

A couple of 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— apart from the small part of *A Tale of Two Cities* I'd got through as a youth before giving up. 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. I do read quite a few 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 it did, I'm sorry.

Those 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. Yes, seriously. Now, being a good Victorian, there is no actual sex in Dickens- for any character- but then get down to the nitty gritty and 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 language of the Common Worship marriage service 'the delight and tenderness of sexual union'. There's more involved than whatever happens or doesn't between the sheets. But back to Dickens. The LGB characters are there: you may not want them to be, you may have read the tales yourself 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 send me a postcard with the request if you really want to (or easier still Google it). And you will discover, they are there, if you have eyes to see.

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 doesn't have to be a problem: after all, 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, what we expect 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 as well after I've finished telling you about the barber in Martin Chuzzlewit: just put it on another postcard.

However, rather than some dry social science lab stuff, 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 collar 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 see what we expect to see. We know that pink is for girls, so when we see pink, we expect a girl. Even when it's clearly a male dog.

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.

So, if you are reading your Bible and chance upon King David's lament for Saul and his son Jonathan:

*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.*

well, probably ninety-five per cent of readers will think something like 'what close friends they were.' That's what the world's like, so they're seeing what they expect to see. But the remaining five per cent will read it and know something quite different is going on, because their particular experience of the world— and so what they expect to see of the world— is different. 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, we can't know. And we really don't need to, because we know that relationship was loving, and it was wonderful and, for David at least, far surpassed the love he experienced with any of his many wives.

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. And to other people who live largely quiet lives, who find themselves bowed down before the trials and sorrows that inevitably mar the days of our days.

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. The Bible has always been open to many various and changing interpretations and God is more than capable of embracing them all. God is love, not a book.

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

The Scriptures are a big collection of books. It takes even longer to read them than all of Dickens' novels. Put them together in the one binding, and the Bible is a big book. And there is room in there for everyone.