

St Peter: Patron Saint of Those Who Can Change Their Minds

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Today is St Peter's Day, and it's a special anniversary for me, for 23 years ago today, I was ordained priest in St Albans Abbey. Seven other men were priested with me; all but one, as far as I know, are still in Christian ministry, though one had a spell as a Baptist minister, and one is now headmaster of Charterhouse, (so I don't know if that counts), and one is known to quite a few of you, Nick Fennemore, the chaplain of the John Radcliffe Hospital. Three women, who were made deaconesses with us one year earlier, when we were all ordained deacon, were not priested with us. They were not ordained as priests for another 14 years, until 1994. And we can remember, can't we, the heartache and pain they went through, yet they stayed faithfully serving the Church which took so long to make up its mind that they could be priests, and that the calling they had heard from God was real. The official structures of the Church, until then, refused to accept that they could be what they knew they were called to be.

The day I was ordained priest took me by surprise. I had thought it would be a bit of a formality. With my Evangelical background and experience, I had thought the really significant event was being made deacon one year earlier: that was when I turned my collar round, was licensed to become a minister in the Church, and a preacher - that was the important office. But being ordained priest changed me; it changed my beliefs about the sacraments, my estimate of the importance of the Eucharist, of blessing, absolution, the significance of priesthood. This didn't happen overnight, but being priested was the focus of that changing of my mind.

Jesus said to his disciples, 'But you, who do you say that I am?' Simon Peter answered, 'You are the Messiah, the Son of the living God.'

Suddenly, he found himself saying something that was outrageous, impossible, blasphemous, something which was contrary to everything in the scriptures, everything in the tradition of the Jewish faith. Central to that faith was the Shema: Hear, O Israel, the LORD our God, the LORD is one. It was apparent that God *could not* have a son, and anyone claiming to be the Son of God, or saying that someone else was, was guilty of blasphemy. Remember Jesus saying to the paralytic who was brought to him, 'Son, your sins are forgiven you,' and the response of the scribes: 'Why does this fellow speak in this way? It is blasphemy! Who can forgive sins but God alone?'

What was it, that caused Simon Peter to believe and say something that most of his contemporaries, and he himself, just a short time before, would have called blasphemy?

Answer: It was his experience; the *reality* of what he was experiencing day by day, as he lived with Jesus. Above all, it was getting to know Jesus better, coming to understand from all that Jesus did and said, who he was, and how he expressed the mind and being of God.

I don't know if there is a patron saint of people who change their minds. But St Peter would be a suitable candidate. And I've come to think that this would be a very instructive way of reflecting on all the stories of St Peter in the New Testament: that all the time he was constantly having to change his mind, his attitude, his behaviours, under the pressure of the surprising things God was doing.

Now, friends, I really didn't want to talk about sex today. But, since it was mentioned last Sunday, and is so much in the news, and I've been thinking about little else for about a fortnight (which is a pretty exhausting state to be in) I feel it would be irresponsible not to share with you what I'm thinking about this controversy. Some of it you can read in the Marston Times. But more personally than that, I want to share with you how, and why, I changed my mind about homosexuality.

Some of you may feel uncomfortable about this, or may disagree furiously with what I have to say. But I would ask you, as we love one another, to hear me out. To listen to what I say, and pray about it. Because the Church we love is hurting, isn't it? And we need to discern whether this is a necessary hurt, like the surgeon's knife, that we have to just endure and get it over with as soon as possible, or whether it is a hurt we ought to run away from, like putting your hand on a hot iron. We may hope it might be cooler the next time we try to touch it. (I don't think it will.)

Those who argue so strongly against any change in the Church's teaching on homosexuality argue that the literal sense of Scripture is quite plain. Lev.18:22 says: You shall not lie with a male as with a woman: it is an abomination. Lev.20:13: If a man 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.

And St Paul, steeped in that Levitical tradition, and seeing the Hellenistic cultural and sexual practices in the world around him, and not having any way of disentangling them from the religious context, repeated that condemnation. He saw same sex intercourse as a symptom of human rebellion against God, flouting God's law because the people concerned had rejected the true knowledge of God, in favour of the worship of false gods. N.B. That this was Paul's interpretation of, and theological reflection on, what he saw. He says, Because of people's wilful refusal to know the truth about God, God 'gave them up' to a debased mind and things that should not be done. What those things are, he lists in Romans 1:29-31; and same sex intercourse is just one among those things. This is all in the context of Paul's argument about knowing what God is really like.

But what if, as we experience life day by day, and live with Jesus, we come, over the passage of years, to a different knowledge and understanding of God? What if we come to a different understanding of what constitutes the glorious mystery of human sexuality, which is such a part of being created in the image of God, male and female?

There are many, many examples of places where the Church no longer adheres to the plain literal sense of Scripture, or more particularly to the way the biblical writers argue their case. And the

reason the Church changes its mind, if that's the right expression, is because it finds its older understanding just doesn't work any more in the real world. It is closely analogous to what we know about the idea of the paradigm shift in science and cosmology. When the evidence and experience of the real world render your previously held views untenable, when what you used to believe no longer works, then you have to change your previously held views – even if those views are the views of holy scripture – because you can't change reality.

Some examples of things we no longer believe, even though it says it in the Bible. We no longer believe:

that the sun moves around the earth

that the universe was created in six days

that adulterers should be stoned to death – and children who rebel against their parents

that slavery is permissible among God's people – or polygamy

that women should cover their heads and be silent in church

that some people may be excluded from church membership on grounds of race.

We no longer believe it is an abomination to lend money at interest. In fact usury (as the Bible called it) is the foundation of modern business. Yet it is far more roundly condemned in the Old Testament, and more often, than homosexual practice.

The Church changed its mind about all these things, because its earlier views didn't work any longer.

Now, in the real world of 2003, there are gay and lesbian people in the world. We don't know what causes 'homosexuality'; we don't know what determines any kind of sexuality, it's part of the mystery of our createdness, part of the deepest core of who we are. If being gay or lesbian were the result of a deliberate, perverse choice someone made, or of some wilful disobedience of moral law, then it might be possible to maintain the scriptural prohibition against it. But that's not how it is, in the real world. That is not our experience, or the experience of gay and lesbian people. The testimony of gay and lesbian Christians is that their sexuality is not something they have chosen, but is simply a given, a deep essential part of who they are. Just as any of us who are heterosexual didn't choose to be: it's just the way we are.

Now, if this is so, what are we to do about it? If we continue to condemn homosexuality, or even to insist on lifelong celibacy for gay and lesbian people, aren't we actually saying: What you are is so abhorrent to God, that the only way you can please him is by total abstinence, by denying who and what you are, and forcibly suppressing your deepest affections and longings?

It doesn't sound like good news, does it? And we are supposed to be good news people.

What is needed, is to find ways for all of us to live, which enable us as far as possible to fulfil God's will, which is: that we love ourselves (actually accept who we are, how God has made us) we love our neighbour, and we love God with every fibre of our being: mind, heart, soul and

strength (=body?) For heterosexual people, marriage is the state the Church blesses, in which we can express and rejoice in our sexuality. And what do we do for gay and lesbian people? As I said in the Marston Times, we at least need to have this debate and think about these issues. And we need to have bishops like Jeffrey John to help us to do it. If we in fact insist that the only option for them is total abstinence, aren't we heaping on them a burden which we ourselves have been unable to bear; aren't we being as bad as the Pharisees?

So you see, I have come to change my mind about homosexuality. And I've done it for pastoral reasons, because of real people I know; for theological reasons, in order to be true to what we have learned about God; and for scriptural reasons, to be honest and consistent about how we read the Bible. And right now, today, I have come to the point where I needed to stand up and say so.

Some of you may be horrified: the Vicar has sold out to the enemy. Some of you may be thinking: At last the Vicar has arrived at what ordinary real people have always known; about time, too. But whatever you are feeling about this: let's stay together, in love. Let's stand by one another. Let's not threaten to tear the Church apart.

One of the most hurtful aspects of what has happened in the last few weeks, is the way some of the strong and rich Evangelical churches (some of them not a million miles from here) have threatened to withhold their parish share, if Jeffrey John is consecrated as Bishop of Reading. They are using their size, their wealth, their strength, to try and force their will on the rest of us.

Well, I call that *bullying* – don't you? And I think we believe that the proper thing to do in life, the brave, just, compassionate, necessary thing, is to stand up to bullies and not let them get away with it. Even if you happen to agree with them, rather than with me, that's what I would ask you to do.

But most of all, let us pray for one another. For our lesbian sisters and gay brothers, especially for all the gay clergy: think of all the anguish and fear they must be suffering in this present climate of witch-hunting, really. Pray for those with whom we disagree (difficult thing!) For our bishops: do we or don't we believe that God has called them to their teaching and decision-making positions in the Church? And let's have the debate – which we can't do, if everyone has already made up their mind and can never, ever, change it.

For remember that St Peter, the rock on which the Lord Jesus builds his Church, is the patron saint of those who change their minds, who *can* change their minds when they see that Jesus calls into question what they had previously held true. And he does it, because he has a better truth for us to receive, a bigger, wholer truth about who God is and who God loves.

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