

I want to attempt something slightly different this morning from a usual sermon. It will still be a sermon but in a different key. This week in the GS the motion calling Synod to "take note" of the bishops' report on marriage and same-sex relations was defeated – by a small number of votes in the House of Clergy it's true – but nevertheless defeated. The document was produced after 3 years of a listening exercise – listening to views on same-sex marriage in the context of Christian faith – but which was criticised for having been written as though no listening had happened at all. The status quo was upheld in the report but for many it treated gay relationships as still being 'the problem' to be managed rather than being a reality which might challenge the church's current position. On defeat of the motion, the Archbishops have said that they will now set up a group to produce 'a large-scale teaching document on human sexuality' and it will be produced by the bishops but in consultation with others. They say it is to be based on 'good, healthy, flourishing relationships and in a proper 21st century understanding of being human and being sexual'. Well, that sounds promising, even for those who are by default sceptical about what can be said by senior clerics who seem pathologically nervous about change. It's in the spirit of that consultative intention that I offer the bishops – and by dint of you sat here this morning, offer you – some reflections of my own. Studies of human sexuality occupy libraries of their own of course, so all I can do is be as brief as a sermon allows. So here's my 2 reflections for the bishops to note, in the form of an address to them.

Your Reverences:

First, it really really really is time that you stopped thinking of sex and sexuality as part of what lurks negatively within the shadowy regions of our being human. Sex, we have been taught for centuries, is part of sin and is therefore to be distrusted, corralled, preferably kept hidden from view, not talked about with the children, and practised at best with bad grace, and if we must indulge we should only do so with the lights out. You might smile at that view nowadays, but it has in fact dominated the whole of Christian faith at least since the 2nd century when some Christian philosophers began to preach that being spiritual meant leaving behind things material and bodily – and the seeds of this view may have even been there from the beginning, some say with the Apostle Paul. St. Augustine in the 5th century solidified it for us when he said that the sinful pride of Adam and Eve, the first couple, was passed on to future generations through the sexual act. That renders the sexual act highly suspicious, always problematic and an instrument of wickedness. The mere fact of sexual desire is evidence, says Augustine, of its tainted fault.

Your Reverences, by making sex sinful, certain things followed. Its activity was to be kept to a minimum. This meant clerical celibacy and also the limiting of the sexual act to the procreation of children in lifelong marriage. To this day this remains the Catholic Church view, that every sexual act must have the intention to produce a child – hence the ban on contraception. The fact that this has long been abandoned in practice by most Catholics doesn't stop the doctrine of course from remaining in place.

But you must know that there is a darker side also to this negative view of sexuality. If the expression of sexuality is curtailed, or even banned in the case of celibate clergy, there is a legitimate question whether the suppression of sexual expression inevitably issues in sexual exploitation and abuse. It's hard to think it doesn't. We can have as many procedures for safeguarding children and vulnerable adults as you like, but if the underlying trigger for abuse remains in place then we have no excuse and reap the consequences.

If none of this is convincing for you – just ponder the issue of one of the meanings of marriage according to the 1662 Prayer Book – that it might stop men behaving like brute beasts. What does that say about how we thought of sex and, more so, how we thought of women? Even the 1928 Prayer Book amendment that marriage is there to avoid fornication is hardly a rousing invitation to a happy and fruitful relationship.

Second, your Reverences:

Ousting the negative view of sexuality is the easy part, but how should we think differently? This will be where you will struggle for you will need to think outside the box and become bolder. Over 40 years of ministry I have been privileged to conduct countless weddings, but I think I can safely say that I don't think any of those couples I helped into marriage did not live together before marriage, and therefore did not know sexual intimacy with one another. Sex was not for them a way of curtailing the innate beastliness of the male but an expression of mutuality, respect and love. You know this of course and you should embrace it, not as a matter of appeasing couples for their unfortunate repudiation tradition but as couples discovering something more joyful than what tradition has offered them. The C of E CW Marriage Service has even caught up with this when it talks of part of the meaning of marriage as the 'delight and tenderness of sexual union'. And by the way, also absent in that Marriage Service, you may have noticed, is the traditional primary motive of the procreation of children.

There are consequences of this huge cultural shift. Here's how one theologian puts it:

'Traditional sexual ethics were based on the legal boundary between sex inside the institution of marriage and sex outside it. Outside of marriage all sex was sinful, regardless of its quality of care and friendship. Inside it, it was "anything goes", including the "right" of the husband to rape his wife.... (which the church never challenged). But a sexual ethic rooted in friendship would judge as immoral sex that is casual, violent, abusive, or without care for or relationship to the partner. Sex becomes moral as it moves increasingly to integrate desire and friendship, to inspire partners to be faithful and committed to one another's well-being.... Sexual morality and immorality becomes a question or process of growth toward relationality and away from exploitative use.' This seems to me to reflect your call for 'a proper 21st century understanding of being human and being sexual'. Then here comes the further consequence of this view: 'This guideline for sexual ethics allows a common moral standard to be applied to heterosexual and homosexual relations. Homosexual relations are not sinful just because they are not heterosexual or procreative, but homosexuality, like heterosexuality, can be judged as sinful to the extent that it is abusive and uncaring of the other.... This is a matter not of homosexual relations imitating heterosexual marriages ... but of both developing a more genuine ethic of mutuality.'

All of which seems to me eminently reasonable, grounded in experience, decent psychological research, sound theology and based on 'good, healthy, flourishing relationships', as you promise for your 'teaching document'.

When same-sex marriage was debated in the Houses of Parliament in May and June 2013, the Archbishop of Canterbury still clung to the notion that marriage's main purpose was the procreation of children, in spite of the new wording in the CW Marriage Service which does not use the word 'procreation', and in spite of the cultural shift towards the quality of mutuality in relationships and the positive view of sex which accompanies such mutuality. In my view, and with due respect, he would have done well to have listened to the speech of Lord Jenkin on that occasion:

'I have come to the firm conclusion that there is nothing to fear in gay marriage and that, indeed, it will be a positive good not just for same-gender unions but for the institution of marriage generally.'

The effect will be to put right at the centre of marriage the concept of a stable, loving relationship... The character of love which marriage reflects—that it is faithful, stable, tough, unselfish and unconditional—is the same character that most Christians see in the love of God. Marriage is therefore holy, not because it is ordained by God, but because it reflects that most important central truth of our religion: the love of God for all of us.’

That seems to me to be a solid Christian statement. But the philosophy of sexuality embodied in it is one of mutual love and care between human beings – and what could be better than that? The Archbishop and 8 other bishops voted against it in 2013. Your Reverences, if he and the other 8 are still of the same mind then I can see no point in a new document, however ‘teachy’ it proposes to be. It will simply represent further stalling. It will be a teaching document which will have closed its eyes to the massive cultural shift which has taken place in society while the church continues to look away.