

Sunday 14th February 2021. Zoom Communion

Text: 1 Corinthians 6:12-20 1 Corinthians 7:1-7, 32-35

PART ONE - INTRODUCTION

SLIDE 1

A Three-part sermon today ... Part One - Introduction

On this Valentine's Day we celebrate Love..

... not the so-called “love” of contemporary culture that starts from the idolatry of putting self-fulfillment first and foremost ..

... We celebrate today Christ-like love

... Love that is committed to the other

... Love that is “not self-seeking” .. Love that “always trusts, always hopes, always perseveres”

We rejoice that “God is love” and “Whoever lives in love lives in God, and God in Him” (1 John 4:16)

We acclaim that Jesus Christ is the embodiment of love

... He is our Pattern Man, showing us the life we are to aspire to

... self-giving love to others, that is the outworking of absolute love for God..

Today we'll consider how this primacy of Christ-like love is worked out in marriage, celibacy and same-sex relationships..

LIVING IN LOVE & FAITH

- The first, marriage, is a common theme in our Church
 - We have had this annual focus on marriage for several years...

... As far as I can remember, though, I have never preached about celibacy or same-sex relationships

... I repent of this .. I repent of my silence

- I further confess that I may only now be trying to honestly address these issues, because the Church of England is coming to a point where decisions have to be made

... All in our churches are asked to respond to the Church's publication and resources, "Living in Love and Faith" regarding sexuality and relationships,

... These publications highlight different understandings there are across the Church

... Our bishops write: "Most pressing among our differences are questions around same-sex relationships.. we recognise that here decisions .. need to be made with some urgency" (pg 422)

PCC's, church members will be asked your views in the not too distant future..

We need to listen carefully to one another across the churches

And, following St Paul's exhortation to unity that runs through 1 Corinthians, we need to learn how we will agree to disagree...

I am very aware that I may be taking on too much for one sermon

- There is vast reading you could undertake – the Living in Love and Faith book itself is over 400 pages long

... All need to undertake extensive prayer and thought

Today, I just aim to highlight the general issues, all within the embrace of Love

...with the conviction that we are to celebrate Christ-like committed love wherever it is found

- in traditional marriage of man and woman,
...in celibacy
and in same-sex relationships..

I am very aware that what I say is a view that has come after a journey over the years,

and there are Christians, who I very much respect, who hold contrary views

... In the urgency of decisions needed in the Church of England all views need to be considered

If you are concerned about anything I say or you would like to talk about any of these issues, please speak to me

... Please do not brood on any discontent... let us talk freely together

By providence our sermon series through 1 Corinthians helps us to focus on these issues

- We are going to hear readings from Chapters 6 and 7.

READINGS

SLIDE 2

PART TWO

Part Two of today's sermon: In this part, we celebrate,

- The glory of marriage
- And the glory of celibacy

But we cannot do this unless we first recognize the glory of the body in Christian faith..

SLIDE 3

(i) **THE GLORY OF THE BODY** 1 Corinthians 6:12-20

See from the first passage we just read 1 Corinthians 6:12-20, the Christian knows there is no such thing as casual or inconsequential sex

In Christian understanding there can be no separation of our bodies from our thoughts, emotions, from our whole being, from our soul... from God

... This is stark contrast to the popular Stoic philosophy of St Paul's time, and that still influences our culture today...

Stoics had the twisted view that the body is "the prison house for the soul"

... So some tried to deny the body's appetites and instincts... a life of aestheticism

... Other Stoics thought that what we do with our bodies is completely irrelevant to our souls, and so the body's appetites and instincts could be allowed free reign...

- The Christian knows that God made us an integral whole – body, mind and spirit

... Our bodies have vital significance now and in eternity

... At the Resurrection, we are raised not as amorphous spirits but in recognizable bodily form

... St Paul declares in 1 Corinthians, "Do you not know that your body is a temple of the Holy Spirit who is in you, whom you have received from God?"

... You and I are God's temples where His presence lives, is to be seen, and draw others to worship

"The body", Paul says, "is not meant for sexual immorality, but for the Lord and the Lord for the body"

So Paul tells us to "flee from sexual immorality", emphasizing that amongst all sins, sexual sin is especially injurious (verse 18)

... sexual sin particularly damages the image of God in our person.

SLIDE 4

(ii) THE GLORY OF MARRIAGE 1 Corinthians 7:1-7, 32-35

For St Paul, then going into 1 Corinthians chapter 7, there can only be two expressions of sexuality

- Marriage or celibacy

Let's first of all celebrate marriage

Three beautiful strands of marriage are identified in the “Living in Love and Faith” publication:-

i) *Mutuality*

First mutuality..an utter sharing between the two

... Marriage means the utter commitment of one person to the other in love..

.. Coming together as one...

The “Living in Love and Faith” book has a beautiful description of this commitment

- Giving one's self over “to the endless mystery of another person” (pg 27)
- A wonderful description that holds the life-time of discovery that can go on in love in the mutuality of marriage..

ii) *Fruitfulness*

The second strand of marriage is fruitfulness

... Of course, this is seen wonderfully in the joy of children and grandchildren

But fruitfulness is seen too in all marriages regardless of whether or not procreation is possible...

.... Fruitfulness in the couple's happiness and well-being, delight in one another

... And fruitfulness in the joy of being together in marriage spilling over to enrich friends, family, neighbours,

- Whole communities benefit from the fruits of good marriage.

iii) *Echo of God's covenant love*

A third strand of marriage is that it is an echo of God's covenant love for us , His Church

... in marriage we are to love as “Christ loved the church and gave himself up for her” (Ephesians 5:25)

- The new heaven and the new earth that is our sure hope is born in the marriage of Christ and the Church (Revelation 21)..

This, then, the essence of marriage: Complete commitment to one another
– mutuality, fruitfulness, and an echo of God's covenant love

SLIDE 5

(iii) THE GLORY OF CELIBACY

For all of the vital importance, the glory of marriage, Paul still holds in 1 Corinthians 7 that, for the Christian, celibacy may be better...

...He says more than once "I wish that you were all as I am"

- That is single, celibate

St Paul's views are clearly influenced by his conviction that "the time is short... this world in its present form is passing away" (verse 29 and 31)

.. He may have believed the end of the world and Christ's return was imminent..

Even so, Christians have discovered through two millennia that celibacy can be the most fulfilling life for the reasons Paul says

- See verses 32- 35 of Chapter 7

.. In essence .. if you are married you will be much more concerned about worldly affairs than if you are not married

... An unmarried person, Paul says is free to be "Concerned about the Lord's affairs" with the aim "to be devoted to the Lord in both body and spirit."

SLIDE 6

In celibacy, all a person's desires and person can be directed to, devoted to God, and how to serve Him

... as depicted in these images of St Teresa

- On the left at the entrance to the city walls of Avila showing St Teresa's devotion to God
and on the right, a much more expressive sculpture by Bernini, of St Teresa's ecstasy that has come from her devotion

- Such richness possible in the celibate life, freely chosen

But, of course, how hard to work through if you have not freely chosen celibacy

St Paul recognizes this

- “better to marry than burn with passion” he writes

.. passion being not just sexual but all the emotional need to love and be loved with another person

- The mutuality and fruitfulness of marriage

Celibacy, being unmarried, may be a great devotion of life for some Christians, but it's not one many of us would have considered choosing for our own lives

... We know how hard it can be to be involuntarily single

.... A key role for the Church must be to embrace those who are single, providing family together, with mutuality and fruitfulness..

Celibacy is hard

... We surely should hesitate to say that singleness and celibacy must be the only options for some people

... which almost takes us to Part Three of today's sermon .. same-sex relationships

... First, to give us time to reflect, on what we have considered so far

- Celebration of love, the Glory of the Body, the Glory of Marriage and the Glory of Celibacy

.. we are going to hear a setting of Shakespeare's Sonnet 29 by Rufus Wainwright

- Beautiful, poignant words of someone saying how desolate they feel,
... feeling as if they are a failure, nothing like as good or talented as other people,
... despising himself
But, then, in Shakespeare's words: “I think on thee... thy sweet love remembered”
... “such wealth brings .. That then I scorn to change my state with kings”

- The power of committed love to redeem us from our loneliness, affirm our soul, find comfort, peace and meaning

... Sonnet 29 by Rufus Wainwright

SONNET 29 BY RUFUS WAINWRIGHT

SLIDE 7

PART THREE: SAME-SEX RELATIONSHIPS

Part Three of today's Valentine's Day sermon, celebrating committed, Christ-like love wherever it is found

- Same sex relationships

Again, anything I say here can only be in the general

- Please read The Living in Love and Faith publication for more detail

- *Same Sex attraction*

First to say, The Living in Love & Faith publication summarises the science that says same sex orientation, is fundamentally innate ..

...Science tells us that our sexual attraction is formed in the womb by genes, and even more so by variant levels of male sex hormones in the womb, at particular stages of development..

Environmental factors- upbringing, social influences have very little impact in determining our sexuality... according to the summary in Living in Love and Faith..

- *Biblical interpretation*

Now consider biblical interpretation... We know the Bible is the Word of God, the grounds for our faith

... but we also know it is the word of humans, written in particular times and particular cultures

We always interpret the Bible through lenses,

- Particularly the lenses of reason, experience and vitally Christ-like love

Look at any Bible passage and ask what is saying today, in the light of reason, experience and Christ-like love

... So yes, all agree that there are Bible verses – not many, a few – that condemn homosexuality

- Leviticus 20:13 is often quoted

But, of course, so much of Leviticus is simply discarded by all of us as being irrelevant or even abhorrent to today

– we filter by reason, experience, Christ-like love

It is true, too, that there are words of St Paul that speak of “homosexual offenders”, including in 1 Corinthians 6:9

... but the context is always general debasement, utter immorality

So, when we see such verses through the lenses of reason, experience and Christ-like love,

we can see that this condemnation surely has nothing to do with committed, Christ-like love in same-sex relationships

- Think about the context where St Paul is writing

... Homosexual practice was an all-pervasive life-style choice in the Mediterranean world of the first century

- 14 of the first 15 Roman Emperors practiced homosexuality

... Homosexuality practiced not because of innate same-sex orientation

but simply for self-willed pleasure ... fundamental sin against the glory of the body

- “the degrading of their bodies” as Paul says in Romans 1:24

Particular Bible verses then, condemn immorality not Christ-like committed love..

There is a more general argument from the Bible that male-female relationship is integral to the Creation mandate, as set out in Genesis

- Indeed, as we are doing today, let’s celebrate the glorious mutuality and fruitfulness of male-female marriage

But does this mean we do not acknowledge, celebrate same sex love with all the glorious possibilities of mutuality and fruitfulness ?

Of course, for Christians who continue to hold to the view that any homosexual practice is sin, the only option for someone born with same sex orientation is to be celibate

- A hard imposition when not freely chosen..
- As we have seen, celibacy can be a glorious choice
... but it is one that not many of us would willingly choose

- *Where Church views have shifted*

Church views have shifted in so many ways over the generations

... The Bible has been used to

- Defend slavery
- Ban contraception
- Prohibit marriage after divorce
- Prevent women's leadership in the Church and the ordination of women

... biblical arguments can be made why these were the correct things to do,

But we have changed because we have looked again at scripture through the lenses of reason, experience and Christ-like love

- We have recognized that changing in these areas has brought true Christ-like freedom, abundance of life and love

The Church has shifted over the last 30 years on same sex relationships,

but we still hold back in celebration

- We are prohibited from publicly celebrating committed same-sex relationships..
- You cannot be ordained and be in a committed practicing same-sex relationship

... These are the issues integral to the Living in Love and Faith publication

... issues where our bishops tell us “decisions...need to be made with some urgency.”

Is it wrong to acknowledge and celebrate committed Christ-like love in same sex relationships ?

You may have realized that when we listened earlier to Rufus Wainwright singing of the love that ended his desolation,

.. he could only be singing of love for another man

- He had a torrid time coming out but is now happily married..

Is not such love that enhances, amplifies, exhorts human well-being, that brings blessings of mutuality and fruitfulness to be openly celebrated ?

SLIDE 8

CONCLUSION

“God is love” and “Whoever lives in love lives in God, and God in Him” writes St John..

On this Valentine’s Day, may we celebrate the glory of Christ-like love wherever it is found.