

Making Void the Word of God

In a recent book about the Jeffrey John affair, the author (Stephen Bates) records an interview that Archbishop Rowan Williams gave him, during which he asked Rowan why he thought homosexuality had become such a divisive issue for the Church. This was his answer:

I think it is about a cultural challenge to the whole view of scripture. This is an issue which allows a clear line to be drawn in the sand. It's not something that affects many people, unlike divorce. It's a good rallying point at a time of cultural flux. If you're a Roman Catholic, there are other issues you can find as a marker - divorce, contraception - but Anglicanism does not have these.

The powerful politicisation around the issue makes it very much harder to have a discussion, and I don't think we are going to get a balanced debate going in the near future. There will not be a rapid reconciliation, especially in the U.S. Do we want some endless fragmentation of the kind that traditionalist groups are prone to, or some coherent strategy which will enable us to work co-operatively?

I think we need rather more attention to what really are Church-dividing issues. Many of us thought we knew what these were - things like the divinity of Christ - not splinters of interpretation. It seems curious to me that at a time when we need quite a lot of attention and understanding to be given to the big central shape of the story, border skirmishing like this is taking up so much of our energy.

It's in the light of this, that I want to think about Mark 7, and this dispute between Jesus and the scribes about the Word of God, and human traditions. In other words, about the right way to interpret scripture. The Pharisees and scribes, who saw themselves as the true upholders of orthodoxy, and the correct interpretation of scripture, were picking holes in what Jesus was teaching and doing, because his disciples didn't wash their hands properly (i.e. the way tradition said they should). What kind of a man of God are you, if your followers are so slack, irreligious?

And Jesus did what I wish some of our leaders would do in the church: instead of justifying himself, or meekly accepting their criticisms and conducting the argument on their terms, he went for the jugular, and accused them of hypocrisy, faithlessness, and abandoning God's will, for the sake of their own traditions. He gives one particular example, of the way they managed to find a let-out clause for one of the clearest commandments, Honour your father and your mother, allowing people not to provide for elderly parents if they claim they are giving to God instead. (The implication, that they are not giving it here and now, but earmarking it for God at some future date - and this still justifies them not helping their parents out in their immediate need.) v.11.

Now, in the present controversy over homosexuality, it's those who take the traditionalist line who claim they are being faithful to the word of God, while those they condemn as 'liberals' (which, rather strangely, has become a bad word) are making void the word of God through their teaching. I want to go for the jugular and say, it's not as simple as this. Both 'sides' interpret the scripture in ways which are faithful to some parts, while ignoring, or not giving equal weight to, others. And sadly, we haven't got Jesus here to cut through to the heart of the matter in the way he did so effectively and inimitably. Lots of preachers and speakers claim to speak for Jesus: the hard thing is for us to discern, which ones are closest to the spirit of Jesus, and what he would say if he were present, in the flesh?

Rowan's mention of divorce, I found especially telling. Because the same Evangelicals and traditionalists in the US, who most vehemently condemn homosexuality and homosexual practices

as unscriptural, almost routinely countenance divorce and even remarriage of divorced people - because there are so many more of these in the church. Yet Jesus himself did say something about divorce; he condemned it. He said nothing at all about homosexual relationships. The fact is, even the most traditionalist of traditionalists overlook many parts of scripture, or don't claim that they are 'the word of God'. And they do this every day. And maybe it's time Rowan and others started calling this by its name: it's hypocrisy.

So the issue is not, what are the words we read in the Bible? Any fool can read Lev.18.22: You shall not lie with a male as with a woman; it is an abomination. But it takes some thought to explain why that is the word of God and literally to be obeyed, when, say, Deut.23.19 isn't: You shall not charge interest on loans [to another Israelite], interest on money, interest on provisions, interest on anything that is lent. The question is, how, from the words we read in scripture, and from our experience of life and of walking with God, can we discover what God's will really is, about issues which didn't exist, in the form they do nowadays, in biblical times?

Perhaps Jesus' cutting through to the heart of the matter would take the form of asking: What is sexuality *for*? Why do we have a sexual component to our nature? Genesis gives two answers. First, it is for togetherness, companionship. God said, It is not good for the man to be alone. (The man = Adam, the being made out of clay, the human being.) So he sought to make for Adam a suitable companion, a helper, a helpmate, i.e. a help meet for him (AV). And secondly, it is for reproduction, so that they might go forth and multiply. At different times, the church has tied itself in terrible knots about the second of these being the primary or only use of sex. Parts of the church still are in knots about it. But not even the Pope (as far as I know) has ever said that people who are infertile, or past the age of child-bearing, should not have sexual intercourse because it is impossible for it to result in conception. Let's simply affirm that because we are sexual beings, we have the capacity for, or need to have, relationships with other human beings; and there is a possibility of some of these relationships being intimate.

For the great majority of people, this involves relationships between men and women: most people are heterosexual. But we now know, much better than we did before (or maybe not?) that there are many people whose sexuality is different. In fact, it is such a mysterious aspect of our humanity that it might be better to say: Everyone's sexuality is different, just like everyone's personality. There isn't really any standard or norm, from which to depart, just a glorious diversity or spectrum. There are, as a matter of fact, people who are attracted to others of the same sex, whom we choose to call gay or lesbian.

What are we going to do about this *fact*? The traditionalists say: this whole orientation is so disordered, so contrary to nature, that it is against God's will. Any following of it, any practice of same-sex relations, is sinful, is disobedient to God's word. The only recourse for a gay or lesbian person is therefore to resist their impulses, to live (with God's help) a life of strict self-discipline; it's celibacy or nothing. Unless they try and 'force' their nature into the 'right' orientation, and marry anyway: a desperate remedy which is known to have led to many desperately miserable marriages over the years.

But those who want to see the Church's official teaching change say: This is actually an issue about the Gospel, about what is Good News for people. It is not Good News to say to large numbers of people: The way you are is so wrong, so disordered, that your only options are to deny it, to repress it, or to change it. And that's what God wants to do, or wants you to do. No. The Gospel requires that we affirm them: you are acceptable to God, accepted by God, because he created you and loves you and because Jesus died to save you. And because they are saved, they are free to live holy lives, pleasing to God, and the church is there to help and support them in living those holy lives.

For many gay people, the only way they have had of expressing their sexual nature has been

through promiscuous sexual activity. Public opinion, or lack of acceptance of homosexuality, has made it difficult or impossible to do anything else. But promiscuous sex (whether homosexual or heterosexual) is dangerous, unhealthy, and destructive. The old BCP Marriage Service says that a third reason for the institution of holy marriage (along with partnership and reproduction) was as 'a remedy against fornication'. A similar remedy, available for gay or lesbian people, would help them to live holy lives. And this is why parts of the church are advocating - not same-sex marriage, that's an emotive and unhelpful term - but some kind of sanctioning or authorising of permanent, faithful and stable same-sex partnerships.

I don't know how I would deal a request for such a blessing, (or look forward to the day) and as things stand it would be difficult to agree to it. But I find that as I wrestle with the questions and issues in this controversy, trying to be faithful to scripture, and to what seems to be God's will, and to the imperatives of the Gospel, this is the necessary direction in which I seem to be being led.

You may disagree (some of you will). But what I urge on us all is to go on wrestling with it, and to see this as an issue of pastoral theology and of the Gospel. It is not something we should divide the Church about. It is not an issue on which the whole authority of scripture stands or falls. I started by quoting the Archbishop. I want to finish with a sentence from the sermon Bishop Christopher Herbert, the Bishop of St Albans, preached, when he instituted Jeffrey John as Dean of St Albans last week.

The letters have poured in to me from all sides, from those rejoicing and from those who are hurting; and both sides — let me say as strongly and forcefully as I can — believe that they are acting out of the highest Christian motives and for the most serious of Christian reasons, which must mean, surely, therefore, as Christians, that we are in this not separately but together.

Let us pray for the charity and wisdom to see this through, together.