

Sermon: 'More than a Single Issue'

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*'The Word became flesh and dwelt among us ... full of grace and truth' (Jn 1:14).
'We, too, groan inwardly while we await the redemption of our bodies' (Rom
8:23c). 'We are destined to grow up into the full humanity of Christ' (Eph 4:13).
Flesh-Body-Humanity – these are the stuff of distinctive Christian faith!*

*'Anyone who thinks the current controversy in the Church about homosexual practice
is only about hp is greatly mistaken.'* (Faris) We are in the midst of a fierce battle
between competing 'world views which have previously shaped Western culture
together – Christian humanism and Pagan naturalism. We are now living in a '*post-
Christian*' age in which private values and public policies disavow any connection
with Christianity.

This isn't new, but it is becoming more obvious. Our culture is now largely immune
to the Christian faith. As 'familiarity breeds contempt' many broken people are led to
despair.

- More and more folk are turning to forms of spirituality which are 'natural' (not supernatural) and self-fulfilling (not self-giving).
- The search for 'happiness,' which used to be found in contributing to the 'common good,' has largely become a quest for self-gratification.
- Deep concern for 'human rights,' which flows from our unique God-given dignity in creation, often degenerates into 'my right' to do what comes naturally.
- Humility in the face of God's holiness and mercy is often superseded by confidence in our own innate goodness.
- Faith in a loving, divine purpose for humanity is often abandoned while we focus on our short term goals.
- Passion for the truth is being displaced by a bland but intolerant tolerance.
- Desire for social harmony based on common morality has been replaced by a consensus based on moral relativism and the virtue of 'diversity.'

This simplified sketch may help us to see that R84 (2003), which sanctions '*mutually exclusive views*' on the ordination of folk in committed same-sex relations, is one result of a seismic shift in Western thinking. Once it was assumed that 'God' was real, and we/I needed to be explained by God. Now, it is assumed that we/I are/is real, and God needs to be explained by us.

Since Descartes uttered the immortal words '*I think therefore I am*' we have all been used to thinking about human existence from our own (self) perspective. Two things follow:

- First, the thinking individual displaced God as the most reliable source of self-knowledge.
- Second, a 'fateful split' between mind and body has taken place in our understanding of what it means to be a 'human being.' We have come to think that

a person's 'essence' is to be found in their self-conscious mind and not, as for biblical faith, in the unity of the body-and-soul.

- Therefore, what has been happening around us and within us is a habit of thought which *believes* that:
 - a. The individual has replaced God
 - b. Our 'true humanity' is to be found in our minds
 - c. Our bodies (which aren't thought to be part of our essential humanity) can now be used as each individual decides according to his/her own reason, feeling and needs.

The 'single issue' we face with R84 is not homosexuality per se, but our true nature and destiny as human beings. What does it mean to be a person? If my humanness is defined by my mind, feelings or will, then the way(s) in which I choose to use my body in sexual relations, will have little to do with the physical structure of the body (as male or female) or with the divinely appointed covenant of marriage (between a man and a woman). In a 'post Christian' world, where God has been replaced by the thinking self, and where the real person isn't thought of as the physical, biological reality, but the 'consciousness' which resides in a suit of flesh, I am free, in principle, to choose my sexuality. What I choose to do in the body (as a chaste, hetero, homo or bi sexual person) isn't thought to affect my essential humanness! The 'rightness' of sexual relationships now depends solely on mutual consent.

Against this stands the unified biblical view that a 'human being' is not only mind or body, but the God-given unity of body-and-mind which *includes* our specific identity as male or female. The failure to see that our creation as 'male' and 'female' constitutes our basic humanity/flesh/body – and isn't *additional* to our creation as 'individuals' – is at the heart of the current crisis which has devastating effects for so many people.

The 'sexuality debate' thus highlights a clash between incompatible views of our flesh / body / humanity. On one hand, it is thought that a 'person' is made in the 'image of God,' quite apart from and prior to considerations of gender (Greeks). On the other, a person's gender (male or female) is an integral part of being created in the 'image of God' (Jews-Christians). With unmistakable clarity, Scripture affirms that our likeness to God is not found in our rationality, creativity, personality, race or culture but in our co-humanity as male and female (Gen 1:26-27; 5:1-2; Col 1:15f, Eph 5:31-32).

This clash cannot be resolved by appeals to tolerance (of difference) or by decisions which just *'note'* that there are *'mutually exclusive views'* (and practices) (R84). ... A clear decision must be clearly made (not fudged) by the National Assembly (2006) on this issue. Scripture honours the (actual) body in a way that is denied by those who begin with the needs and choices of consenting 'individuals.' It calls us to treat our bodies with respect for their God-given 'structure' (as male and female) and with delight that God has redeemed our fallen humanity by taking our flesh in Christ.

It isn't by chance that people like Bishop Spong, who insist that we abandon faith in the Incarnation and Resurrection of Christ, support the gay agenda. They think that the particular shape of the human body and the particular community of the 'Body of Christ' are barriers to the individual's search for *his/her own* spirituality, values and sexuality.

Their protest makes it clear that this is ‘more than a single issue.’ The structure and purpose of our bodies cannot be separated from the ‘body of doctrine’ concerning Christ and the Church. Indeed, there is an integral connection between our *bodily creation* (as male and female) and the *embodiment* of God’s love (in Jesus) and his presence in the ‘*Body of Christ*’ (Church).

This connection has been splendidly expressed by the late Pope John Paul II in his ‘*theology of the body*.’ God ‘*impressed his own form on the flesh ... in such a way that even what was visible might bear the divine form*’ (Catechism of the Catholic Church, n 704). In the one flesh union of man and woman in marriage we see, not only the beauty and holiness and joy of living in communion with the ‘other,’ but also the ‘great mystery’ that takes us into the heart of God’s plan for the cosmos (Eph 5:31-32). The complementary unity of marriage is a sacrament of God’s love for the world in a way that the union of two (similar) individuals cannot be. As a particular man is a mystery to a particular woman and a particular woman is a mystery to a particular man in a particular (exclusive) marriage, so God’s union with the human race is, to us, a wonderful, particular and exclusive mystery of love. ...

We Protestants, who tend to spiritualise or moralise faith, need to be reminded that the heart of the Gospel is ‘*God’s free and gracious union with humanity in the flesh of Christ*.’ The ‘Otherness’ of God (who is unlike us) is made known ‘to us’ in Christ’s incarnate, crucified and resurrected body. And the Church is united with him in the ‘holy communion of his body.’

As we look back through the events of Jesus and Israel, we can see that ‘God created us male and female right from the beginning to live in a “holy communion” that foreshadows the Holy Communion of Christ and the Church’ (Christopher West, *Theology of the Body*, p9). That is why the analogy of marriage (between man and woman) plays such a prominent part in the witness of Scripture to God’s steadfast love. In a special way it highlights God’s union with humanity ‘in Christ’ and our union with God through faith in Christ!

Like all analogies, it must be used carefully. We aren’t to make God in our image and infer that God is a sexual being (Greeks). We are made in God’s image, not *vice versa*. God has inscribed an image of his own mystery in our humanity by creating us male and female (West, p11). The marriage analogy is the least inadequate. Unlike the analogy between individuals, it points to the ‘Otherness’ of God who has ‘united’ himself with our humanity in the ‘flesh of Christ’ and calls us into ‘true community’ as the ‘Body of Christ.’

It is necessary to think through the issues raised by R84, not by starting with my/our individual reason, feeling or will (as post-Christians), but from God’s revelation, as attested in Scripture. By rejecting the idea that our ‘consciousness’ is the ‘essence’ of us as persons, and insisting on the unity of body-and-mind in the twofold creation as male and female, we see the unique splendour of marriage in God’s purpose – both as the means by which human community is nourished and maintained *and* as a splendid parable of God’s self-giving love in uniting himself with our flesh in Christ. ... R84 isn’t just about sex! More than a single issue!

Therefore, this is not a matter about which members of the ‘Body of Christ’ can agree to disagree by holding ‘*mutually exclusive views*.’ That is why RA is committed to doing what it can to get the 11th Assembly (2006) to ‘re-affirm’ the fundamental

sexual teaching-and-ethic of the One Holy Catholic and Apostolic Church – in conformity to our creation and redemption in Christ.

To this end, and to offer genuine hope for broken men and women, we are encouraging congregations and Presbyteries and Assembly to support a motion which will re-affirm the splendid teaching of the Ecumenical Church. Our goal is to re-call the UCA (including ourselves) to her true mission – to preach the word of God’s mercy and righteousness (to and with our fellow sinners) and to offer friendship and support to all (including brothers and sisters who are attracted to homoerotic relationships) in their struggles with temptation, loneliness, ostracism, sickness and death.

In the present climate within the UCA, this is an extremely difficult task. Regrettably, many people, including those who have ‘come out’ of the gay life-style, have experienced great hostility from Church leaders at every level. The various Councils of our Church are reluctant to hear dissenting voices. The results of surveys, showing that 6500 individuals and 43 congregations have left the UCA because of R84, are dismissed; as were earlier surveys and independent research which showed overwhelming opposition to the Assembly. Opponents of R84 are often treated with contempt, their motives, compassion and integrity being seriously questioned. Voices of dissent from the United Aboriginal and Islander Christian Congress and Migrant-Ethnic Churches are deliberately and cleverly muffled by Anglo-Saxon leaders who publicly wear their pro-aboriginal and pro-multicultural credentials with pride!

Friends, we seek your prayers, your theological insight, your political commitment and your financial support to fight the battle until at least the next Assembly. At the moment, we are considering various ways in which RA may be able to establish itself more firmly as a Confessing Movement. We believe that the crisis in the UCA, sparked by R84, is not a ‘single issue’ about sex, but a particularly important issue about sex which also exposes a way of thinking about ‘humanity’ which is totally at odds with the created and redeemed humanity which are found in the flesh of Jesus Christ. We all need to be reminded that our chief purpose is to glorify Jesus Christ, the Word made flesh, and to marvel at the splendour of our creation and redemption as male and female, as attested in Scripture. That, ultimately, is why RA is needed in the UCA at this point in its short history.

In all things, then, let us praise God that in Christ Jesus the Word became flesh and dwelt among us ... full of grace and truth!