

## Living in Love and Faith

This morning I would like to talk about Living in Love and Faith.

This is the Church of England's consultation on sex, relationships, identity and marriage.

I will say more about that toward the end.

This morning I would like to share my own thoughts on this – and what I think the church should now do.

I do this, because, as a leader, I thought people might be interested in what I thought, but also because, I have held both the traditional and the inclusive view, and so feel like I have something to contribute. However, I expect you to make up your own minds, and I completely respect those of us who disagree with me.

This is a photo taken from Of things not seen.



It was taken at a confirmation class, where I was asked my views on this issue. I like the photo because it conveys how complex I find this issue. However, I do have a clear position on this.

My position is that the church should change its rules, so that those from the LGBTI+ community are treated the same way as those who are not, and there should be no distinction between the laity and clergy.

So, how did I get to this point?

There is so much I want to say, but because of time, I am having to restrict myself. See this as a conversation starter, and not the final word. That being said, this will still be one of my longer sermons, so please try to remain conscious!

The first time, I remember, taking any kind of position in this issue, was when I was about 17. My mother received a letter from the church we were going to, where the vicar said, that he had excommunicated a church member, that means, withholding holy communion from them, because she was in a same sex relationship. And I remember my mother being outraged by this. She felt that no one has the right to judge another human being like that, and only God could. Jesus welcomed everyone, so who is man to exclude? In those days, I

took my cue, when it came to faith, from her, and so I was convinced by her and it made a lot of sense to me!

Over the next few years, I became more and more interested in learning and growing in faith and getting more fully involved in church. And as I did so, I embraced the church's teaching and stance on this issue, that sex is in the context of marriage between a man and a woman. Anything beyond it is sin, whether it was same sex and opposite sex. It felt very normal and natural to take this stance.

There are 6 references most commonly used when examining what the bible says about homosexuality. I wasn't necessarily familiar with all of these passages, but it really felt quite obvious to me that the bible painted a negative view of same sex relationships and I was surprised to hear that there were other Christians, who thought differently.

Because it seemed so clear to me, I felt quite suspicious of those, who held a different view. I felt a degree of hostility, as I thought they were simply choosing to ignore what God had clearly said in the bible.

Fundamental to this view is are people born gay, or do they either choose it, or has events in life altered them. I very much held to this latter view that homosexuality was a choice. It felt like it was a deliberate, un natural choice, open rebellion to church tradition. It wasn't on my radar that gay people could genuinely love each other.

Things began to change, a few years later, when a friend of mine, shared with me that he was gay. He was the first, openly gay person, I knew. I was surprised. I had a stereotypical view of what a gay person was like, and he wasn't it. He was going through a very difficult time because he had felt the pressure to keep his sexuality a secret, and was wrestling with mental fatigue and depression. He was of the view that gay and lesbian people should be able to be in a relationship. In our conversations, he convinced me that this was who he was, it wasn't a lifestyle choice. He clearly had a different way of interpreting those biblical texts. It put him at odds with the leadership in our church, and that must have been very stressful for him, in ways that I cannot understand.

What struck me was that, I had known him for a few years and he was to me an authentic Christian, kind and generous, and devoted, with a fantastic way of expressing his faith that was inspirational. I recognised that the Holy Spirit had gifted him, and I felt very much that this was someone who followed Jesus and who took the bible seriously.

I also saw the real pain and sense of rejection my friend was experiencing from the church's teaching and stance.

At the same time, I had also got to know people who had come to Holy Trinity, who had more liberal views, and I had really got to like and respect them. They also felt strongly that the bible can be interpreted in different ways. Although to my knowledge, none of them were gay, I began to feel that there might be something in how they saw this issue.

At some of their encouraging, I did a course, called work shop. The course leader, spoke about how, for him, homosexuality, was not a sin. That the texts which condemn it, were either about ritual purity for a certain time and place, or about exercising power and control, and it was not talking about loving, committed same sex relationships. I think he saw same sex attraction, not as a sin, but a disability, in a sense that we are all disabled. In the context of a loving committed relationships, he felt that same sex couples should be allowed to marry.

I wasn't sure about the disability part, and I have pretty much left that behind in my current thinking, except in the general sense that we all need healing, but I found overall what he said, seemed plausible. and that this new way of interpreting those bible verses, had a lot of merit. I was also convinced that a gay and lesbian person need not remain celibate that they should be able to be in a relationship.

I also noted, most importantly that Jesus does not say anything about this subject. I don't except Matthew 19:5 is referring to marriage only being right between those of opposite sex, it is talking about divorce and the responsibility of husbands to their wives, they have left their family, their father and mother, and are committed to their wives, their wives are dependent on them to be provided for.

I came, most importantly to the conclusion, that Jesus was always breaking taboos and boundaries, in the company he kept, welcoming and including - the only ones who were not part of his group were those who choose to self-exclude themselves.

That has been my journey of understanding this issue.

So, what have I learnt on my journey?

This is not a dispute between those who take the bible seriously and those who do not. The majority of people, on both sides of this dispute take the bible seriously. This is a dispute between how we interpret the bible. We all interpret the bible.

Let's take a silly example to begin with.

Isaiah 55:12 says:

You will go out in joy  
and be led forth in peace;  
the mountains and hills  
will burst into song before you,  
and all the trees of the field  
will clap their hands

Do we really think Isiah was describing trees growing hands and clapping? Or mountains and hills singing worship choruses? Of course not. It's a way of describing how creation glorifies God! We have interpreted the bible using common sense, without even thinking about it.

Let's take another example. In the 10 commandments, it says:

<sup>12</sup> "Honour your father and your mother, so that you may live long in the land the LORD your God is giving you.

- Exodus 20:12

Anyone reading that, will say, yes, that sounds right. Jesus ratifies this in Mark 7. So, what then do you make of Luke 14:26, when Jesus says - <sup>26</sup> "If anyone comes to me and does not hate father and mother, ...such a person cannot be my disciple?"

What's going on here then? Is Jesus having a break down?

Of course, again, not many people, will say that we should take Jesus literally. He is not saying that hatred of our family is a pre requisite for discipleship! He is making the point, that if you follow Him, he must come first. The irony is, if you put him first, you will love your

father and mother more, not less. So, what you have done there, is interpret the bible within the context of the rest of the bible.

Let's take a third one:

Leviticus 20:9

<sup>9</sup> "If anyone curses his father or mother, he must be put to death.

Or

Deuteronomy 21:18-21

<sup>18</sup> If a man has a stubborn and rebellious son who does not obey his father and mother and will not listen to them when they discipline him, <sup>19</sup> his father and mother shall take hold of him and bring him to the elders at the gate of his town. <sup>20</sup> They shall say to the elders, "This son of ours is stubborn and rebellious. He will not obey us. He is a profligate and a drunkard." <sup>21</sup> Then all the men of his town shall stone him to death.

Is there anyone, in any church tradition, who thinks this is how we should respond to disobedient children?!!

What we have done here, is to interpret the bible it using its cultural context.

So, we have this three-pronged interpretation, using commons sense, using the rest of the bible, and using the culture. And we all do it instinctively.

Now there are other texts of course where we interpret **differently**. Baptism for example, is it as an adult or can infants be baptised. Who can take Holy Communion. Different churches have different practices, because they have interpreted the biblical texts, - **DIFFERENTLY**. Its not that one tradition takes the bible more seriously than others.

So why then, if the biblical texts referring to same sex relationships are interpreted, is it considered not taking the bible seriously?

Secondly, it's not helpful to see this as a conflict between those who are loving, and those who are homophobic. If I go back to the days when I held the view that same sex relationships were sinful, I was ignorant, I was prejudiced, but I don't feel like I was homophobic. Having said that, there is homophobia in the church and the church has a lot to repent of and say sorry to gay people for. But let us not automatically impose the blanket of homophobia over everyone who holds to the traditional view.

I believe, whatever the church decides, that there must be a cultural change in the church. The church must work to be a safe space for the LGBTI+ people. Many of them have not felt that they could share their experiences of what they were discovering about themselves, even with those closest to them, for fear of being rejected, misunderstood. Many of them suffer in silence. People of all ages are affected, and many young people are suffering in silence and do not feel they can talk to anyone. This has led sadly to tragic outcomes.

I would like to recommend to you *Undivided, by Vicky Beaching*. She was a British Christian singer, especially in the evangelical wing of the church in the UK and in the bible belt in the US. She knew from the age of 13 that she was gay, but such was the pressure she felt from her wing of the church and its teaching, she could not tell anyone for 22 years. Convinced that being gay was a sin, she tried prayer, submitted to exorcisms, and tried to deny who she was, and it was a massive burden, and carrying this burden alone, began to take a toll on her mental and physical health. That that ultimately caused her to tell a few people, and

then she told the world, in 2014. She is also a theologian, and writes movingly of her experience, and how she looked at what the bible really says about same sex relationships. It's really easy to read, I read it in three days. I really recommend it, to most ages, certainly from secondary school age upwards.

Amongst your friends, colleagues, children, grandchildren, there may be a Vicky Beeching – who is carrying this enormous weight and stress in their life, alone, and so, would they see you, me, as a safe person to talk to? Would they see St James as a safe place to be open about who they truly are? I do not want a Vicky Beeching to pass through St James carrying such a weight on their own.

For those of you, you would like the church to be inclusive, but are afraid of making a mistake, I would only say, that we all make mistakes. When we get to heaven, we will find that we are all heretics, and it did not matter, because we are in heaven!

For myself, if I am going to get this wrong, would I have wanted to be inclusive and welcoming and liberating towards the LGBTI+ community and then find out that I should have been restrictive, or would I have wanted to have kept the current stance of the church of England, denying the right of people who simply want to live out who they are, and to follow Jesus, and then find out that I should have been inclusive.

I choose the former.

For those of us who want to see change, I would urge you to engage with the biblical texts, and to know how and why you can interpret it differently to the traditional teaching of the church. We cannot simply ignore parts of the bible we do not like.

For those of us who feel the church should stick to its current stance and teaching, I would urge you to listen to the stories and experiences of the LGBTI+ community. For me, listening to my friend share his experience was a crucial learning experience. We cannot reliably make up our minds simply with theory. We have to take peoples experiences into account. The incarnation is about God becoming us and sharing in our lives.

So, I commend to you the Living in Love and Faith Resources.

There is a website, a learning Hub, which I will send the link tomorrow. Its free to register and included is a 5-part course, which looks at these issues in more depth than a sermon can. It looks at the biblical texts, it looks at stories of different people affected by this issue, and there are places to stop and to reflect. You can go at our own pace, do it on your own, or with a partner or friends.

There are also podcast, a library, and short films where people share their experiences.

For those who do not have the internet or a reliable device, I am happy to bring my laptop to church, and for you to use it.

There is also a Living in Love and faith book,

I am also available for you to chat with, and whatever your views on this are, you will find me approachable and I will be non-judgemental.

The church of England asks us, to engage with this, and to then feedback to them, in the form of a questionnaire. They are collecting feedback, and we have until the end of April to submit our thoughts. After which they will prayerfully review the feedback and propose a way forward. Please get involved. It's your church.

I said last week, that we should approach issues such as these with humility. As Paul says in 1 Corinthians 13, we only know in part, no one knows it all

I have recently decided, that I need to use reading glasses when I read the bible. And its very nice, I can see much more clearly. We understand in part. We all need 'glasses'. The glasses are, Jesus and each other, including LGBTI+ Christians. My hope for the church - is that we will be one family, inclusive, welcoming anyone who wants to come and join us. And when we disagree about an issue, rather than taking sides and pitting ourselves against each other, I would love us to say, we are all in this journey of trying to understand and learn together, this is how far I have got, how far have you got, and listen and respect each other.

After Vicky Beaching came out, she had a difficult conversation with her grandfather. He held the traditional view and he was very sad and very concern for her, and she loved him very much, but had finally felt released and freed up and could not even think about going backwards. At the end of their conversation, she said to him a quote from billy Graham.

"It is the Holy Spirit's job to convict, God's job to judge and my job to love."

She said, grand dad, let's leave the judgement to God the Father, and why don't we just love each other. After thinking about it for a moment, her grandfather says yes, he could do that. And they have enjoyed a really close, loving relationship ever since, even though they have different theologies.

Let's leave the judgement to God, And the changing of hearts to the Holy Spirit, let's just love each other, in our glorious wonderful diversity. That's our job.

Let's live with each other, in Love and Faith.

Amen.