

**Sermon for Pentecost 4:  
Sunday 6<sup>th</sup> July 2014**

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Genesis 25.19-34

Psalms 45.10-17

Romans 7.14-25

Matthew 13.1-23



Our Gospel today has a lot to say on judgement. It starts with the righteous people judging John the Baptist and Jesus: they condemn John the Baptist as having a demon, and Jesus as a drunkard and a glutton! But note Jesus' response: Jesus does not condemn his accusers. Jesus rarely condemns or judges individuals – but many times condemns and judges groups and communities. When Jesus mentions the word 'you' in reference to his judgement, it is usually 'you' plural: such as 'woe to you, Scribes and Pharisees, hypocrites!' (Matthew 23.13-15); desolation to you, Jerusalem (Matthew 23.37-39); he condemns the Scribes as a group (Luke 20.45-47). In the Gospel today, woe to you, Bethsaida and Capernaum!

If you look at the picture today on the Pew Bulletin [above], it shows Jesus holding a pair of scales? A yolk? He is holding it with a finger or two, and handing it to an individual – look how light it is! As the Gospel says, "my yolk is easy, and my burden is light" (Matthew 11.30). But when the scales are held up to communities, how heavy the judgement and burden!

One interesting thing in our Gospel is that Jesus then goes on to compare Sodom favourably with Capernaum (Matthew 11.23-24). What are we to make of this?

When we talk about Sodom many Christians leap to the traditional understanding of the crime of Sodom as being same-gender sexuality. Homosexuality is an issue which has consumed our church, and has caused and is causing great pain and anguish. It is an immense pastoral issue, and there are people on both sides of the argument who are stirred by sincere and great passion; fortunately part of the genius of the Anglican Church is respecting the sincerity of those whose views differ from you on such issues.

Yet viewed objectively this topic is of little biblical or theological interest. It ought to be as of little interest as issues about race or gender – indeed of far less interest given that discussions of race and gender are far more pronounced in the Bible. Yet it has consumed this church, and diverted us away from the topics that ought to command our attention, our interest and our energy. I must personally admit that this is not an issue about which I am passionate; if you want to see me angry ask me about injustice or greed or environmental destruction or child abuse. Overnight we have heard that our government has returned asylum seekers back into the hands of the government from which they were fleeing, which is a flagrant breach of international law, and is deeply offensive to our Christian duty to protect the stranger and the foreigner. These are issues about which I can be passionate;

these are issues which are central to Christian moral teaching. These are the issues we ought to be teaching about and preaching about and shouting about.

However, this Gospel is a good example of how our perceptions of homosexuality take us away from the main game; how a biblical passage about welcome and the light burden of Christ can be side tracked by biblically peripheral issues. So, let us deal with this particular peripheral issue of homosexuality, so that we can return to the main game. In the discussion that follows, I must acknowledge my debt to Dr Barry Webb, who is a Senior Research Fellow at Moore College – I draw heavily from his paper *Homosexuality in Scripture*.<sup>1</sup> Whilst my conclusions will differ from those of Dr Webb, his scholarship and knowledge of biblical languages, and his approach to exegesis, command considerable respect and inform my thinking.

First, as Dr Webb himself says, the Bible never mentions homosexuality in the sense of “sexual orientation”. The word and the concept did not exist until the late 19<sup>th</sup> Century. What we have then in the Bible is about half a dozen references to same-gender sexual behaviour, all of them in my view ambiguous in some sense.

In Genesis 19 we have the account of the destruction of Sodom and Gomorrah. But what was the sin that led to destruction? Jesus himself in the Gospel passage reflects the dominant Jewish understanding of the passage as being about the gross abuse of hospitality; the sexual deviance involved was not homosexuality *per se*, but rape, and even worse, rape of visitors by their hosts. The crime of Capernaum, in not welcoming and indeed despising the messengers of God, was even worse than the crime of Sodom in attempting to rape and abuse the messengers of God. As Dr Webb says, “The sin of Sodom and Gomorrah was ‘very grave’ according to [Genesis] 18.20. But exegesis does not indicate that homosexuality as such is the issue ... the sexual sin of the Sodomites is part of a more general state of disorder, including inhospitality, xenophobia [sic], and violence.” It is clear from any reasoned exegesis of Genesis 19 that homosexuality, or same-gender sexual behaviour, is not itself the issue.

There are other references to same-gender sexual behaviour in the Old Testament, usually temple prostitution which is rightly condemned; and there are two references in Leviticus: Leviticus 18.22 and 20.13 in which a man lying with a man as he would with a woman is condemned. There has been much discussion as to what this actually means (does it refer to lying on women’s beds? does it only refer to penetrative intercourse? etc) but let’s assume the widest claim that it refers to same-gender sexual behaviour of any sort. We would be on very shaky ground to take two references from Leviticus and apply them to the rest of the scripture. After all, the same passages have verses which condemn having sex with a woman in her period (18.19 and 20.18) and in the same part of Leviticus there are many prohibitions that are clearly rejected by us: for example in 19.19 there is a prohibition on garments with mixed types of cloth, and in Leviticus 19.27-28 there is a prohibition on shaving and on tattoos. As Dr Webb makes clear, Leviticus is set in a far larger theological

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<sup>1</sup> ‘Homosexuality in Scripture’. In *Explorations 8: Theological and Pastoral Responses to Homosexuality*. Edited by B. G. Webb. Adelaide: Openbook, 1994. Accessed from Internet 03 Jul 14 from: <http://www.moore.edu.au/Media/Default/PDFS/Homosexuality%20Paper-B-Webb.pdf>

context related to the covenant between God and Israel; I would add that to take material out of that context is problematic without taking into account the general tenor of scripture.

This brings us to the New Testament. Jesus never mentions same-gender sexuality – his references to Sodom make clear that sexuality is not the issue here. It has been suggested that there are two possible reasons why Jesus fails to mention same-gender sexuality – either it was so obvious a sin he did not need to mention it, or it was such a trivial matter it was not worth mentioning. Given that Jesus often mentions sins which are clearly significant – such as murder, adultery, betrayal and greed – the most reasonable interpretation of Jesus’ failure to mention homosexuality is that it was trivial. Indeed, there are only three explicit references in the New Testament to same-gender sexual behaviour, all in the Pauline epistles: Romans 1.18-32 (specifically vv. 26-27), and in 1 Corinthians 6.9-10 and again in almost identical terms in 1 Timothy 1.8-10. Many commentators would argue that all these references are quite ambiguous: the need for a lengthy analysis of the actual meaning of the Greek words found in Dr Webb’s exegesis would tend to confirm this, along with his correct insistence that these passages only make sense in a broader biblical narrative.

The passage in Romans refers to those who worship idols and as a result separate themselves from God, who gives them up to impurity and degradation: women exchanging natural intercourse for unnatural, and men giving up natural intercourse and instead burning with passion for others. It is hard to see what to make of this. It certainly does not refer to those who are constitutionally homosexual, and it does not refer to those who are Christians. It seems that it refers to idolaters who choose to deny their basic nature, and then are involved promiscuously with others (note the plural used in the passage). So we would be hard put to apply this passage to Christians who are involved in same-gender monogamous relations! In fairness to Dr Webb, he does not discuss this passage in those terms and espouses a different understanding of human nature. In terms of the passage from Romans, he casts it in terms of its continuity with Old Testament scripture. Dr Webb is quite clear that in his view homosexual behaviour is only one of a number of sinful conditions: Romans 7 & 8 talks at length about being slaves of flesh, and there are many sins to which flesh is prone – not just sexual, but also sins of power and wealth.

But of course this leads straight back to the idea that a particular passage can only make sense as part of a broader context, especially if it is ambiguous. It cannot be read in isolation. We are rightly cautious of taking limited Pauline references and building a theology upon them: after all, we would not justify slavery because Paul sends Onesimus back to his owner Philemon. Paul unambiguously tells women to be silent in church (1 Corinthians 14.34-36) – not just the church in Corinth but as is practiced in all the churches of the saints; yet this is also a Pauline injunction we no longer follow, as it does not fit with our overall understanding of the tenor of scripture.

This then brings us to the only other two references in the New Testament. This is to be found in a list of sinners condemned by Paul in 1 Corinthians 6 and 1 Timothy 1. In both cases, to use the Greek, *malakoi* and *arsenokotai* are condemned. The word *malakoi* is previously found in classical Greek, and refers to those who are soft or passive. The word *arsenokotai* is invented by Paul – this is the first ever recorded usage. If Paul wanted to condemn homosexual behaviour, there were plenty of words already available in classical

Greek, so we are struggling to accurately define *arsenokotai*. But clearly it is linked to *malakoi*, and in classical Greek *malakoi* was often used in reference to boy prostitutes (Webb). Whilst Webb takes *arsenokotai* to apply to all homosexual behaviour, it is unclear how he does so. A more likely meaning of *arsenokotai* is to be drawn from linking it to *malakoi*; if in classical Greek *malakoi* refers to soft persons, especially boy prostitutes, then *arsenokotai* is going to refer to those who use them, most likely the clients of boy prostitutes, which is clearly sinful in any context. It is hard to see how it would refer to same-gender monogamous relationships between adults, neither of whom is *malakoi*.

Dr Webb does make it quite clear that in order to understand these passages we need to understand the overall tenor and purpose of scripture, and he is very careful to link his discussion into overall themes. He chooses to interpret these passages in the light of the overall biblical blessing of heterosexual relations, and comes to the conclusion that homosexual behaviour is sinful.

Now clearly the Bible does see loving heterosexual marriage as a wonderful, blessed thing – our first reading today about Rebecca and Isaac clearly shows this, as does Psalm 45. But this does not mean that other forms of behaviour are, of necessity, sinful. Just because one form of behaviour is very good, does not mean other forms of behaviour must be wrong. Many people do not partake in heterosexual marriage – Jesus and St Paul included. Yet we would not say that they are failing the biblical ideal and therefore are sinful. Heterosexual marriage is not compulsory. In the end, all we do must be measured by that highest biblical ideal, which is love: it is against this standard that all sexual behaviour must be measured. We must look at the overall tenor of scripture and the overall revelation of the truth of God before we make judgements. We need only look at the campaigns against slavery and racism and the oppression of women to see how bitterly people use scripture as a weapon in order to defend their traditional understandings of society, and fail to recognise the narrative of love that infuses the Bible.

As can be seen, homosexual behaviour is barely mentioned in the Bible, and when it is, the mentions are quite ambiguous. I just fail to see how this issue deserves the importance that it is given. As a trivial issue, it is best left to conscience. What is clearly important – and this is clearly the prime issue for Jesus in today's Gospel – is how we welcome others. Do we judge them, or do we welcome them into God's Kingdom? Our first reading shows just how important welcome is: imagine that Rebecca's father had turned Abraham's servant away. There could never then have been the love that flourished between Rebecca and Isaac. Welcome must come first: love without welcome is impossible. They are inextricably linked.

I refer you back to the pew bulletin, to the small print under the Cathedral symbol. *At Christ Church Cathedral we seek to share God's unconditional love of all people regardless of age, sex, marital or family status, sexual orientation, ability or wealth.* As the Gospel shows, we are called by Jesus himself not to judge others, but to welcome others into the Kingdom of God. We are called to truly show the love of God to others, without worrying about their age or gender or sexuality or wealth or status in this world. We are not called to judge other people (Luke 6.37). But today's Gospel also clearly shows that we will be judged for our failure as a community to welcome and to love. This is the main game! May God therefore give us the grace to welcome with love. Amen.