth of Jesus not only within the history of the Jewish people but also in the setting of the Roman Empire because he wishes the Christians to whom he is writing to see that the promises of the God of Israel continue to be fulfilled as his readers follow Jesus in the Roman world in which they themselves live.

The contradictions and variations in the Scriptures do not make the Bible worthless. On the contrary, they show that there is already a process of retelling and reinterpreting going on within the Scriptures themselves as people respond to God's call in different circumstances and contexts. There is always an interweaving of receiving and responding, of what we might call God's word and human words, and above all in the Christian Bible there is the centrality of the one who in himself brings together God's gift and humanity's response.

Looking back I see that as a graduate student my choice of research topic arose from my attempts to hold together my Christian commitment and my academic exploration. Student introductions to thinking about the atonement had usually referred to the 'sacrificial theory' of the

letter to the Hebrews. Supposedly the author thought that his statement ‘without the shedding of blood there is no forgiveness of sins’ (9.22) was simply axiomatic. But a God who demanded blood in order to forgive did not seem to me to be the Father of Jesus, and I wanted to think more about this enigmatic book of the New Testament. What Hebrews in fact says is that ‘under the law almost everything is purified with blood, and without the shedding of blood there is no forgiveness of sins’ (9.22). And the author does not hesitate to point to the sort of contradictions that lead Christopher Hitchens to dismiss the Bible as worthless. Quoting Psalm 40, which he puts on the lips of Jesus who indeed prayed these prayers of Israel, he says:

“You have neither desired nor taken pleasure in sacrifices and offerings and burnt offerings and sin offerings” (these are offered according to the law), then he added, “See I have come to do your will” (10.8-9).

But this contradiction between the law and the psalm does not cause the author to dismiss his Jewish Scriptures as worthless. Instead he looks at them again in the light of Christ, and draws on the Scriptural tradition to address the new situation of his readers. These Jewish Christians are missing the security of their former priests, sacrifices and temple, but the author insists that this is not a time for looking back but is a time for moving forward, to encounter Jesus ‘outside the camp’ (13.13) as he puts it. We know that not to participate in either Jewish or pagan rituals was to run the risk of being exposed as an atheist. But in this ancient sermon the author returns to the Scriptures, and to the contradictions he has exposed. He finds in Genesis 14 and Psalm 110 another priesthood, based on the power of ‘an indestructible life’ (7.16), and this priesthood ‘of the order of Melchizedek’ is the first to be mentioned in the Bible, which gives it priority in terms of the tools of interpretation then in use. And he finds in Exodus another sanctuary, the heavenly one of which Moses is told to make an earthly copy, ‘See that you make everything according to the pattern that was shown you on the mountain’ (25.40, quoted in Hebrews 8.5), and in distinguishing heavenly reality from earthly shadow he is pressing into service some of the popular Platonism that many of his Jewish contemporaries also drew upon. And he found in Psalm 40 another sacrifice, not the Levitical ‘burnt offerings and sin offerings’ which God did not desire, but willing obedience to God: ‘See I have come to do your will’. And here it is what he and his readers know of Jesus that is in mind: ‘the pioneer and perfecter of faith, who for the sake of the joy that was set before him endured the cross, disregarding its shame, and has taken his seat at the right hand of the throne of God’ (12.2). Building on the community’s belief that Jesus is at God’s right hand the author invites them to see that they are not dispossessed, but that they have in Jesus a great high priest in the heavenly sanctuary. The author’s image of Christ entering heaven with his own blood, is a powerful vision of the one who, he says, shared our blood and flesh, and by his faithfulness triumphed over death, and ‘is able for all time to save those who approach God through him, since he always lives to make intercession for them’ (7.25). This is no holding fast to an accepted theory assumed to be axiomatic. By a provocative juxtaposition of a psalm questioning sacrifice and a law demanding it, the letter to the Hebrews picks up the dynamic of the Scriptures finding them to point outside themselves to Christ, and he returns to the Scriptures to find for his readers another priesthood, another sanctuary and another sacrifice. In Christ they have all that they need to lead them from the security of the camp towards the city that is to come.

It takes courage to move from our security inside the camp to encounter Christ outside and to ‘bear the abuse he endured’ (13.13). But we need not be surprised that the dynamic of the Scriptures is to point us to the way of the cross, which is the road to life. Clare has described her encounter with Christ in terms that for me, not unsurprisingly, echo those of Hebrews. She spoke of Jesus’ ‘move away from invulnerable purity and condescending piety to the place where his back is scored as a scapegoat and his eyes are crying’, very much a move outside the camp. And she spoke of meeting him there ‘both in the places where we are most glorious and the places where we are most sore’. My gay friends, particularly the ordained who have come out of the closet, have certainly shown me how to take the Bible more seriously. They have certainly deepened my understanding of what the letter to the Hebrews means when it talks about the Levitical provisions for worship as ‘regulations for the body imposed until the time comes to set things right’ (9.10). And sometimes their courage inspires even me to worry a little less about what those in the camp may think, and to seek Christ in places where I may share his humility and his exaltation.

Paul reminds the Corinthians of the good news they had received and in which they stand (1 Corinthians 15.1):

For I handed on to you as of first importance what I in turn had received; that Christ died for our sins in accordance with the scriptures, and that he was buried, and that he was raised on the third day in accordance with the scriptures (15.3).

This early tradition holds together the story of Israel in the Scriptures, the person and work of Christ, who died and was raised, and the life of the congregation: he died for our sins.

This framework holds together the Scriptures, Christ, and those being addressed. Above all it holds them together in a dynamic of dying and rising with Christ. It is the risen Christ on the Emmaus Road who says that the prophets declared both his sufferings and his glory as he 'interpreted to [his disciples] the things about himself in all the scriptures' (Luke 24.27). And it is profoundly significant that the faith we express together in the Nicene Creed is still that 'on the third day he rose again in accordance with the Scriptures'. Here the connection is firmly established between reading the Bible and God's gift of life in Christ.

Clare Herbert

I have given you the overall biblical framework by which I live in faith as a gay person but how do I tackle those particular texts in the Bible which appear to condemn homosexuality outright?

1. I think we need to start by having a clear understanding of what we think the Bible is for us and where its authority lies. I believe that the Bible is the human witness to the Divine Word and that it therefore both reveals that Word, that communication from God and with God, and also distorts it. It cannot help but distort God as well as communicate God because it has been written by human beings who have human as well as divinely inspired reasons for writing what they thought.

Let me give you an example of what I mean. The words of Deuteronomy 22: 28-29 require an unmarried woman who has been raped to enter into marriage with her attacker. When those words were written they might have been understood to be uttered from the mouth of a beneficent God since the woman as object and possession had been violated and should be given a future instead of discarded as worthless. The care of God might then well be understood to be reflected in making arrangements for the rest of the woman's life! But we would hardly so interpret God's care now! We would want to take the essence of this message – that a violated woman deserves respect and care but we would refuse to accept that care coming from her rapist and indeed ask her about her future hopes of healing and belonging. In our day her own agency over her own body would be one of the first things we would aim to reinstate in reflecting the actions of a caring God. The Bible as a human witness both contains and distorts the divine Word – it cannot do other – which is why we find such religious and moral development within it, and such contradictions within it.

2. So when we consider a difficult text for gay and lesbian people found in the Old Testament – I am going to leave the New Testament to Arnold – one of the first things I do is to try to understand it in its own context. I attempt to develop a critical awareness of what might be the underlying ideologies of the writer

So if I take the verses for example in Leviticus 18 and 20 – "You shall not lie with a male as with a woman, it is an abomination, and, if a male lies with a male as with a woman, both of them have committed an abomination: they shall be put to death, their blood is upon them."

I ask first what the text was FOR. It is part of a holiness code intended to help Israel build up and protect her identity whether as an invading, invaded or in the long run dispersed people among other peoples with different religious beliefs and social mores. It is therefore likely to be harsh around boundary issues.

It does not challenge homosexuality as a way of being, nor threaten life lived in sustained homosexual relationships of faithfulness and trust because neither would have been known. Homosexuality understood as such has only been so described for about the last 100 years! So particular sexual acts between men are being described as taboo because they involve a man treating another man as he should treat a woman. A woman was understood to be a commodity and the man's semen understood to be that valuable life force which would preserve the family for

the further maintaining of the land which was the source of all income, sustenance, power. It should not be wasted.

The sexual penetration here being forbidden had huge symbolic force. Unregulated sex would be a serious threat to the fabric of society both in terms of recognised ownership and in terms of weakening recognised hierarchies and should therefore receive the severest punishment. Similarly, if it is not sexual penetration which is being condemned here but more simply relationships fuelled by lust and therefore idolatrous, then again the order of society, created to worship a creator and not the created being is violated.

We find that we are therefore dealing with the moral outlook of an unfamiliar and alien culture whose basic presuppositions about gender and sexuality we would question. (And it is interesting to note that same sex relationships between women hardly warranted condemnation because so lacking in political power or social weight were women themselves).

If that is the context of the texts is there any useful or meaningful underlying message. Well there may be: that sexual activity may create a blurring of the boundaries of identity and involve the exchange of power. There may be things to listen to here in terms of how we regulate our sexual activity. Sexual activity has social, political and individual meaning to consider when we create our sexual ethics.

But now because this text contains so heavy a proscription I want to return to the word taboo and reflect on its weight a little. Particularly I want to investigate the weight of sexual taboo in the light of the irruption of Jesus and his calling in our lives.

I want to return to it because the force of these biblical texts seems to me to lie in their preservation of a taboo against gay sex. No matter how rational or well researched we may become in our textual criticism, no matter how good at digging out underlying ideology, no matter how certain that these texts are not talking of sexual orientation known to us as homosexual, nevertheless these texts seem to contain a chilling and life destroying power which we need to learn both to recognise and to refuse to be cowed by. What is that power?

When societies are under constant threat as Israel was – and indeed the Anglican Communion may be now - they develop elaborate rules about purity and pollution. Because the human body is taken as a metaphor for the social body purity and defilement rules cluster around clean versus unclean foods, bodily discharge, visible illness and bodily expressions of sexuality.

The trouble with taboos is that they aim to make excluded behaviours or conditions unthinkable, to need no thought or rational explanation. They are simply regarded as traitorous to social aims, to have no remedy, so that expulsion or death is the only path to coping with their violation. Now pollution and taboo are easily translatable into the divine sanction of a tribal deity and some human authors of the Old Testament ushered the God of the Hebrews into this useful role. That role projected on to God continues to disturb us – despite the almost laughably bourgeois lives being led these days by most by most gay and lesbian people in the West including myself, getting married, sharing mortgages and responsibilities for children, neighbours and elderly relatives nevertheless gays and lesbians are still seen to somehow be undermining society and its family values. Homosexual practices still have a taboo factor.

I said at the start of this lecture how very glad I was to have Arnold with me and I am very serious about that. A lady's views expressed last time about the death carrying properties of various parts of male anatomy are a good example of how this stuff puts the gay person right into the centre of being the object of a shocking taboo. They should not go into such a degrading conversation alone, ever. Yet the Bible too can place them there! At St Martin's some months ago I was taking Evensong and quite by mistake ended up having to listen to the Bible at its more vehemently extreme against female same sex behaviour. I trust this team, this vicar, this church and yet the public proclamation still had the power to force me into an unsafe place where I was alone and could not argue back – that is the power of taboo.

Marilyn McCord Adams, in her work on "Sexuality without taboos" suggests that what we need to do is to both engage the brain when we read or hear these texts and to alert the Church to the need to discard this taboo. Why:

- taboo always protects the status quo rather than enlarging the stretch of the tent of God's kingdom to include all,
- taboo maintains social injustice through inarticulate fear, and
- taboo is enforced by the scapegoating of the carrier of the symbol. We need to press the pause button here because this needs explaining a bit. Often one breaking a taboo is forced out of society and sacrificed, whether literally or metaphorically. Recently both the anthropologist Rene Girard and the theologian James Alison have helped us unpack how well Jesus understood this scapegoating mechanism which in fact prevents us realising some important truth about ourselves by allowing us to slake our thirst to punish another. Jesus realising how the religious system around him had become focused on the exclusion of the outsider to prevent our seeing what is going on with the insider walked out into the place of the blamed outsider. He made us by his own innocence see how we are always blaming others for society's faults instead of admitting our own full human nature and learning to deal with it together. Jesus had had enough of the scapegoat mechanism – he understood it to be preventing us mature as full and religious beings and we need to learn, if we would follow him, to do away with them too!

Instead of heightening the taboo about gay sexual identity – as many of the recent C of E statements wish not to do but end up doing - we need instead to learn to re-emphasise the incarnation of God in the human flesh of Christ. We need to befriend rather than repress our bodies and to dig down to the roots of our calling as fully sexual persons, all of us, in our great variety of gender identity and sexual being and from there learn how to live together in peace!

It is to counter the taboo that I have decided to live openly as a lesbian who is also a priest. I believe that the mechanism used to preserve unity in the Church by sacrificing the healthy hopes and aims of gay and lesbian people who are both priest and gay is shown in Christ to be both useless against the onslaught of reality and profoundly unchristian. I have decided to try to live a life which is both responsible and yet unfettered by the shadow of a taboo whose powers once overshadowed my life but do no longer. My chains have well and truly fallen off – I just wait for the rest of the Church of England to catch up!

In summary:

- Being gay has been the grit in the oyster of my life which has enabled me to develop my thinking independently of the approval of the hierarchy of the Church while belonging to and loving that Church as I would a family.
- By adopting a critical and thinking attitude towards biblical texts I have become more able to understand the Bible as a document offered to me for engagement in the meaning of the divine Word in dialogue with my own life and thought.
- I no longer understand the Bible to have some sort of external authority which may be imposed upon me. Its authority is dependent upon the confirmation of God's Spirit speaking to me which confirmation comes from within myself but can be tested by its sewing and creating in the world around me through the channel who is me the fruits of the Spirit.

Arnold Browne

'Welcome one another just as Christ has welcomed you, for the glory of God'

In John 6 Jesus is shown engaged in conversation with the crowd whom he had fed on the previous day with the five loaves and two fish. The crowd quotes Scripture, 'Our ancestors ate the manna in the wilderness; as it is written, "He gave them bread from heaven to eat" (Exodus 16; Psalm 78)'. Jesus' reply is a sort of sermon on the text, bringing it alive for his hearers. 'Then Jesus said to them "Very truly, I tell you, it was not Moses who gave you the bread from heaven, but it is my Father who gives you the true bread from heaven. For the bread of God is that which comes down from heaven and gives life to the world". They said to him, "Sir give us this bread always".' (John 6.31-33).

In John's narrative the crowd seems to quote Scripture to show their religious credentials. It is we who are the descendents of those who were fed in the wilderness, and we have the texts to prove it. But Jesus has fed the multitude on an unnamed mountain beyond Judea, beyond Samaria, even beyond Galilee, truly 'outside the camp'. He now invites them to interpret the Scriptures in the light of that experience, not to focus on 'our ancestors' (after all, he says, it was not you whom Moses fed in the wilderness but your ancestors, who all died). Instead he urges them to seek to be nourished as God's word addresses them in the present (my Father gives you the true bread from heaven). And according to Matthew and Luke it was a text from Deuteronomy about the manna that came alive for Jesus in his own wilderness, strengthening him to be faithful to God's call to his people: 'He humbled you by letting you hunger, then by feeding you with manna, with which neither you nor your ancestors were acquainted, in order to make you understand that one does not live by bread alone, but by every word that proceeds from the mouth of the Lord' (Deuteronomy 8.3; see Matthew 4.4 and Luke 4.4).

Jesus brings the Scriptures alive as good news for those who hear him. And so, as we have seen, the gospel that Paul handed on to the Corinthians held together the Scriptures, Jesus crucified and risen, and the lives of those who lived by this good news. This informs the way in which Paul, our first Christian writer, reads the books of Moses. He explained to the Corinthian congregation that now, 'whenever Moses is read', he sees 'the light of the gospel of the glory of Christ' (2 Corinthians 3.15-4.4). Now when he reads the account of creation in Genesis 1-2 his focus is on Jesus and those who seek to follow him: 'For it is the God who said, "Let light shine out of darkness", who has shone in our hearts to give the light of knowledge of the glory of God in the face of Jesus Christ' (2 Corinthians 4.6).

I find it particularly remarkable that when addressing the question of head coverings in worship, Paul offers, in one short passage, in 1 Corinthians 11.2-16, two different ways of bringing together the creation accounts in the Jewish Scriptures, commitment to Christ as Lord, and the particular experiences and concerns of the community. The first is hierarchical, God and Christ, husband and wife. From the story of the creation of Eve from Adam's rib (Genesis 2.21-23) Paul argues that men and women are fundamentally different, and the latter subordinate to the former. This was the common view of his Jewish and Graeco-Roman contemporaries, and was accepted as part of the natural order. Paul can ask, 'Does not nature itself teach you that if a man wears long hair, it is degrading to him, but if a woman has long hair it is her glory?' (11.14-15). What Paul here calls 'nature' we would call 'social convention', and it seems that he has an eye on those 'outsiders' (14.16, 23-24) who might be misled by seeing women prophets with uncovered heads and flowing hair into thinking that Christianity was simply another ecstatic cult. The priority is the call to commend the gospel.

But even as Paul argues that hierarchical gender distinctions are natural, he offers a simultaneous second reading of the creation accounts in the light of Christ, stressing the mutuality of men and women: 'Nevertheless, in the Lord woman is not independent of man or man independent of woman. For just as woman came from man, so man comes through woman; but all things come from God' (11.11-12). And so he leaves no doubt that in the Christian community both uncovered men and covered women have God's authority to pray and to prophesy as they build up the church.

This diversity of interpretation, even within one passage addressing one issue, suggests that we will need to listen to different voices as we work together to interpret the Scriptures in the light of our own call to follow Christ in the twenty-first century. And in our proclamation of the good news in our particular circumstances we will need to be aware that what we have discovered to be 'natural' and what might now be obstacles to the acceptance of the message in our society will be as important as, but very different from, the assumptions and conventions of first century Corinth.

In his letter to the Romans, Paul again brings together his reading of Scripture, his understanding of Christ, and his concern for the Christian community to which he is writing. The historian Suetonius records that in 49 AD Jews were expelled from Rome by Claudius, following disturbances over 'Chrestus', but they began to return after Claudius' murder in 54 AD, a year or two before Paul wrote Romans. Given this history, it seems likely that gentile Christians, perhaps encouraged by what they had heard about Paul's championing their cause, will have been in the ascendancy in the community to which he writes. In his letter to this diverse community Paul seeks

to encourage gentile and Jewish Christians in Rome to respect each other. In Galatians Paul defended the gospel for uncircumcised gentiles against some from Jerusalem who wanted to impose on them the marks of Jewish identity. Writing to the Romans Paul now defends the gospel for the circumcised (see e.g. 3.30, 11.12, 14.3), and reminds the whole community that the father of Jesus is the God of Israel. The gospel is for everyone, 'to the Jew first and also to the Greek' (1.16). Remarkably he urges those who differ, even about the importance of keeping the Sabbath (whether or not to observe one of the ten commandments) to accept and welcome each other:

Some judge one day to be better than another, while others judge all days to be alike. Let all be fully convinced in their own minds. Those who observe the day, observe it in honour of the Lord ... while those who abstain, abstain in honour of the Lord and give thanks to God. We do not live to ourselves, and we do not die to ourselves. If we live, we live to the Lord, and if we die, we die to the Lord' (10.5-7).

We do not live to ourselves, we live to the Lord. Pivotal to Romans is the distinction Paul makes between life in Adam, living to ourselves, and life in Christ, living to the Lord: 'For just as by the one man's disobedience the many were made sinners, so by the one man's obedience the many will be made righteous' (5.18)

Reading Genesis in the light of Christ prompts Paul to retell the story of Adam to illuminate the significance of Christ. In Romans 1.18-3 Paul looks back to give an account of human wickedness in terms of the narrative of Adam's fall, and in Romans 8 he looks forward as he argues that it is in Christ that the tragedy is reversed as men and women are 'predestined to be conformed to the image of God's Son' (8.29).

When he says 'though they knew God they did not honour him as God' (1.21), he is arguing that sinful humanity follows the pattern of Adam in what Genesis describes as the disordered desire 'to be like God, knowing good and evil' (3.5). And, Paul argues, such a misplaced desire to be like God ('to exchange the glory of the immortal God for images resembling a mortal human being' (1.23), leads to other lusts, sexual and social, indeed to 'every kind of wickedness' (1.29). Paul's returning and subordinated Jewish Christians may have enjoyed this passage. The argument is familiar in Jewish literature, 'the idea of making idols was the beginning of fornication' (Wisdom 14.12). It was an established diatribe against the immoral gentile world. But, as is revealed at the beginning of chapter 2, Paul is not talking only about 'them' (the outsiders), he is talking about 'us' (the insiders) too: 'therefore you have no excuse, whoever you are, when you judge others; for in passing judgement on another you condemn yourself, because you, the judge, are doing the very same things' (2.1). In particular, Jewish Christians, who might be tempted to distinguish themselves from those lawless gentile Christians who don't even keep the Sabbath, need to give some thought to the abuse of the law. Paul tells them that 'it is not the hearers of the law who are righteous in God's sight but the doers who will be justified'. Just having and hearing the Biblical Torah, the books of Moses, just saying with the crowd in John 6 that we are the ones whose ancestors ate the manna in the wilderness, is to abuse the Torah. In Romans Paul shows from his own experience how even the biblical law, 'holy and just and good' (7.12), can be misused in the service of selfish and sectarian interests. He says that for him it became nothing less than the 'law of sin and death' (8.2), not least as he used it to persecute and destroy those of his people who became followers of Jesus: 'Wretched man that I am! Who will deliver me from this body of death? Thanks be to God through Jesus Christ our Lord!' (8.24-25).

None of us may think that Romans 1 is not about us. As a married man I must note that Paul makes no use of Genesis 1-2 to affirm an ideal of male-female monogamy. When in Galatians he does bring together Genesis 1.27 ('male and female he created them') and 2.24 ('they become one flesh') it is not to promote marriage, but to say that we are all one body in Christ:

As many of you as were baptized into Christ have clothed yourself with Christ. There is no longer any Jew or Greek, there is no longer slave or free, there is no longer male and female; for you are all one in Christ Jesus (Galatians 3.27-28).

The married may most certainly live in Adam, for as Paul says in 1 Corinthians, 'the married man is anxious about the affairs of the world, how to please his wife, and his interests are divided' (7.33-34).

It is probable that not only Paul's Jewish contemporaries but most of his gentile contemporaries too would have agreed that same-sex intercourse was a good example of sexual and social disorder.

For this reason [because they exchanged the truth of God for a lie and worshipped and served the creature rather than the Creator] God gave them up to degrading passions 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 (1.26-27).

Above all this was seen as 'unnatural' because it was understood to be a deliberate rejection of the socially accepted gender hierarchy, and therefore it functions for the readers as a powerful symbol of social disorder. Sexually passive men were sneered at as 'rivals of girls' (Catullus, Poem 57), and women who were seen to 'imitate the sexual role of men' (Pseudo-Phokylides, Sentences 192) were also seen as having 'the mind and the desires and everything else of a man' (Lucian of Samosata, Dialogues of the Courtesans 5.4).

We have already seen Paul himself beginning to question the accepted gender hierarchy, and in relating this text to our own lives we are bound to consider carefully whether the example now works at all, given the scientific and social context in which we live. It would be tragic if we were so focused on the trees of an example that may no longer be helpful that we didn't see the wood of the argument of Romans as a whole. It would be a bitter irony if we used Romans as Paul recognized he had used the Torah: 'For the law of the Spirit of life in Christ Jesus has set you free from the law of sin and death' (8.2).

Because my gay friends are willing to wrestle with Romans they have helped me to see that the text only comes alive when I recognize that it is never about them rather than us, never about you rather than me. It is about all of us who hear Paul's invitation to 'Welcome one another, therefore, just as Christ has welcome you, for the glory of God' (15.7).

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