

## 20140223Epiphany7Sermon

When I saw that our first reading was from Leviticus, I held my breath. I knew that there are verses from Leviticus that are used by the anti-homosexual lobby to condemn LGBTIs. Was it from Chapter 19 as our reading was? Actually, the two verses quoted constantly as "biblical proof" of condemnation of same sex relationships come from chapter 18 and 20. But our reading to day sits in the middle of these two verses, not only physically but also theologically. Chapter 18 v22 says: *You shall not lie with a male as with a woman; it is an abomination.* And chapter 20 v 13 says: *If a man lies with a male as with a woman, both of them have committed an abomination; they shall be put to death; their blood is upon them.* These two verses have historically been interpreted by Jews and Christians as clear blanket prohibitions against homosexual acts. However, more recent interpretations focus on these verses context as part of the Holiness Code, a code of purity meant to distinguish the behaviour of Israelites from the Canaanites. And this continues in our 1<sup>st</sup> Reading this morning.

Here God says to Moses that he must tell the people of Israel: You shall be holy, for I the Lord your God am holy. This verse resonates with the Gospel where Jesus tells us that we must be perfect as your heavenly Father is perfect. Both the OT and the gospel's demand is practically impossible to carry out. Can we be as perfect as God?

Every verse in this short reading ends with the words: *I am the Lord your God - a constant reminder that the people must behave in the same way as God would - you shall be holy for I the Lord your God am holy.* God instructs that we should assist the poor and the alien by leaving the gleanings in the fields, we should not steal, lie or swear falsely; we should not be unjust or slander our neighbour; we should not hate any member of our family; we should not judge others or take vengeance or a bear a grudge but we should love our neighbour as ourself. Are you fully keeping this part of this Leviticus Holiness Code? If so then may be you can criticise those who are not keeping that part mentioned chapter 18 and 20; if not then do not judge.

I learnt a new word preparing this sermon - perspicuous. It's an adjective which means *something clearly expressed and easily understood; something that is lucid.* I came across it in an article dealing with the Church of England's House of Bishops' Statement on Same Sex marriage. SSM is already part of South African law but will become part of UK law in March.

The article was headed: *Gay marriage: the bible is not perspicuous.* In the article it showed how in the case of gay marriage the church was moving very slowly in England. And this is still the case here in South Africa too. By law two people of the same gender may get married, but the Anglican Church of Southern Africa has instructed its clergy that they are marriage officers only because they are ordained members of the Anglican Church of Southern Africa so they may not go against the Church's teaching on gay marriage.

At the last Cape Town Synod at least three years ago, pastoral guidelines were requested concerning parishioners who were living in same-sex relationships. At present, nearly three years on, no definitive guidelines have been published, merely a draft document for discussion. Is the church hoping that if they ignore it long enough the problem will go away? I hope not because all that will go away will be LGBTI Anglicans who will seek a home where they can worship almighty God openly with their partners.

Some concern was expressed at the Diocesan Synod that even seeking these pastoral guidelines would be opening the door to unorthodoxy. In the C of E the Pilling Report proposed a two-year period of 'facilitated conversations'. But what is the point of facilitated conversations if, in the eyes of those speaking against the motion, the scripture is so clear about these matters. Surely conversations imply that a change to the biblical orthodoxy our Church will follow.

Those opposed to same sex marriages felt that the church was a safe place to be because the Bible is clear and perspicuous. The trouble is the Scriptures are not clear and perspicuous. This is what the bishop needs to meet head on and reply, loudly and clearly, that the Bible is not clear and perspicuous. What made the Church think that the scriptures were clear and lucid? Well, at the beginning of the Reformation, Catholics and Protestants alike accepted the supreme authority of the Bible. Catholics argued that God had also provided an authority to interpret the Bible, namely the pope. Protestants argued (rightly) that the Catholic Church's interpretations of biblical texts were often wrong. But that left the problem: how should people interpret the Bible? Eventually new answers did develop,

including biblical scholarship as we know it today; but at the beginning of the Reformation there was no other candidate for the office of biblical interpreter except the Roman Catholic pope. So many of the Reformers therefore argued that Christians should accept the Bible as it was, completely un-interpreted. How do we do that? By accepting each text absolutely literally.

So opposition to the Catholic Church led to the principle of rejecting interpretation. All that was left was the un-interpreted words. To make this doctrine work in practice, Reformers developed the theory that every text was easy to understand, so anybody who found any text difficult to understand was making the mistake of trying interpreting it. Of course, the Bible was as difficult to understand then as it always had been; but the theory demanded that it was not.

It is one thing for historians to explain why the theory of biblical perspicuity developed in the sixteenth century; it is quite another to explain why anyone should be so ill-informed as to maintain it today. But there are conservative evangelical Anglicans who think the question of sex outside heterosexual marriage simply boils down to whether we accept the authority of the Bible. But they are just not listening to what their opponents are saying. Church leaders really do need to be more honest about the Bible's lack of clarity. Our Bishop's Synod has produced these draft Guidelines for Pastoral Care of same-sex couples. In the introduction they admit their viewpoints on it are wide and varied. Those who do not approve of same-sex unions are quick to point out the church's position by affirming our Church's teaching as give by our Lord that marriage is in its nature a union permanent and lifelong, for better for worse, till death them do part, of one man with one woman, to the exclusion of all others on either side, for the procreation and nurture of children, for the hallowing and right direction of the natural instincts and affections, and for the mutual society, help and comfort which the one ought to have of the other, both in prosperity and adversity.

But what, can I ask, was our Lord's teaching? Here are the only two relevant biblical texts, Mark 10:2-9 and Matthew 19:3-12.

What are those texts? Mark 10:2-9: *Some Pharisees came, and to test him they asked, 'Is it lawful for a man to divorce his wife?' He answered them, 'What did Moses command you?' They said, 'Moses allowed a man to write a certificate of dismissal and to divorce her.' But Jesus said to them, 'Because of your hardness of heart he wrote this commandment for you. But from the beginning of creation, "God made them male and female." "For this reason a man shall leave his father and mother and be joined to his wife, and the two shall become one flesh." So they are no longer two, but one flesh. Therefore what God has joined together, let no one separate'.*

Matthew 19:3-12: *Some Pharisees came to him, and to test him they asked, 'Is it lawful for a man to divorce his wife for any cause?' He answered, 'Have you not read that the one who made them at the beginning "made them male and female", and said, "For this reason a man shall leave his father and mother and be joined to his wife, and the two shall become one flesh"? So they are no longer two, but one flesh. Therefore what God has joined together, let no one separate.' They said to him, 'Why then did Moses command us to give a certificate of dismissal and to divorce her?' He said to them, 'It was because you were so hard-hearted that Moses allowed you to divorce your wives, but at the beginning it was not so. And I say to you, whoever divorces his wife, except for unchastity, and marries another commits adultery.'*

*His disciples said to him, 'If such is the case of a man with his wife, it is better not to marry.' But he said to them, 'Not everyone can accept this teaching, but only those to whom it is given. For there are eunuchs who have been so from birth, and there are eunuchs who have been made eunuchs by others, and there are eunuchs who have made themselves eunuchs for the sake of the kingdom of heaven. Let anyone accept this who can'.*

Now, if you can deduce what we say about marriage in our Prayer Book Service from these two passages, let me know how you did it. Oh, and can I add you have to do it without interpreting the verse because then they aren't perspicuous.

We all seem to think that Paul was the biggest homophobe around but he does speak in today's 2nd lesson about holiness and if the scriptures are not perspicuous, surely we can interpret this passage to our advantage. Paul believed he had laid a foundation in the Corinthian Church, a foundation which is Christ Jesus. He then says that we

are the temple built on that foundation and that God's spirit dwells in that temple. If anyone destroys that temple - God's temple - if anyone destroys the faith and love of Christ in someone by hurtfully excluding them from the community they are destroying the presence of the Holy Spirit in that community. As Paul puts it so well, *"Let no one boast about human leaders. For all things are yours, whether Paul or Apollos or Cephas or the world or life or death or the present or the future—all belong to you, **and you belong to Christ, and Christ belongs to God.**"*

But we are not followers of Paul, as he carefully points out in the quotation, but followers of Christ. What does our Gospel say? Well, here Jesus is perspicuous: *'You have heard that it was said, "You shall love your neighbour and hate your enemy." 44But I say to you, **Love your enemies and pray for those who persecute you,** 45so that you may be children of your Father in heaven; for he makes his sun rise on the evil and on the good, and sends rain on the righteous and on the unrighteous. 46For if you love those who love you, what reward do you have? Do not even the tax-collectors do the same? 47And if you greet only your brothers and sisters, what more are you doing than others? Do not even the Gentiles do the same?*

We must be open to the guidelines the Bishops will finally produce; we must welcome LGBTI people into our congregation - not on conditions that they turn away from their sin or anything like that; we must be open to facilitating conversations that leads to a deeper understanding of others who might be different from us but who are all children of the same heavenly Father.

And this morning we are making Nhlonipho, Nomalizo and Chinedu members of the body of Christ through Baptism. They are children of the same heavenly father, they will become our sisters and brothers...Let us treat them as such.