

Sermon by Rev Dr Max Champion after UCA Assembly 2003

(Lessons: Genesis 1:26-27; 1 Corinthians 6:9-20; Mark 6: 30-34)

The recent decision of the Tenth Assembly of UCA to allow ordination of ministers living in same-sex relationships has caused uproar. 'Progressive' supporters of the decision take pride in belonging to such a mature & inclusive Church ... a victory for compassion over prejudice & fear of 'difference.' 'Conservative' opponents express dismay at a casual approach to the bible & a decline in moral standards ...a victory for 'shallow tolerance' over confession.

The decision affects everybody & evokes strong emotions - theological, ethical, personal ... How could they? Why has it taken so long? The effects are far reaching for understanding who we are, how we relate to family, friends & fellow Christians & how to exercise pastoral ministry.

Two 'mutually exclusive positions' on sexual ethics have been approved. One holds to 'celibacy in singleness & faithfulness in marriage' (1987); the other to 'right relationships' of 'love, caring & compassion embodied in Jesus Christ' (4.6) as 'applied both to heterosexual & lesbian, gay & bisexual relationships' (5.39) (Sexuality Task Group Report, 1996). They are 'irreconcilable.'

Contrary to what Rev Dr Dean Drayton, Uniting Church President, says, it is not a 'clarification of the current situation' (21/7). It is a momentous change in the Church's faith & practice! Until now, a person's 'sexual orientation' was irrelevant to ordination. Now, a 'practising homosexual' living in a (vaguely defined) 'committed relationship' may be accepted.

The vote at Assembly was decisive (80% +). This is surprising in view of strong opposition to the Task Group Report (1997), when 85% of respondents were against ordination of practising homosexuals. But it does explain Assembly's refusal to refer it to other Councils of the Church, as it is duty bound to do 'on matters of vital importance to the life of the Church' (Basis of Union 15(e) & Constitution 39).

It is incredible that Assembly should approve such contradictory beliefs on a central issue! Sexuality is hardly a matter of indifference! The 'divergence' can be explained by (a) Clash over how to interpret Scripture today & (b) Disagreement about how much 'modern culture' should affect biblical authority. ... How are we to interpret Scripture today when it is assumed - that individuals have a 'right' to satisfy their diverse sexual needs & that moral progress can be achieved by tolerance.

Make no mistake. This decision is a radical departure from what the Church has always believed about sexuality. More is at stake than what you & I think about homosexuality!

* The central issue for the Church is the authority of Scripture. There are 'divergent views' in the Uniting Church but are they equally consistent with the high view in the Basis of Union that the Old & New Testament are 'unique testimony' to God's redeeming grace in Christ which 'nourishes & regulates the Church's faith & obedience' (par 5)? Here, the key questions concern (a) our creation as male & female, (b) the meaning of 'inclusive community' & (c) the nature of compassion.

* In exploring these issues we need to be aware of the debate on the nature of homosexuality.

- a) It is by no means agreed that homosexuality is biologically, socially or psychologically pre-determined. ... No 'gay gene' has been discovered. Even if there were, we would want to know whether it is akin to left handedness (neutral or gift), Multiple Sclerosis or disability (cure) or alcoholism (cure &/or reform). ... If personal & family factors are involved, we would still want to know whether it is to be understood (empathy), affirmed (diversity) or reversed (therapy). ... Can we accept that any behaviour is 'fully determined' by genetics & culture? And should we act upon or resist other kinds of 'orientation?'
- b) In the gay community, there has been a backlash against this view. Because it assumes that a person is a biological or social freak & denies free will, many gay people affirm their right to choose & re-invent their sexuality according to their (sometimes changing) emotional needs & physical attractions. Increasingly, this is the basis on which the case is made for accepting gay, lesbian & bisexual practice.

* In Scripture the highest value is placed on our creation as male & female & on the beauty, fidelity & sanctity of marriage between a man & a woman. This is not a matter of picking out a few isolated texts but on reading the whole. At the heart of the human drama is our creation as men & women in the 'image of God' no less (Gen 1:26f), a diversity & union that Christ blessed (Mk 10:6-9)! We are created as different & complementary bodies before we are anything else! In Genesis nothing is said about our colour, race, ethnicity, nation, culture or religion. There is no mention of personal qualities or general attributes like reason, desire & temperament. It affirms the miracle of sexual love in the bodily difference of male & female & the incredible vocation of husband & wife. Same-sex relationships are thereby ruled out.

Tragically (Genesis 3), the human story is marked by the 'perversion' of this grand purpose. In every sphere of life, including sex, pride & self-will spoil our relationships. We aren't content to live in the framework of freedom provided by God for our benefit. In sex this is evident in distrust, hatred, fear, manipulation & abuse of the 'other', both outside & within marriage.

* Paul speaks of this in 1 Corinthians 6:9-20 (see also Romans 1:26f). He is writing to a very unattractive group of converts living in a culture not unlike ours that offers a diverse range of activities for sexual gratification. Among them are former thieves, alcoholics, adulterers, idolaters & homosexuals whose behaviour is unacceptable. Some are still immoral, greedy, abusive & quarrelsome. One is in an incestuous relationship (5:1); others visit prostitutes!

Paul doesn't 'pull any punches.' They mustn't 'thumb their noses' at God's grace. As gross as their 'unrighteousness' is, they have been redeemed (washed, justified, sanctified) by Christ crucified & risen. Therefore, they are to live in Christian freedom, not by unrestrained licence. 'Once you were... But now.' They mustn't 'regress' to their former life-style!

Elsewhere, Paul challenges 'conservatives' who think they are 'righteous' in God's sight by their religious & moral deeds! They, too, 'thumb their noses' at God's sheer grace. But, here, he is concerned about 'progressives' who think that

'Christian freedom' means the right to use their bodies as they choose. He argues (7: 1f) that because the body is a 'temple of the Holy Spirit' & a 'member of the body of Christ,' they shouldn't have sexual intercourse outside the mutual bond of love between husband & wife. ... Paul is particularly upset by men having sex with prostitutes (6: 15f), but his 'bodily ethic' also applies to the incestuous (5: 1) adulterous & homosexual members (6: 9) of the parish. They must 'glorify God in their bodies' (6: 20) by having sex in faithful male-female marriages or living disciplined single lives (7: 25f).

It is often argued that Paul is criticising permissive sex in general because, unlike us, he had no experience of committed same-sex relationships. However, the use of two terms to describe anal intercourse (one passive, the other aggressive) suggests his abhorrence of the act itself!

It is also argued, more widely, that acceptance of homosexuality in the Church today is akin to accepting Gentiles into the early Church. As Paul urged circumcised 'Jewish Christians' to accept uncircumcised 'Gentiles' (see Galatians 3.28; 5:16; Romans 10:12), so heterosexual Christians should accept homosexuals (eg. Rev Dr Drayton's pastoral letter). Refusal to do so constitutes a failure to be 'inclusive' & 'hospitable' in the manner of Jesus! ... This is a very serious charge.

Two responses are apt:

- a) The equality of Jews & Gentiles 'in Christ' isn't based on the equivalence of righteousness & unrighteousness, but on two groups who are both 'justified by faith' & called to live a new life in the Spirit. Both are called to give up their old ways! There is no place for self-righteous moralism ('conservatives') or self-indulgent immorality ('progressives'). The falseness of the argument that appeals to Paul (& Scripture as a whole) is obvious if, instead of pairing heterosexuality & homosexuality, we pair marriage & adultery, incest or prostitution!
- b) The matter of compassion. 'Compassion' is often used to get sympathy for various groups of 'victims'. We rightly speak of showing unconditional love, acceptance & tolerance' towards others. This is fine as far as it goes, but it doesn't tell us how their suffering & oppression can be relieved. For that we need a deeper understanding of human dignity & purpose. ... Today, we are experiencing a clash between two irreconcilable 'purposes.'

* If, as scripture says, our purpose is to live as male & female in the image of God, & if it is 'perverted' by self-righteous moralism & self-indulgent immorality, then 'compassion' will mean unconditional love for fellow sinners that includes the invitation to 'change.' ... In relation to sexuality, this means being reminded that being 'justified by faith' in Christ commits us to living a new life. ... We all fail, in sex as in other relationships. Temptation, confession & pardon are part of the Christian life. But that is no excuse for mocking the wonderful 'diversity' whereby God has structured our physiology as male & female & instituted the union of husband & wife in marriage.

* If, however, our purpose is to realise our own potential & satisfy our sexual needs, then 'compassion' will mean tolerating sexual diversity (Gay, Lesbian, Bisexual & Transgender) & affirming individual choice, subject only to consent between the participants. ... We mustn't underestimate the power of this way of

thinking today. Films, TV sitcoms, newspapers, magazines & schools all promote this 'shallow & destructive faith.'

This popular way of life certainly reminds us of the fragility of sexual relationships & the difficulties that some folk face in forming & maintaining them, including those of 'homosexual orientation'. We are also made aware of the danger of vilification. However, its all-pervasiveness in society has conditioned us to tolerate almost any form of 'sexual diversity' & lose our revulsion at sexual acts that mock the marvellous design of our creator & redeemer.

This conditioning is well advanced. 'Progressives' have long held power in the Church & the community. 'Conservatives' are caricatured as 'homophobic.' The push for gay rights, which assumes the exercise of the will, is 'the cause one dares not criticise.' ... Alexander Pope once wrote a poem that fits our situation:

'Vice is a monster of so frightful mien,
As to be hated needs but to be seen,
Yet seen too oft, familiar with her face,
We first endure, then pity, then embrace.'

'That is the sequence of change in attitude & judgment that has been advanced by the gay & lesbian movement with notable success': 'to endure (tolerance), to pity (compassion) & to embrace (affirmation).'

The failure of the Uniting Church to resist this movement & still love men & women whose particular temptation is homosexuality, is deeply disturbing. It is a denial of the fact that the grace of God in Christ for us all, including homosexuals, is 'redemptive' not simply 'affirmative.' ... The Church is 'inclusive' in the sense that all of us have 'perverted' God's grand design but, incredibly, have been forgiven in Christ to live a new life in the power of the Spirit. All of us still fall short of the glory of God & need to re-claim God's grace in confession & amendment of life. ... But that is completely different from endorsing behaviour that is wrong!

The decision of Assembly to allow ordination of 'practicing homosexuals' means that behaviour that is a 'perversion' of what the whole Scripture says about our creation as male & female is now endorsed. The next logical step, as Rev. Dorothy McRae-McMahon has said publicly, is blessing same-sex marriages! ...

'When Jesus went ashore he saw a great crowd, & he had compassion on them, because they were like sheep without a shepherd' (Mk 6: 34). 'He began to teach them many things' (6: 34) & healed those who came into contact with him' (6: 56). ... In the Gospels 'compassion' (6: 34) is used only of Jesus or by those who symbolise God's mercy in him. A king forgives a servant an unpayable debt (Mt 18: 17); a Samaritan saves a beaten traveller from death (Lk 10: 33) & a father welcomes a prodigal son who had wasted his life (Lk 15: 20). It is 'love' that heals the sick, restores the outcast, raises the dead & forgives sin ... compassion that is 'intolerant' of sin, evil & death & challenges all that we do to pervert our created purpose.

Such 'intolerance' is actually the 'tolerance of grace' in that God forgives our 'conservative' & 'progressive' sins & restores us to 'peace' with Him & each other. Jesus wasn't a 'heartless conservative' or a 'tolerant progressive.' He empathised with the plight of the 'lost' but didn't simply 'affirm them.' He cured their ignorance & healed their bodies & minds. ...

That is how it should be as we participate in the ministry of the Church. Our life together & our ministry in the world are to reflect the 'healing love' of Christ for us all on the cross. ...

'Outside Edinburgh is the Community of the Transfiguration. In the garden is a sculpture by a grateful young man. He had been raised in an Exclusive Brethren community. After confessing that he was gay he was told to leave. He experienced complete rejection. Roland Walls, a member of the community, came across him praying in the chapel. When he finished pouring out his story Roland embraced him embodying the love, acceptance & forgiveness from which the Church lives. Later the young man returned with sandstone sculpture portraying two men kneeling & embracing. This, he explained, was the Second Adam (Christ) embracing fallen Adam (himself). The only way to distinguish the two Adams is by the nail prints in the hands of Christ.' (J. Torrance, *Worship, Community & the Triune God of Grace*, p 55f)

This moving story speaks to 'conservatives' & 'progressives' alike. Judgmentalism & tolerance are both excluded! ... It makes it clear that the Church 'must lovingly support all the faithful in their struggle against temptation, while at the same time insisting that precisely for their sake we must describe as sinful the homosexual & extramarital heterosexual behaviour to which some are drawn' (First Things, 41 1994, p18). ...

It is a great pity that the Assembly couldn't see the difference between such 'evangelical grace' & the endorsement of sexual behaviour that, whatever its origin, diminishes our humanity!

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