

ON BEING HUMAN - THE NATURE OF LOVE

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"All, everything that I understand, I only understand because I love." (Leo Tolstoy)

Thank you so much Wendy for inviting me to Wadham College. It is a great privilege to be with you all here tonight.

The theme for this term is 'On Being human', and tonight I want to concentrate on the nature of love.

Many of you have returned from your summer holidays and have had a chance, during those long days to read a new book or an old favourite. For my summer reading I picked up, once again, one of my favourite books: *Captain Corelli's Mandolin*, by Louis de Bernieres.

Some of you might know it well, or some of you may even have seen the film version of the novel. If so, you may remember a very poignant scene where father and daughter discuss the nature of love (brilliantly acted by John Hurt and Penelope Cruz). I quote from the novel:

"Love is a temporary madness, it erupts like volcanoes and then subsides. And when it subsides you have to make a decision. You have to work out whether your root was so entwined together that it is inconceivable that you should ever part. Because this is what love is not. Love is not breathlessness, it is not excitement, it is not the promulgation of promises of eternal passion. That is just being in love, which any fool can do. Love itself is what is left over when being in love has burned away, and this is both an art and a fortunate accident. Those that truly love have roots that grow towards each other underground, and when all the pretty blossoms have fallen from their branches, they find that they are one tree and not two."

This is a beautiful piece of prose which is often read out at marriages, and points to what our great bard Shakespeare understood of love:

*Love's not Time's fool, though rosy lips and cheeks.
Within his bending sickle's compass come;
Love alters not with his brief hours and weeks,
But bears it out even to the edge of doom.
(Sonnet 116)*

So, love is hard and for the long term.

I quote from Bernieres because, of course, we have our own Christian definition of love. It was read tonight and is even more challenging and thought provoking. St. Paul wrote from Ephesus to Corinthians where he had founded the church:

“Love is patient and kind; love does not envy or boast; it is not arrogant or rude. It does not insist on its own way; it is not irritable or resentful; it does not rejoice at wrongdoing, but rejoices with the truth. Love bears all things, believes all things, hopes all things, endures all things” (1 Corinanthians 13).

It might surprise you that the Church of England is in a bit of state about love. In a way, that is nothing new. Over the last few hundred years, the Church of England has been in crisis over slavery, race, gender, and now its worried about love between two people of the same sex, i.e. same-sex union and same-sex marriage.

As you know, in the UK civil partnerships have been legal since 2004, and in 2013 the British law legalized same-sex marriage. However, a piece of legislation called the “quadruple lock” effectively enables the Church of England not to have to recognize this legality and exempts the church from solemnizing or even “blessing” same sex marriage in a church or even a secular setting (House of Bishop Guidelines B30). The Church of England Clergy can only ‘informally pray’ with a same-sex couple after they have had a civil service.

It is clear to the secular world that the Church of England has got itself into a very tight corner. It is seen to be failing to love all those who are members of our communion, including those from the LGBTI community who wish to have their long-term Christian, monogamous, same-sex relationships recognized by God.

The Archbishop of York, however, does not see this as a problem. He said last week that, “I support civil partnerships because I think that’s a matter of equality, and a matter of fairness, but for me, it was wrong for the Government to try to redefine the nature of marriage.” He continued, “My upholding of Christian marriage as I understand it goes hand-in-hand with saying to people, ‘to diminish homosexual people is anathema to the Christian faith because God loves us all equally’.”

Traditionalists also object to the word ‘marriage’ being used to describe the union between two people of the same-sex. For them, the word is absolutely set in stone as being between a man and a woman; there can be no other interpretation of marriage despite obvious different interpretations across the centuries and within different cultures. Indeed, the Oxford University Dictionary definition of marriage is, “*a legal contract between spouses that establishes rights and obligations between them, between them and their children, and between them and their in-laws. The definition of marriage varies according to different cultures.*”

There has been movement over the last few decade around the church’s approach to marriage (e.g. the marriage of a divorced person, approaches to contraception etc.) and I admit that accepting that marriage exists been same sex couple is a huge leap for some who are ‘wedded’ to scripture, especially Matthew 19:4. Other Biblical references to marriage occur in many

places and the selection of those which touch on this debate would include: Genesis 2 18-24, 25 1-2, Leviticus 20 14-21, 1 Corinthians 7 1-7, Ephesians 5:21-33.

Most traditionalists also state that the bible is the literal and living word of God. For them, there are three places in the New Testament where homosexual activity is condemned: Genesis 19, Romans 1:26-27, 1 Corinthians 6:9-10, and 1 Timothy 1:9-10. A fourth passage, Jude 7, is often interpreted as referring to homosexuality.

None of the four gospels mention the subject directly, and there is nothing about homosexuality in the Book of Acts. The presumed references to 'homosexuality' itself in the New Testament hinge on the interpretation of three specific Greek words: *arsenokoitēs* (ἀρσενοκοίτης), *malakos* (μαλακός), and *porneia* (πορνεία) and its cognates. While it is not disputed that the three Greek words apply to sexual relations between men (and possibly between women), some academics interpret the relevant passages as a prohibition against pederasty or prostitution rather than homosexuality *per se*, while other scholars have presented a counter argument. The historical context of the passages has also been a subject of debate.

But many Christians in the Church of England would not agree that homosexual acts are 'sinful'. Recent research has thoroughly discredited homosexuality as some kind of 'illness' or unnatural. The work of the Christian ethicist Margaret Farley is very interesting on this topic and as the lay reader, Anthony Archer from the Diocese of St Albans, pointed out: "The more I got to know and count as friends Christians who identified as LGBTI, the more I have been convinced that their sexual orientation is the way God created them".

Without doubt there is much exegesis about this topic, and I highly recommend for anyone interested in this to read "Amazing Love" by Andrew Davidson (2016). Andrew gives a very robust and sound counter argument to the evangelical literalist stance.

And so why is the debate on this issue so important? **Because lives depend on it.**

Let me explain. As a Liberal Anglo Catholic my response to God is based on three things: Scripture, Tradition and Reason. So, when I was asked to 'celebrate' a same sex marriage in May of this year I readily agreed. I thought that as long as I asked the permission of my Bishop here in Oxford and the Bishop of the area in South Africa I would be allowed to take the celebration. I did not break any canonical rules, as I explicitly did not bless the couple. My understanding was that this would be permitted as the two people were committed to each other and were prepared to take on these words of love - from 1 Corinthians 13 - for each other: "Love is patient, love is kind." Thus, in all good Christian conscience I wanted to help them celebrate that love and a life-long monogamous relationship.

So on May 5th in South Africa I found myself staying in the ground of a beautiful hotel with The Canon Mpho Tutu, Desmond Tutu's daughter, and her same sex partner Professor Marceline Van Furth (whom she had already married in a civil ceremony in Holland). In my homily I asserted that it is the nature and quality of love that God cares about the most. I quote some words from the Homily:

*“In a world with so many suffering from hunger and lacking in shelter and basic needs, with so many terrible events taking place illuminating man’s inhumanity to man, Marceline and Mpho have overcome fear and realized that God is concerned with the way in which we treat each other – that we treat all with tenderness, gentleness and kindness. **It is the quality and nature of our love that is central to God’s concern. And He asks us to seek the humanity and Christ in the eyes of everyone we come across on our path.**”*

Remember our words from I Corinthians 13. I think they hark back to an important precedent that over rules all.

“If I speak in the tongues of men or of angels, but do not have love, I am only a resounding gong or a clanging cymbal. If I give all I possess to the poor and give over my body to hardship that I may boast, but do not have love, I gain nothing.”

The former Archbishop Desmond Tutu himself was at the wedding and only last year said, "I would refuse to go to a homophobic heaven. No, I would say sorry, I mean I would much rather go to the other place." Archbishop Tutu said this at the launch of the Free and Equal campaign in Cape Town, "I would not worship a God who is homophobic and that is how deeply I feel about this." Archbishop Tutu is waging a campaign against homophobia that is similar to the campaign he waged against racism in South Africa, "I am as passionate about this campaign as I ever was about apartheid. For me, it is at the same level."

You might well ask Mpho Tutu why it was important to share vows at the celebration of her marriage (though let’s be clear that I did not bless the couple as I was not allowed to by Canon law) and she said to me “I have learnt from my father in internal consistency that he is willing to take his faith and faith understanding to its logical conclusion. My father says I look at the people who are in the relationship, and when I line up their love, their behaviours, and what I see of them here are people in my congregation who have been in committed relationship for umpteen years. On what basis can I deny that this is love? This is the real thing. It is real love and real commitment. What is the issue here then? What about it makes it an ungodly union?”

So, I have two points to make. The first is that, as mentioned in my Homily, if God is concerned with the nature of love between two people and not their sexuality, God, I believe, would condemn an abusive heterosexual relationship over and above a loving homosexual one. “We know and rely on the love God has for us. God is love. Whoever lives in love, lives in God, and God in them,” (1 John 4:16).

If we look at the cases of domestic violence in the UK and Africa that will give some cause for concern relating to this matter. Just recently the BBC Radio 4 drama story of Helen and Rob Titchener in the Archers had listeners gripped through every twist and turn. No one could believe that this type of domestic abuse was present in a heterosexual couple’s relationship, in a middle class family situation, and that Helen would be convicted. The writers researched the topic very thoroughly. Here are some domestic abuse facts for the UK.

- 1 in 4 women will be affected by domestic abuse and 1 in 6 men in their lifetime.

- Domestic abuse leads to, on average, two women being murdered each week and 30 men per year.
- It accounts for 16% of all violent crime.

(Source: Crime in England and Wales 04/05 report.)

With these statistics how could we worship a God who would condemn a homosexual relationship over a heterosexual one that is abusive just because it is taking place in a “traditional” marriage?

And of course this issue of domestic violence in marriages is not isolated to the UK. This affects the whole Anglican Communion. South Africa has one of the highest incidences of domestic violence in the world. And, sadly, domestic violence is the most common and widespread human rights abuse in South Africa. Every day, women are murdered, physically and sexually assaulted, threatened and humiliated by their partners, within their own homes. According to the Tear Foundation, in South Africa someone is raped or sexually abused every 17 seconds.

A woman I met in a Cape Town Township earlier this year said:

“In South Africa when you get married you pay ‘lobola’, which means they think they own a woman – so they do everything they want to that woman. It is so very sad for me because when a woman gets married to a man they do not get married to get beaten up or be a punching bag for him.”

But this is the reality for many Anglican women in Africa who live on an average of \$3 a day. It is obviously not the reality for all heterosexual relationships, but extreme domestic abuse is present and the UN statistics back that up: “Recent global prevalence figures indicate that about 1 in 3 (35%) of women worldwide have experienced either physical and/or sexual intimate partner violence or non-partner sexual violence in their lifetime. Violence can negatively affect women’s physical, mental, sexual and reproductive health, and may increase vulnerability to HIV”

The second point is that the traditionalist position continues to perpetuate abuse and discrimination, which play out in the lives of young people both here in the UK and in South Africa. One could argue that the continuing stance of organizations such as GAFCON who believe that “God cannot bless and approve something which is inherently rebellion against His nature and design” and release statements such as “We recognize that the brokenness of our world produces many aspects of human behaviour which are contrary to God’s good design. These include slander, greed, malice, hatred, jealousy, dishonesty, selfishness, envy and murder, as well as fornication, adultery and same-sex unions” (16th October 2016), are actually at the root of the acceptance of discrimination and abuse towards LGBTQ people.

The perpetuation of this theological stance actually leads to incidents of violence, discrimination even deaths of LGBTI individuals here (see Jayne Ozanne’s story in the editors’ preface to *Journeys in Grace and Truth – Revisiting Scripture and Sexuality*, p. pxii) in the UK and those in the townships of many countries in Africa.

I quote from a woman who I interviewed three weeks ago who lives in a township in South Africa. The township of Khayelitsha has the highest crime rate in SA.

“As a gay woman I fear for my life, to be killed or corrected by rape or gang raped by my community. They correct you by raping you and when they have finished they sometimes kill you. When I see a relationship between a woman and a woman I am truly happy and proud because I can see the love and humanity in that relationship.!”

So my argument is that traditionalists, such as GAFCON and the Evangelical Group on General Synod (EGGS), are rightly welcome to their understanding, their theology and their literal biblical interpretation. In fact, their stance was nicely summed up in a recent letter to The College of Bishops on 12th October in which in a crucial paragraph they explained that:

“Any change in the Church’s teaching or practice – such as the introduction of provisions that celebrate or bless sexual relationships outside of a marriage between one man and one woman – would represent a significant departure from our apostolic inheritance and the authority of the Bible in matters of faith and doctrine. It would also, inevitably, be a further step on a trajectory towards the full acceptance of same-sex sexual partnerships as equivalent to male-female marriage”.

This position - as a fellow Christian - I honour, but I argue that there should be space for more than just one theological stance on this subject if our ‘broad Anglican’ church is to be just to all. As a liberal, I feel that there is a moral and spiritual imperative to stand up and make a “Call for Compassion” - for those who wish for their love, a faithful and committed Christian love, towards their chosen one to be recognized by the church and the clergy who wish to recognize it formally.

I am reminded of the words of the great hymn by Faber:

*There's a wideness in God's mercy like the wideness of the sea;
There's a kindness in his justice, which is more than liberty.
For the love of God is broader than the measure of man's mind;
And the heart of the Eternal is most wonderfully kind.*

We know that when we read the bible there is a broader truth which permeates it and particularly in the New Testament:

“Whoever does not love does not know God, because God is love.” (1 John 4:8)

“Be completely humble and gentle; be patient, bearing with one another in love.” (Ephesians 4:2)

I am asking the Archbishop of Canterbury not to be overwhelmed by one limited doctrinal position, but to provide an ecclesiastical, legal provision for the ‘blessing’ of same-sex union, for those who believe that such unions are NOT against ‘God good design for the world’. By that act alone the Archbishop would help save lives around the world, especially in Africa and change the tide of discrimination, injustice, hurt and pain suffered by so many. The

Archbishop would then be truly reflecting on the kingdom message to “Do justice, love mercy and walk humbly with our God” (Micah 6:8).

Personally I am prepared to take a chance with an open inclusive and generous theology of Love; when I reach the gates I would like to be standing in the same spot as the Archbishop Desmond Tutu. Let’s all stop and hope and pray that the doors of Heaven will open not only for me but also for all the people on earth who put love first.

Amen.