

## **Sermon for Mattins at Sexagesima, 19 February 2017**

*Romans 8:18-25, Matthew 6:25-34*

'Don't worry: be happy'. I think I remember a pop song along those lines. You might think that it sums up the idea in both our Bible lessons today. St Paul: 'For I reckon that the sufferings of this present time are not worthy to be compared with the glory which shall be revealed in us' and Jesus himself in St Matthew's Gospel: 'Take no thought for your life, what ye shall eat, or what ye shall drink; nor yet for your body, what ye shall put on. Is not the life more than meat, and the body than raiment? ... [and] Take therefore no thought for the morrow: for the morrow shall take thought for the things of itself. Sufficient unto the day is the evil thereof.'

Actually I think those are rather challenging passages today. Why wouldn't we be worried? Why shouldn't we 'take thought for the morrow'? What with Trump and Brexit and the rise of 'populist' politics around the world - which some commentators have likened in many ways to Nazism - how can we not worry?

This last week, the Church of England did its own collective bit of worrying, when its governing body, its parliament, the General Synod, met.

On Wednesday, I watched the General Synod live stream from Church House, Westminster. It was the debate on the bishops' report on their shared conversations concerning sexuality. In particular the report was about the church's attitude to homosexuality: whether there could be marriages of homosexuals in church, and how to deal with homosexual clergy.

Would it be possible for the church to regard homosexuality as not being sinful? Could gay clergy in active relationships be accepted in the church? Could gay unions be blessed in marriage ceremonies in church just like heterosexual couples? The report is 17 pages long but you can sum up the main conclusions in a couple of sentences. The bishops did not see any reason to change the church's traditional understanding of marriage, i.e. a lifelong union between a man and woman, not gays. Instead they wanted to demonstrate the church's willingness to welcome gays by developing new teaching material and seeking 'maximum freedom' in pastoral matters.

The motion was for this report simply to be 'noted', which seemed rather odd. The Synod was asked not to express approval or disapproval of the report, but rather simply to note that the bishops had been doing this work - as they had, for the last three years - so that they could continue with it. People clearly didn't buy that explanation. The intended sense, I think, was that the subcommittee of bishops (it wasn't all of them) wanted Synod to 'take note' of

their work in the sense of seeing the way the subcommittee's thoughts were developing, and indicating thereby that they were content for them to carry on along the same lines.

If that was the intention, it didn't work. Speaker after speaker in the debate said that the trouble with the bishops' report was that it looked to normal people in the outside world like homophobia and a justification for it. There was only one speaker who actually said that homosexuality was sinful, although, as Christians, she said, we should still be nice to the sinful homosexuals.

There was a lot of talk about how people in the various moderated discussions had changed their views, although I have to say that eventually in the report, nothing seems to have changed since the last major church report on sexuality in 1991.

One younger delegate, Lucy Gorman, from York diocese, said very simply that it was difficult to attract young people into the church and get them to listen to the gospel of Jesus, in circumstances where they perceived that the church was institutionally homophobic and did not seem to reflect Jesus's commandments of love.

Various people, including some of the bishops themselves, stated that the problem was that the church is seemingly irreconcilably divided.

On the one side, so-called traditionalists or conservative evangelicals argue that Scripture and tradition uphold the proposition that marriage is only possible between a man and a woman, and any other possible combination of sexes is sinful. It is however possible, they say, to love the sinner and hate the sin.

On the other side are liberals who argue that all the supposed biblical authorities for the proposition that any kind of homosexual love is sinful are either to be understood within the social context of the time or can be accommodated within a liberal theological understanding. The more important thing is that a loving union should be blessed and upheld.

I've got a feeling that there ought to be a health warning about the use of the various terms to describe the parties like 'evangelical' or 'liberal', as it tends to make people behave in tribal ways rather than being rational in their analysis. So I would ask you today not to get hung up on the labels which I'm using. It might be better if I simply said that the yellow camp believed so-and-so, and the green camp believed so-and-so else. Try to identify them by what they believe rather than by their colours!

Many speakers told how the church's current position is hurtful to many people, both ordained and lay. Faithful people with many years of membership of the church mentioned how hurtful it was to be told that you were sinful, and there was even a story of one teenager who committed suicide because, recognising that they were gay, they believed that the church would never accept them.

The bishops' paper was couched in terms that people were being influenced by the standards of society today, and that in some sense immutable truths of Biblical teaching were in some sense being overturned or or challenged for the sake of earthly values; in other words, 'It doesn't matter if everyone else in England thinks I'm wrong, if I can find a biblical authority for what I believe.'

At the beginning and end of the debate the Bishop of Norwich, Graham James, spoke. In his introduction he said one thing which nobody else in the debate picked up, but which I think could be a key to an amicable and just resolution of the controversy.

What Bishop Graham James said was that, since the Church's last document, which came out in 1991, called 'Issues in Human Sexuality', insufficient attention has been given by the Church to scientific and medical understanding as it has developed concerning homosexual couples.

My perception is that the scientific research concerning homosexuality can be summed up in two simple propositions. Whether one is a heterosexual, homosexual, transgender, or bisexual is not a question of volition but of genetic inheritance; you don't choose, but you are born that way. The second proposition is that it is possible to understand maleness and femaleness against a spectrum of sexual orientation rather than according to a hard and fast duality.

To put it another way it is not simply a question of whether people are physically male or female, that is, all-male or all-female, but it is possible that in many instances people may exhibit sexual characteristics which come from both the male and the female side which do not match their physical make-up. You can be physically male with many female attributes, for example.

All the Biblical authorities, it is said, reflect a basic proposition that marriage requires the union of a man and woman. I suggest that it might be better, in the light of the advances in science, if we talked not of 'a man' and 'a woman', but rather, of a husband and a wife, male and female parties to a union.

I wonder whether a possible area for further discussion which might be fruitful is as follows. Because of the infinitely graded spectrum of sexual orientation, one finds gay couples referring to each other, one as the husband and the

other as the wife. Even though, physiologically, they may both be male or female, as between themselves, one is treated as male and the other is treated as female. I think that if 'male' and 'female' are understood in that way, behaviourally, one might say, rather than physiologically, then one can accept the Biblical and Prayer Book terms without having to explain them away.

I don't think it can be right that God created some people in such a way that they are flawed, sinful. Indeed use of the word 'sin' has a connotation of behaviour, bad behaviour, the sort of thing which separates us from God. I cannot see how it can be sinful for someone to behave according to the way they were made.

I wonder whether one could also bring in St Paul here. Chapter 8 of his letter to the Romans contains some of his most famous passages. In our lesson, we have heard the perhaps rather puzzling passage,

'For we know that the whole creation groaneth and travaileth in pain together until now.  
And not only they, but ourselves also, which have the firstfruits of the Spirit, even we ourselves groan within ourselves, waiting for the adoption, to wit, the redemption of our body.' (Romans 8:22-23)

The 'firstfruits of the Spirit' on the one hand, and 'the redemption of the body' on the other. It is one of St Paul's key ideas, the distinction between the body and the spirit. It is reminiscent of the Platonic concept of 'forms' - in Greek τὰ εἶδη, ideas. Plato distinguished physical objects, like tables, say, from the 'idea' of tables; what it is to be a table.

I wonder whether one could align 'the body' in St Paul with the physiological man, or woman: and the 'spirit' could reflect the behavioural aspect, the being a husband, or being a wife. On the one hand, the physical human being; and on the other, that they are a husband, or a wife. And what it is to be a husband, how we understand what it is to be a husband, or a wife, doesn't necessarily coincide with their physiology.

It can't involve sin. Look what St Paul himself says, at the end of this great chapter:

'For I am persuaded, that neither death, nor life, nor angels, nor principalities, nor powers, nor things present, nor things to come,  
Nor height, nor depth, nor any other creature, shall be able to separate us from the love of God, which is in Christ Jesus our Lord.'

Well, you might say that the Church of England is still miles away from any understanding along the lines I've just suggested. But the heartening thing, as I see it, is that the Synod didn't vote to 'take note'. I think they saw through the rather artificial way it was being considered. Not by very much, but nevertheless by a majority (except among the bishops), the Synod didn't 'take note' of the report - it meant, they didn't want anything to do with it. The Church needs to do better, they said.

I say 'Amen' to that.

Hugh Bryant