

You may have noticed that in recent years June has become 'Pride' month. This month was chosen as the one as it contains the anniversary of the Stonewall Riots which erupted on June 28th 1969 as the community snapped after years of police persecution in New York; an event generally considered to mark the birth of the modern gay rights movement. Christians are deeply concerned with pride, of course, of a very different kind- *the* original sin, the pride of Adam, the deadliest of the seven deadly sins; but despite frequent feeble comparisons, the Pride celebrations of June reference another pride: the pride that is the refusal of an historically persecuted minority to remain shamed and silent, their determination to accept the way God has made them and to ask you to too. Christians unfortunately don't just get into a confused knot about the semantics of the word 'pride'; they've spent centuries actively shaming, silencing and persecuting that very same minority, and, much to our collective shame, still do. It's one of the least attractive sides of Christian practice, and, to be honest, not really Christian at all. If you wondered why we have marked the month in this church, albeit in a very small way, well, it's a tiny act of atonement for the misery and pain our faith has caused and still causes our siblings; and an affirmation of those members of the LGBT community we are proud to have in our congregation, in our families, in our workplaces; and as our colleagues, friends... and rectors. And an excuse to have rainbow cake after the service.

So, in recognition of Pride month as it draws to its close, I'm bringing before you once more the following sermon... about books.

Some five years ago I set myself the task of working my way through the Dickens novels I hadn't yet read, which was, basically, all of them.

It took a good few months, was an education and a joy; and I don't think I did what I often do which is to start unconsciously imitating whatever I'm reading at any particular time, in my sermons. Sometimes I read boring books, which goes a long way to explaining my preaching. Anyway, I don't remember any 'lawks' or 'Gawd bless ya Nell' sneaking into the pulpit when I was devouring Dickens, but if so, I'm sorry.

The books had all the things you might expect: humour, pathos, sentimentality, purple prose, puns, parody and literary pyrotechnics as well as lists and alliteration. And, which I really wasn't expecting, a number of lesbian and gay characters. Now, being a good Victorian, there is no actual sex in Dickens- for any character- but then sex is not really what being LGBT is all about, any more than those thousands of people who have come to St Mary's chocolate box to be married only ever cared about their wedding night, or in the post-Victorian world of the Common Worship marriage service 'the delight and tenderness of sexual union'. But back to Dickens. The LGBT characters are there: you may not want them to be, you may have read the tales and never noticed them but there they are if you but have the eyes to see. I won't list them here, but you can always ask me afterwards if you really want to. Nobody did the last time this sermon was preached, but I live in hope.

So it is with so many things that are always there: we never see them, we never notice. That's just how we are, it's how our brains work. And it's not necessarily a problem: it's why, in our own eyes at least, we've been, as a species, so successful that we can plausibly claim to rule the world. All because we only see what it's useful to see, and ignore the rest.

We don't see the world as it is: we build up an idea of what the world should be like and then we see that. We open our eyes every morning and, in a very real sense, see what we expect to see. What we see and what is actually there are very often not the same thing. Endless psychological experiments have shown this: I can bore you with them later after I've finished telling you about the barber in Martin Chuzzlewit, just ask me.

However, I know you'd rather hear about my dog. He's a shiba inu, so people tend to notice him; he's a dog not a bitch, though I sometimes wonder; and because his harness is pink everyone we meet calls him 'she'. Even before he had his operation and the anatomical evidence was more plentiful than it is now. Even when I pointedly call him 'good boy' in their hearing. Still a she. We know that pink is for girls, so when we see pink, we see a girl. Even when it's clearly a male dog. And when the penny finally drops, I'm told off for dressing a 'boy' dog in pink.

It's very, very difficult for us to step outside our brains, and to be fair it might be scary and a bit messy if we could. It's difficult. And if for hundreds of years we've built up a culture of expecting and ignoring, if we teach it and preach it, if we reinforce it every day from our birth on, it's more difficult yet.

This morning, around the world Christians heard the Old Testament reader say:

*I am distressed for you, my brother Jonathan; greatly beloved were you to me; your love to me was wonderful, passing the love of women.*

Of the people who were paying attention some 95% will have heard it and thought 'such good friends' and 5% or so will have heard it and known something quite different was going on. Who knows what the exact nature of David and Jonathan's relationship was, whether it had a physical expression or not? We don't know, probably can't. And we really don't need to, because we know it was loving, and it was wonderful and, for David, far surpassed the love he experienced with any of his many wives. For Jonathan, this is what the Bible says happened when he first met David:

*the soul of Jonathan was bound to the soul of David, and Jonathan loved him as his own soul.*

The LGBT characters are there in the Bible: you may not want them to be, you may have listened to the Scriptures read and never noticed them, but there they are if you but have ears to hear and eyes to see. If we sidestep our habitual obsessing about sex, they suddenly emerge from the blur: Ruth and Naomi, David and Jonathan, The Centurion's Servant, the young man at Gethsemane, the Ethiopian eunuch.

We have all been taught all sort of things about the Bible: what it means, what it doesn't mean, what it says and doesn't say. But nobody has a monopoly of truth and nobody has a monopoly of the Bible. The Bible is and always has been open to many, various and changing interpretations. In the scriptures people have found support for the status quo, the superiority of men over women, the institutions of slavery and apartheid, the divine right of kings and the duty to obey authority however unjust, the sanctity of marriage and the family. Those very same scriptures have given hope, succour, comfort and determination to oppressed people throughout history, to women, to African American slaves, the Latin American poor, the Dalits of India, LGBT people everywhere.

The Bible has always been open to many various and changing interpretations because the Bible tells us about God, but is not God. You can't trap the truth of God in paper pages. God is love, not a book.

*Love bears all things, believes all things, hopes all things, endures all things.*

The Bible is a big collection of books. It takes even longer to read them than all of Dickens' novels. The Bible is a big book. And there is room in there for everyone.