

*Fr Andrew Fenby*

I am not a very good Christian. I know I'm not. This is not false modesty on my part, or even genuine modesty. It's not scrupulosity or holding myself to the highest standards, constantly stepping on the scales of piety to weigh myself and finding myself wanting. 'Ooh another 2 pounds of sin this week.' It's just a statement of fact. I'm not a good Christian. Don't worry. Please don't think 'Oh no, he's going to use the pulpit as a confessional and tell us he's buried someone under the patio'. I'm not. Nothing like that is coming. I haven't got a patio.

However, all said, I'm not a good Christian. In most ways I am an entirely typical Christian. I struggle and fail to keep the almost impossible set of demands of my faith: loving my neighbour as myself, doing unto others as I would have them do to me, turning the other cheek, going the extra mile, selling my possessions and giving the money to the poor, welcoming strangers, particularly if they want to look around the church just as I'm about to lock up; loving God with all my heart, all my soul and all my strength, particularly when it's not Sunday. We all want, I know to hold clergy to a higher standard than other Christians, but the truth is, the dog collar does not a better Christian make. A more self-conscious one perhaps, but not a good one. So, I am not a very good Christian. This I know. I also know that my not being a very good Christian is not in any way related my being born gay and this year celebrating 10 years in a civil partnership.

Now just in case you were going to get really worried: be reassured. I'm not going to start talking about the one thing worse than bodies buried in the garden; I won't be making the move from the patio to the bedroom. Don't worry on that score.

I have never struggled with my faith and my sexual orientation. There really isn't a clash. Gay people are God's people, made in God's image just like straight people and also the people who really can't be bothered. I'm not Christian in spite of being gay. I'm Christian because I'm gay. Persecuted people get the guy on the Cross. A deeply homophobic society- such as Britain was until very recently- has made much of my life a struggle. And although there's a long way still to go, things are better; except of course in the estate of our nation which should be leading the way, but instead is determined to be King Cnut, standing on the shore ordering the tide to turn back; the only difference is Cnut probably never did that, and the Church of England certainly is.

I will not be spending much of this sermon talking about my personal experience, because it's not all about me. When the House of Bishops publish one of their uncompromisingly loveless homophobic statements, which they do periodically—usually coming up to (or one year actually on) Valentine's Day; yes, when Church House yet again cries that LGBT people fall short of God's ideal, I *do* take it personally, but mostly my heart sinks because a big chunk of my vocation is encouraging people to come to church and not to leave it. In that light, issuing statements that are indistinguishable from the rants of loveless bigoted puritans is never a good look.

Some of this unceasing hostility to difference is cultural: churches are part of their cultures— which until recently have been highly hostile— and because established churches are clunky institutions, they find the process of change painfully slow (witness our snail's pace acceptance of women's ministry). And part of the ongoing hate is the dominance of a particular way of reading the scriptures— literalist, fundamentalist, conservative, call it what you will— which likes to think of itself as having access to the one true meaning, but in reality is one among many ways of understanding God's scriptural gift.

Despite what you may hear shouted, the Bible record is neither clear nor simple on this matter. There are books and books filled with scholarly argument and unpleasant polemic; there are important debates decades long about how we read the scriptures and how we approach and interpret them, because every reading is an interpretation. The matter is neither simple nor clear. It rarely is.

There are five or six at most verses in the Bible hostile in some way to some LGBT activity (those who regularly have them shouted at them know them as the 'clobber' passages). Two of these are in the New Testament, and none in the Gospels. For comparison there are hundreds of verses hostile to various expressions of heterosexual activity— including, believe it or not, marriage. There is no mention in the Bible of what we understand as LGBT people or their experience, because those concepts did not exist when the books of the Bible were penned. The same goes for much, most of modern living: cars, the internet, electricity, fridges, *in vitro* fertilisation, blood transfusions and MRI scans. They are not mentioned in the Bible not because God disapproves but because nobody had conceived of the possibility of such things, it didn't, couldn't fit their worldview. Arguments rage about the meaning of the clobber passages; the best way to translate Greek terms and Hebrew idioms;

hermeneutics, semantics and semiotics. No time here to even start, but we can note that other people have. The work has been done if you want to read it.

There are also numerous instances in the Bible where positive images of the LGBT experience can be found, *if* you can leave your preconceptions to one side and grab a pair of ancient world cultural lenses. It's unlikely that anyone has ever drawn your attention to them, and mostly these hopeful leads are ignored and those avenues unexplored, because having decided God hates gays, most cannot even begin to contemplate an alternative.

If as a church we have been willing to ignore where the Bible might speak affirming words to our LGBT sisters and brothers, we have never been reticent to find in the scrolls and folios of scripture words of condemnation for them even if this involves forcing meaning on the text it was never intended to hold.

To wit, one of the most embarrassing slogans Christians have ever dreamt up— some time in the 70s— was 'God created Adam and Eve, not Adam and Steve.' It is certainly true that in the first chapter of Genesis, the crowning act of the final working day of the first week— the creation of humanity— is clearly envisaged in terms of male and female. However, it's giving the passage a weight it simply cannot bear to imply that this means heterosexual marriage is the only sanctioned form of human union. At the very least, to say that God saw 'A' and said it was good does not exclude 'B' being good, or 'C' or 'D' or any number of things we didn't think to mention at the time. Absence means neither approval nor condemnation: it means whatever we're thinking about isn't the concern of that piece of scripture. Put in cringe-words, that God created Adam and Eve doesn't mean he didn't *also* create Pam and Eve *and* Adam and Steve.

More to the point, going down that road, we will miss seeing that the phrase 'male and female he created them' which sounds so obvious and innocuous to us was a revolutionary one in the ancient world. The Jewish people were pretty much unique in this view, that both men and women are created equally in God's image. The belief in most other cultures then was that women were incomplete men or women were men where something had gone wrong. Aristotle, who more than anyone else wrote the mind of the classical world, thought that women were nothing more than deformed males: something had gone wrong in their mother's womb and their development was never completed. God made them male, and the female ones were the seconds that didn't come out quite right. You can just about see this view fading

out of view in the Eden tale of Eve and the spare rib. So when the Jewish creation account states that God created us male and female it wasn't laying down the law about equal marriage in the 21st century. It was rather more explosively asserting the equal dignity of women and men in the 5th century BC. Anything more is over-reading.

There are numerous mentions of marriage— of the episcopal ly pukka type, between a man and a woman— in the Bible. They are literal and legal, metaphorical and figurative. Frequently the relationship of God to Israel, Christ to the church or even the individual soul to God is described in terms of that of marriage. Usually, God is the groom and the people his bride. The bride and groom symbolism is not used because God really wants to affirm the inherent male and femaleness of nature. It's there because the Bible was written by people who had only ever known love in a certain (heterosexual) way, and could only then conceive of love in that certain way. The writers of the Bible were as limited by their experience as we all are. They wrote the Bible, God did not. They were limited in the ways they could think about love. God is not. So, when the relationship of God to his people or Jesus to the church (same thing) is compared to a marriage that's not to make a point about male and female (biology has nothing to do here) but to make a point about being committed and dedicated, and, most astonishingly, vulnerable. If you love someone then you make yourself vulnerable to them: vulnerable to rejection, vulnerable to disappointment, possibly exploitation or abuse: and by loving us, God makes himself vulnerable. At its most extreme, the complete vulnerability of the cross. We have arrived at the cross: I'm almost done.

*“God proves his love for us in that while we still were sinners Christ died for us”* So St Paul wrote.

Jesus died on the cross, for humanity; all of us, without exception and without conditions. Male, female, intersex and gender neutral; lesbian, gay, bi or trans; married, single, widowed, civil partnered, living together. All of us, without exception and without conditions. We are none of us very good Christians, and never will be. As St Paul also wrote:

*“All... fall short of the glory of God”*

And we are all without exception and without conditions, as we are, as God made us, loved and beloved children of God.