

Bishops, Sex and Secularism

There has been a good deal in the papers lately about the Church and homosexuality. There is a huge controversy between those who believe that homosexual behaviour is a sin, condemned by the Bible and by 2,000 years of Christian theology, and those who believe that God makes homosexual people the way they are and that the Church should celebrate homosexual love. The mass of Anglicans in the middle are desperately trying to find a discipline and a code of practice (or fudge!) which will keep everyone together in one communion, whereas the extremists on both sides keep pushing and seem prepared to see the Anglican Communion break up, rather than compromise on what they believe.¹ There have always been serious differences of opinion within the Church and it is worth asking why a very few of these differences push people to the point of threatening schism (the break up of the Church). Homosexuality is one such issue. The ordination of women is another. What is special about these issues that people feel pushed to extreme positions? I wonder if the answer is that sexuality and gender roles are essential to the way we perceive ourselves and our role in society. They are very powerful emotionally and psychologically. Challenging our established beliefs about human sexuality or the roles of men and women raises insistently the question whether we understand ourselves and the world in terms of the biblical worldview, as proclaimed in the traditional teaching of the Church, or whether we basically derive our self-understanding and our values from the world in which we live and try to relate them to the Bible and traditional Christian teaching as best we can.

300 Anglican bishops, unhappy with the way things are going, met in Jerusalem at what was called the *Global Anglican Future Conference*, in a kind of riposte to the Lambeth Conference to which the Archbishop of Canterbury invites all the bishops of the Anglican Communion every ten years since C19. Our bishop, Bishop Michael Nazir-Ali has been outspoken in his opposition to the acceptance of homosexual behaviour, but he told this conference in Jerusalem that the main challenge facing the Church is not homosexuality, but militant secularism. What is secularism? According to my dictionary, secularism is *a doctrine which rejects religion, especially in ethics; the attitude that religion should have no place in civil affairs*.

On these definitions we are living in an increasingly secular society. Religion is rejected and certainly thought to have no place in framing modern Britain. If you are wondering how a predominantly Christian (indeed Anglican) country became a secular society in just a couple of generations, I blame it on those complacent Christians of the last three or four decades, who thought that they could still be Christians without coming to Church or supporting the Church in any other way, who just assumed that Christian values would prevail without speaking up for them, and who saw no need to send their children to Sunday School or in any other way to pass on their faith to the next generation. Such complacent Christians ought not to be surprised to wake up to a shortage of clergy, churches closing, projections that there will soon be more active Moslems in this country than Christians, and a government which only thinks about “faith communities” when it is placating extremists of other religions but is no longer interested in working with the Church to produce a better society, based on Christian values.

Secularism. According to St Paul in (Romans 1) homosexual behaviour becomes commonplace because human society forgets about God. Paul says that we have no excuse for turning our backs on God. The wonderful universe we live in is itself persuasive evidence of the power and love of God. Human love is a mirror of the divine love. God has given us consciences. He has made Himself known and is revealed in the Holy Scriptures. We have no excuse for not knowing God or for failing to worship Him. However, we do reject God. We ignore God. We worship false gods. We spend our lives on the service of things we have made, rather than in serving the One Who made us, Whose service is perfect freedom. We have only ourselves to blame.

Some people would come in here and say that, therefore, widespread homosexual practice is not only ungodly; it is also a symptom of an ungodly society. We ought not, however, to pick out homosexual

¹ The Anglican Communion is that worldwide body of churches who essentially believe what the Church of England believes, worship according to rites that are recognisably derived from our Book of Common Prayer, were mostly founded by C of E missionaries or British expatriates and are in communion with the Archbishop of Canterbury.

activity as uniquely wrong. Paul says that a lot of other things are the result of humanity's rejection of God: *all unrighteousness, fornication, wickedness, covetousness, maliciousness, full of envy, murder, debate, deceit, malignity, whisperers, backbiters, haters of God, despiteful, proud, boasters, inventors of evil things, disobedient to parents, without understanding, covenant breakers, without natural affection, implacable, unmerciful: Who knowing the judgment of God, that they who commit such things are worthy of death, not only do the same, but have pleasure in them that do them.* It is not just homosexual misconduct. Every kind of human misconduct can be traced back to our rejection of God and His perfect Law of love.

It works like this. You and I were made to be the children of God. We were made in His image. We can never be satisfied, we cannot find meaning and purpose in our lives, therefore, except in relationship to God. So, rejection of God (original sin) leaves us permanently dissatisfied and without any real sense of purpose or direction. So we look for satisfaction and meaning apart from God. This leads to homosexual behaviour and other sexual adventures and experiments. The truth is that human sexuality finds its true meaning in life-long, heterosexual, monogamous marriage. Anything else is of sin and cannot ultimately satisfy. One may be pure and single or faithfully married, but no other sexual relationship is undefiled by sin or finally satisfactory.

If we are to fulfil our potential as human beings, made in the image of God, our character must conform to His character and He is perfect self-sacrificing love and entirely faithful. Whatever falls short of this is of sin. In fact one definition of sin is falling short of our potential to be the children of God.

We must not, however, condemn homosexual misconduct more than heterosexual misconduct. Neither must we condemn sexual sin and take a more relaxed view of other kinds of sin. There is a God-shaped hole in the life of every unbeliever and too many people try to fill that hole with drink or drugs, which in turn have terrible consequences both for their own health and in terms of the way they treat other people.

Teenagers get into gangs in order to feel that they belong, that their lives have meaning, and enforce "respect" through violence. If only they knew! They belong already to Jesus if they will only accept Him into their lives. They don't need the appearance of respect from people who fear them. They already have the unconditional love of God and the incredible status of being His son. It is all ours for the asking.

Many perfectly respectable people see their lives as progressing when they come into positions of power, grow richer or move up the social scale. The desire for power, position or wealth may tempt us into other sins. We may be tempted to dishonesty or to bully others or to despise people who have less than we have. But there is more to it than that. If God takes second place in our lives to ambition or career or home-building, or hobbies, or community activities, or anything else whatsoever, we are effectively idolaters, who are wasting our lives in pursuit of what can never satisfy and will tempt us ever deeper into sin.

I suspect that the most common idol of all – so commonplace that many of you will probably get angry with me for calling it a sin – is materialism. Millions of people buy so much more than they need – often with money they cannot afford. They are despoiling the environment by their excessive consumption. They may be denying scarce resources to genuinely needy people. They may be exploiting others forced to work for little pay in poor conditions. They are certainly missing the point of life – which is to know God as our loving heavenly Father and Jesus as our Saviour and the Holy Spirit as our constant companion.

An MP (Tom Harding) recently asked why we are all so miserable when really we have never had it so good in material terms. There was a violent public reaction, mainly from people whose idea of hardship seemed to be if they had to cancel one of their holidays in order to pay the mortgage. Both sides of the debate missed the point, however. We cannot be contented by material possessions and the prospect of always owning a bit more. Happiness comes from enjoying what you have got with a thankful heart and blessedness comes from giving away what you've got to someone who needs it more!

We might feel sorry for the homosexual desperately looking for meaning in sexual encounters, rather than in worship. We should feel equally sorry for the crowds milling round *Bluewater* on a Sunday morning, seeking in retail therapy what they can only find in prayer.

As St Augustine says, our hearts are restless till they find their rest in God. If we want to be happy, if we want to be fulfilled as human beings, the only way we can be is by being at one with God. We are all divided from God by our own personal sin and are quite helpless to help ourselves. But God does not leave it at that. He offers us His help. He sends Jesus to die on the Cross. The death of Jesus is a sacrifice for the sins of the whole world. All we have to do is to repent and believe. If we do that, our sins are washed away; we are born again. We are baptised into the Body of Christ. We have a new start as the children of God. We are in relationship with God once again. We can know God and to know God is to have eternal life.

What we are not yet is perfect and we shall not be perfect till we die and go to Heaven. Not being perfect, we can still be wrong about things. So Christians will have serious differences of opinion even on important matters of doctrine and conduct. We will still sin ourselves and we are in a very weak position when it comes to judging other people. That is best left to God.

St Paul tells us that to break any of the commandments is to break the whole law. We cannot condemn someone else's adultery or other sexual sin if we do not remember the Sabbath to keep it holy. We can hardly criticise someone else's religious shortcomings if we covet our neighbour's Audi, house, wife or wide screen telly. Indeed the New Testament teaches us that those of us who know better (because we know Jesus) can expect harsher judgment if we sin than those other people who sin in ignorance.

So do we split with Christians we don't agree with? In all humility, they might after all be right. And even if we are virtually certain that we are right, we shall never achieve a perfect church on earth. We may finish up with a much smaller Church, a Church not so much of the righteous as of the self-righteous, if we exclude the people we don't agree with. Coming back to the fact that we aspire to conform ourselves to the character of God, one tremendously significant aspect of God's character is His unity. Jesus prayed that we might be one. It is a terrible thing to create division in His Body, splits in the Temple of the Holy Spirit, civil war in the Kingdom of God.

How, then, do we deal with people whose sexual lives conform neither to the ideals of celibacy nor to those of heterosexual, monogamous, life-long marriage? Do we condemn and exclude? Maybe they feel guilty about the way their lives have turned out or deeply disappointed. Maybe they themselves see nothing wrong in adopting life styles which society in general is relaxed about and many Christians believe are OK. Do we condemn and exclude or do we welcome them into the fellowship of the Church as a place in which they can experience the love of God? Do we support them, pray for them and bless them? If so, do we appear to condone the less than ideal? If we do not, do we cut people off from the means of grace they so much need if they are to sort out their lives?

What do we Christians have to offer addicts and members of criminal gangs? Only more surveillance and harsher penalties? Or do we have other resources for sharing with them the love of God?

Living in a secular society, what do we really want people to do if the shop they work for opens on Sundays or if, as employees of local authorities or certain commercial firms, they are expected to tell lies to the public? What do we ask of a soldier in an army which is called to fight in a war he believes to be unjust?

Can we confront materialism – sheer, excessive consumption – without making ourselves unintelligible to a materialistic society and alienating most of the people who naturally belong to our churches?

Finally, what response can we, as Christians, make to the secularisation of the society we live in? I suggest four things.

1. We need to repent of our own failure to love God with all our hearts and our neighbours as ourselves.
2. We need to pray daily - and live like people who are in regular conversation with God Almighty.
3. We need to read the Bible assiduously – and live by its teaching.
4. We need to take part frequently in public worship – especially the service which Jesus Himself gave us, the Holy Communion, by which *our sinful bodies may be made clean by his body, and our souls washed through his most precious blood, and that we may evermore dwell in him, and he in us.*
Amen.