

A sermon by Sam Wells, given in October 2004 to the congregation at St. Mark's , Newnham, Cambridge and subsequently published in Samuel Wells, *Speaking the Truth: Preaching in a Pluralistic Culture* (Nashville: Abingdon, 2008).

I'd like to set before you four understandings of homosexuality. Each one is, I suspect, widely held in the church and each one is represented in most congregations. I want to present each one in terms that its proponents would recognize. I will try to set out each argument at its best. For each of the four, I shall offer a summary sentence, a brief description, an account of its scriptural warrant, a comment on its strengths and weaknesses, a kind of nightmare vision if that argument were to go unopposed, a sense of what the argument might assume but not explicitly state, and one question I would like to those who hold that particular view. I am calling the four views, in order, holiness, kingdom, pastoral, and liberation.

The first approach says 'The Bible is clear.' I'm calling this the *holiness* approach. This view rests on humility: Scripture offers us God's pattern for human flourishing, and, while certain things may appear to do no harm, one cannot seek a holy life while being unfaithful to the biblical text. The scriptural warrant comes from half a dozen texts. Leviticus is concerned with purity and the numerical growth of the population. It twice refers to lying 'with a male as with a woman' as an abomination (Lev 18.22, 20.13). Meanwhile Romans is concerned to show how not only Jews but also Gentiles have had the opportunity to follow God's ways, and it argues that men who were 'consumed with passion for one another' and 'committed shameless acts with men' are examples of departing from this natural law (Rom 1.18-32). In addition, 1 Corinthians 6.9-10 and 1 Timothy 1.8-11 include 'sodomites' under a general list of lawlessness and profanity.

The strengths of this argument are its concern for holiness, its awareness of the need for discipline in the dynamic matter of sexual touch, and its respect for scriptural authority. It has several weaknesses. Its reliance on Levitical law leaves it having to explain why some laws in Leviticus are still considered valid while many are not. Even when the New Testament texts stand alone, it also has to explain why rules on homosexuality are inflexible while rules on divorce, usury and the role of women seem to be able to change. It has to face up to an inconsistency in applying 'single verse' injunctions. Why is the church not unambiguously pacifist? Why is not committed to thoroughgoing simplicity of life? Why is not committed to having goods in common? All of these seem better grounded than an antipathy to homosexuality, but presumably they were found to be too inflexible if the church were to remain broad and socially and unsustainable. Meanwhile, some holiness advocates have the unfortunate inclination in using what I would regard as spurious 'natural law' arguments that have little to do with Scripture - for example, that if we were all gay the species would die out, or that gay sex is unhealthy. There is also a tendency to use analogies that compare homosexuality to paedophilia. I regard all of these tendencies as weakening the holiness argument. However the most significant

weakness is the very deep theological problem it raises. Many holiness proponents seem prepared to acknowledge that God makes some people homosexual, that homosexuality is discovery not a preference, but this creates a troubling mystery of why God should do this. What kind of God creates and bestows a gift then prohibits its flourishing? Thus the holiness approach seems simply to shift the problem from the Bible to God.

Underlying the holiness view is, I suspect, a sense that the world is getting out of control. It's sometimes said the Church has lost the ability to speak about right and wrong: a stand has to be taken somewhere. That somewhere is often taken to be marriage. This is a view that carries widespread sympathy in the church. But I would point out again that it is not unambiguously derived from the New Testament, which seems more concerned with singleness and the body of Christ than with marriage. There is, meanwhile, a profound irony that many of those who want to protect marriage seem prepared to split the church. All the approaches have a nightmare vision: if the holiness approach were left to itself the nightmare vision would be of a church self-righteous, legalistic, self-obsessed, constantly splitting, and dismissed by most progressive forces in society as hopelessly out of touch. The question I would want to ask the proponents of the holiness approach is, 'Why has the issue of homosexuality become *the* issue?'

The second approach says 'Can we talk about something else?' I'm calling this the *kingdom* approach. This view draws attention to the main thrust of Jesus life, preaching, work and passion. He concentrated on bringing all kinds of people, especially outcasts, into his new kingdom. The kingdom approach maintains that homosexuality is a distraction from major issues like evangelism, war, abortion, poverty, money, and the environment. The scriptural warrant for this view rests on a simple word count. *Homosexuality* is not mentioned in the gospels and has only a handful of references in the Bible as a whole; meanwhile the issues the gospels do talk about - use of wealth, loving God with all your heart, soul, mind and strength, and your neighbour as yourself, and simply following Jesus - are obscured by the focus on homosexuality. The radical Old Testament prophets simply ask that God's people 'act justly, love mercy, and walk humbly' with God (Micah 6.8). This seems a lot more important than sexual orientation. Most gay Christians I know personally would be kingdom proponents, seeing their own sexual orientation as well down the list of the great issues facing the world.

The strength of the kingdom approach is its concern for the big picture and for the broad thrust of Scripture in the modern world. Its weakness is that it has no positive argument on homosexuality. Not only is it eager to change the subject, it also makes one feel one shouldn't be having the conversation. But bewilderment is not an argument; impatience is seldom a good witness. If the kingdom proponents have got nothing to say they can't be surprised that the issues are being settled by others who have a lot to say. A second weakness of the kingdom view is a tendency just to ignore the parts of Scripture that don't

fit its simple message. It seems to struggle with the injunctions of Scripture that jolt the assumptions of the twenty-first century. It forgets that discipleship is about conforming one's world to Scripture, not conforming Scripture to one's world.

Underlying the kingdom view is, I suspect, a desire for the simplicity of the direct response of the first disciples to Jesus, and a kind of resentment at anything that inhibits the straightforward practice and sharing his good news. If the kingdom view were left to itself the nightmare vision would be of a Church self-important, impatient, depressed, and incapable of translating its noble ideals into the day-to-day business of living and worshiping as a community. The question I would want to ask the kingdom proponents is, 'Might not what you see as a distraction in fact be inviting the Church to discover what it means to act justly, love mercy and walk humbly with God today?'

The third approach says 'Can't you see what the Church is *doing* to people?' I'm calling this the *pastoral* approach. The pastoral approach seeks first of all the virtue of honesty. It points out that there have always been gay people in the church, and in the priesthood, and maintains it is high time to recognize the church as it really is. It emphasizes concern for individuals. It is exasperated at the way gay people are sometimes treated. It seeks that all people pursue integrity, rather than what it tends to see as hypocrisy. The scriptural warrant is rooted in Paul's recognition that 'all have sinned and fallen short of the glory of God' (Romans 3.23). This is in the spirit of Jesus' word: 'Do not judge, that you may not be judged' (Matthew 7.1). When Jesus was confronted with the woman caught in adultery, he suggested 'Let anyone among you who is without sin be the first to throw a stone at her' (John 8.7). In the parable of the Pharisee and the tax-collector, it is the one who simply recognized himself as a sinner that went home justified, rather than the one who was so keen to establish his righteousness. Jesus also said that what we do for the 'least', we do for him (Matthew 25.40), and gay people have a claim to be regarded as the 'least' in today's society.

The strengths of this argument are its emphasis on compassion, realism, and honesty. It reflects the widespread belief that if Christianity is about anything it is about love, and it asks whether there is really so much love in the world that the church can afford to stamp it down when it happens to appear. The weakness is its tendency to over-identify with individual concerns to the neglect of wider questions of church order and scriptural interpretation. The pastoral approach can be reluctant to articulate a corporate gospel distinguishable from tolerance and a respect for privacy.

Underlying the pastoral view is, I suspect, a sense shared by many in contemporary society, particularly of the younger generation, that large institutions are invariably oppressive and inhuman, and that real value is largely or entirely to be found on a personal level, in the intimacy and trust of relationships and friendships. There is a tendency to seek in the church a haven

from the hurly-burly of the aggressive, intrusive world. 'Just live and let live' is the motto. Many of those that take the pastoral view might feel that even to preach a sermon on this subject was inappropriate. If the pastoral view were left to itself the nightmare vision would be of a church that had given up on structures, had no overall vision, was entirely devolved, was concerned only to pick up the pieces, and had no mainstream agenda. The question I would want to ask the pastoral proponents is, 'What genuinely constitutes a holy life for a gay person? Are privacy and tolerance really enough, or is it time to articulate a more constructive view, and does that mean celibacy, gay marriage or some redefinition of sacred friendship?'

The fourth approach says, 'This is a straightforward issue of discrimination.' I'm calling this the *liberation* approach. The liberation view sees the question in terms of rights and justice. It sees discrimination against gay people as rooted in ignorance, prejudice and the misuse of power. It believes the church should regard secular aspirations on rights issues as its own minimum standard. It finds the church embarrassing and way behind the times. It approaches Scripture in two ways. On the one hand it insists that what Paul was attacking was cult prostitution and promiscuity and that he knew nothing of stable gay partnerships. It calls for the Bible to be read in the context of its day. On the other hand it points out that Paul claimed there was no distinction between Jew and Greek, slave and free, male and female (Galatians 3.28), a breathtaking claim in his day. Meanwhile Jesus came to bring good news to the poor, prisoners, disabled and oppressed (Luke 4.18) - and that has to mean in today's language good news for those that are gay. Some proponents of the liberation view would say that since we are made in the image of God (Genesis 1.27), we should treasure the way we are made, and if he made us gay, he surely did so because he wanted us to be this way.

The strengths of the liberation approach are its concern for justice and for the outsider, and its emphasis that Christianity must be *good news*. Its weakness is its over-dependence on social-scientific research, its disdain for some of the traditional sources of Christian wisdom, and its naive faith in the harmony of a society based on conflicting rights.

Underlying the liberation approach is, I suspect, a deep sense that the world of the Bible is a very different world from the one we live in today, and an honest attempt to place the church in the vanguard of the progressive forces in society, rather than always lagging grumpily behind. It sees freedom as the heart of God's will and purpose for his creation. If the liberation view were left to itself, the nightmare vision would be of a Church losing identity, subtly lacking in self-esteem, losing contact with historical Christianity, and lacking a gospel distinct from a secular liberal agenda. Remembering that those who wed the spirit of the age quickly become widows, the question I would want to ask the liberation proponents is, 'Can you demonstrate to the rest of the church that your main concern is to be faithful to the God historically revealed in Christ, rather than simply to take up the fashionable cause of the moment?'

These then are four theological approaches to the issue of homosexuality. I have three purposes in setting them before you. The first is to say that I think they are all legitimate approaches. It is wrong to say one is true to the Bible and the others are not. It is wrong to say one is loving and the others are not. It is wrong to say one is concerned with justice and the others are not. My guess is that while some people will identify wholeheartedly with one of these four approaches, many will want to take the best bits from all four. (That might be called the Anglican way.) It might be worth saying that I can think of gay Christians who would recognize themselves under each of these four approaches. The second thing I want to say is that all four views are represented in most congregations. I see that as something to be proud of, not to apologize for. I am proud of it. I believe the very existence of a church like ours, where all four views are respected, is good news.

The third and last thing I will say is this. We could settle for a polite tolerance, all head off into separate congregations with consistent opinions, and never have to meet someone we disagreed with. But we are gathered here this morning, not because we find Christianity helpful or comforting, but because we believe it is *true*. What we have to offer the world is not a book full of answers but a way of continuing a conversation with God and with one another. That way is a way that meets together, recognizes our own sinfulness, shares joy, listens, seeks the truth, prays, seeks reconciliation, gives thanks, shares bread, receives blessing, and thus renews its mission. It is the Eucharistic way, made possible by the truth and reconciliation found in Jesus. We have been given this precious gift in the Anglican Communion and no denomination is better placed than we are to engage these questions in a spirit of unity and peace. Our gospel is that Christ has broken down the dividing wall of hostility (Ephesians 2.14). If we can't all stay in the room and talk to each other we're telling the world our gospel isn't true. I'm not sure we can look to the wider church to somehow settle this issue for us. We shall somehow have to settle it for ourselves and the *way* we do so, in the power of the Spirit, as much as any answer we come to, will be our gospel, the truth we offer to our world today.