

Sexuality: A Different Biblical Approach

“He ordered them to take nothing for their journey except a staff; no bread, no bag, no money in their belts; but to wear sandals and not to put on two tunics”. S. Mark 6:7-8.

I want to use this text as my starting point this morning to talk about excess baggage on the journey of faith. I am taking the service today because Rev. Laurel Barr is away at the Assembly meetings in Brisbane, and so my thoughts about excess baggage are related to the issue of sexuality which is one of the main topics at that meeting. What I want to try and do is to put this one particular issue in its context as a part of the complex issue of Christianity and culture.

Let me begin by taking you back 133 years to 1873, when the colonial Government in Victoria was contemplating a change to the Marriage Act. This caused considerable debate and opposition at the time. One of the prominent leaders of the Presbyterian Church, Rev. Dr. Adam Cairns, was a fierce opponent of the proposed change and his views were typical of many clergy at the time. He was the minister of the Chalmers Presbyterian Church in East Melbourne, which was later renamed the Cairns Memorial Church in his honour after his death. He was indeed a pillar of the Church in his day. This is what he said about the change the Government was introducing:

“The change threatened is recommended to us as an act of mutual forbearance. In a matter of indifference forbearance is obvious duty, in a matter of principle it is deliberate treachery to the cause of truth. Where is the forbearance? A brother minister celebrates a marriage which God forbids – such is my belief – I am asked to regard him, and to treat him as if he had done no wrong. This it is impossible for me to do.....By the unchangeable Word of God such marriage is incestuous”.

Today, 133 years later, his comments have a remarkably familiar ring. But, what Dr. Adam Cairns was fulminating against was not gay marriage, but his vehement opposition was directed towards the proposal of the Government to change legislation so that a man would be able to legally marry his deceased brother's wife. In fairness to Dr. Cairns, who was, according to Frank Engel's history of the Australian church, a man who supported church union at the time, this proposed change had caused a storm across the whole of the then British Empire. In his book from which I have taken this example, another Australian author, Dr. Graeme Griffin comments that “History does not record how he [Rev. Adam Cairns] actually responded to these situations when his worst fears were realised and the legislation was passed.”

I acknowledge that it is not an exact parallel with current concerns about gay marriage, but I think it does sound some sort of a warning about how culture and faith can become entwined without us recognising it. I don't suppose anyone today could be bothered for a second with the question as to whether a man could marry his deceased brother's wife, and yet 133 years ago it was a matter perceived to be of the greatest moral importance and on which church leaders had plenty to say.

When I was a student of theology the standard textbook of the day on this issue was H. Richard Niebuhr's “Christ and Culture”. Niebuhr, not to be confused with his more famous brother Reinhold, was a professor at Yale Divinity School for over 30 years, and in the introduction to his book which he entitled “The Enduring Problem”, he had this to say:

“It is helpful to remember that the question of Christianity and civilisation is by no means a new one; that Christian perplexity in this area has been perennial, and that the problem has been an enduring one through all the Christian centuries. It is helpful also to recall that the repeated struggles of Christians with this problem have yielded no single Christian answer”. Niebuhr goes on to give what he sees to be five different ways in which Christians have attempted to relate to the culture around them. Although his book is somewhat dated now, his warning against thinking that there is only one way, is wise advice.

Let me take another example, where for more than three quarters of its 2000 year history, the Church was quite certain about a particular moral issue only later to completely abandon it. I refer to the question of usury, that is, the practice of lending money at interest. Great store was put on the text in Luke 6:35, which in the Vulgate [that is, the Latin] translation read: “lend, hoping for nothing thence”. This had clear pre-eminence over Jesus’ words in the parable of the talents where the third servant is castigated for not at least putting his money with the bankers and getting interest rather than burying it in the ground. A whole series of Church Councils from Nicea in 325 to Vienna in 1311 all condemned the taking of interest by either clergy or laity. In his book on this topic, the English theologian Ronald Preston comments that “Usury was by far the most debated and the most important economic issue in moral theology”. It led, of course, to the special role of the Jewish people in money lending because they were not bound by this Christian interpretation. Moreover, Christians used Deuteronomy 23:20 [which reads “to a foreigner you may lend upon interest, but to your brother you shall not lend”] as the basis for using the Jews as middlemen. Preston comments that “money-lending was so profitable to the Jews that they could easily cope with the provision in England and France that half their property should go to the king when they died”.

What happened between those days and this? Today, Uniting Church Financial Services offers itself as a bank to church members and church organisations, has some \$1 billion which it lends out on mortgages, loans, and earns interest so as to support the work of the Church. If someone came to a Synod or Assembly of the Church with the proposal that we should shut it all down because it offends against Biblical teachings, they would be regarded as eccentric to say the least and no attention would be paid to their cause. And yet for some 1,500 years, this is what the Church devoutly believed. In our Protestantism, although Luther was even more strongly against usury and took Luke 6:35 so literally that he also condemned rent and annuities, the change came through John Calvin and the old ways gradually disappeared, as they also did in the Catholic tradition.

Concluding his study of this subject, Ronald Preston wrote: “It is not an encouraging story [he means that the Church could get it so wrong for so long]. One cannot make such a move from a biblical text. Its detailed prescriptions are related to the historical situation out of which they came....Yet Christians are continually prone to reason as if they were not, for example in the questions of divorce or homosexuality. They did it for centuries in the case of slavery, for a strong biblical case in favour of it can be made. It has now been given up.....In practice, attempts to read off detailed requirements for a social order from the text of the Bible are highly selective”.

And since my quotation from Preston has introduced the issue of divorce, we all recognise that the Church has shifted on that issue also, especially in Protestantism, despite very clear proscriptions in the scriptures against it. The Catholic Church, as in the case of Nicole Kidman, requires annulment before a second marriage, but that seems easier than in the past, and one can envisage changes there in the future. Christians who can quote Leviticus 20:13 at will on the subject of homosexuality are

often found to be much more liberal in their interpretation of Jesus' words at Mark 10:9 'therefore what God has joined together, let no one separate'.

Many other examples could be given, including polygamy, and some of you may remember that in a sermon here last year, I quoted from Rev. Gregor Henderson's Bible studies at the Synod meeting in Tamworth in 2004. Gregor had told us how, at a meeting of the World Alliance of Reformed Churches, a Presbyterian minister from Africa had come up to him and asked how many wives the Uniting Church in Australia allowed its ministers to have.

Which brings us to the vexed issue of homosexuality and the question of whether it is proper to ordain homosexual persons as ministers, indeed even bishops, of the Church? The differences on this issue in the Uniting Church are exactly mirrored in other churches, including the Anglican Communion. As you will see from what I have said, I do not think that this issue is best addressed by trading verses from the Bible. Moreover, in contrast to the issue of divorce, social taboos against homosexuality remain strong, although they are much on the wane in the western world. Nevertheless, for many people, perhaps more males than females, there are strong emotional responses to this issue which render logical argument, be it scriptural, scientific, psychological, or medical, rather superfluous.

There are, of course, more sophisticated arguments than the scriptural ones and it would be a relief in the Uniting Church if we heard more of them rather than the accustomed trading of scripture verses. For instance, to all too briefly describe one of those arguments, it is said that homosexual practices are of their very nature incompatible with Christian love. When God saw that it was not good for the man to be alone, he precisely made a woman to be with him. Homosexual relationships reflect a fundamentally narcissistic search for what is the same as oneself and are therefore unfulfilling. For this reason, it is said; they cannot be accepted by the Church.

While I put this forward as a more sophisticated theological argument, the problem here is what I call the Galileo problem in Christian thinking. That is, when Galileo looked through his primitive telescope in 1609 and found the four moons of Jupiter and the phases of Venus, he knew that Copernicus was right and the sun, not the earth, was the centre of the universe. But the empirical findings of Galileo and Copernicus cut across accepted scholasticism, based on Biblical and Aristotelian teachings. Although he later recanted his views, Galileo was subjected to permanent house arrest. Interestingly Pope John Paul II commissioned an enquiry into the Galileo affair in 1981 and in 1992 declared that the theologians of the day had erred and that "the Bible does not concern itself with details of the physical world".

Similarly, in regard to the argument I instanced about homosexuality, the evidence does not seem to bear out the theory. It does not seem true that their relationships tend to make homosexuals unfulfilled and unhappy, especially if these relationships are stable and faithful. Neither does it seem true that not wanting a sexual partner of the other sex implies rejection of the other sex. Homosexual people, it seems, do have deep friendships with people of the other sex. But, at least from my point of view, a debate along those lines would be more sophisticated and more fruitful and would be subject to some discipline, rather than the scriptural arguments more common in the Uniting Church. Nevertheless, for the reasons I have already given, the likelihood of consensus at this time is very remote, whatever the nature of the debate, and an agreement to respect the views of others seems the only way ahead.

Separating the faith from culture is no easy matter, as Richard Niebuhr wrote some 50 years ago. Christians will have different ways of doing it, some by a close observance to biblical texts, others by various theologies. But, whatever our means and whatever be on decisions on particular matters of discipleship, let us beware of excess baggage. Let us pursue our pilgrimage of faith relying on the grace of the God who came to us in Jesus of Nazareth, and in that mighty incarnation redeemed us and offers us liberation from all worldly prejudices, cultures, and ideologies, to be his holy people.

And let us take the least amount of baggage on the journey.

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