

Cutting Edge Consortium 21st April 2012: “Making space for an honest conversation”

In British society, the game is up. Gay people are equal members of our society.

- Civil Partnerships are now accepted, if not approved of, by the vast majority of people, including Christians.
- All the main political parties in the UK support same sex marriage and the Prime Minister says he supports it not *despite* being a Conservative but *because* he is a Conservative. He is also a practising Anglican. We might also note that the concept of equal marriage is supported by former Prime Minister Tony Blair, a practising Roman Catholic.
- There has been editorial support for equal marriage in The Times as well as the more predictable Guardian and Independent¹.
- Conservative London Mayor, Boris Johnson, took immediate steps to halt what he called “the offensive” poster campaign - 'Not gay! Ex-gay, post-gay and proud. Get over it!' - sponsored by the Core Issues Trust and Anglican Mainstream saying it had no place in a tolerant city. There is a libertarian argument about free speech but Boris must have decided that would be electoral suicide in London and 65% of respondents on The Daily Mail web site said he was right.
- In Europe six countries already have same sex marriage: Belgium, Holland, Spain, Portugal, Sweden and Norway. Denmark is close to it.

You might think the churches would take some pride in this. The equality and human rights agenda has in part developed from Christianity. Surely we want to encourage people to make loving, faithful, life-long commitments. We might also think that the inclusion of people previously denied or excluded is the sort of thing Jesus would have done.

Yet a very big gap has opened up between Church and society. It is an ill-tempered debate about same sex partnerships that has been running unresolved in the churches for many years and our attitude to this issue has been made the test for orthodoxy by theologically and morally conservative Christians. At the 1998 Lambeth Conference a large majority of the bishops of the Anglican Communion voted for a resolution rejecting homosexual practice as incompatible with Scripture². In recent weeks a great deal of anger has erupted because of the government’s consultation about ‘equal civil marriage’. At least part of the trouble is the ridiculously short period of time given to a consultation about overturning a centuries old pattern previously seen as fundamental.

The furore from the churches is over the perceived redefinition of the use of the word ‘marriage’ for same sex partnerships. We might note in passing the acceptance of Civil Partnerships and how far we have in fact moved in a short period but for some Christians this is a first order issue. The Coalition for Marriage has collected an extraordinary 450,000

¹ An entertaining editorial in The Guardian on 8th March 2012 said: “It is surprisingly hard to find in the Bible a consistent endorsement of heterosexual marriage as we now understand it. The Old Testament is replete with stories of men like King Solomon who had 700 wives and 300 concubines. And the New Testament is generally populated by single men and women whose domestic arrangements have little in common with the model of Christian marriage that is now being aggressively defended by Cardinal Keith O’Brien and others. Indeed, the best that many wedding service liturgies can do to insist that Jesus himself supported the institution of marriage is to say that he once turned up at one.”

² Mark Chapman Anglican Theology Continuum 2012, page 204.

signatories (as at 19.04.12) in support of “the legal definition of marriage [as] the voluntary union for life of one man and one woman to the exclusion of all others. I oppose any attempt to redefine it.”³ It is a very large number, but still only a quarter of the 1.8 million who signed the petition opposing road tolls in 2007, and the equivalent of about 12% of those who are regular church attenders in this country.

Of course I accept the traditional teaching of the Church and the ordering of personal relationships, family and society by marriage and I think it is right that this traditional practice is defended; but the doctrine and practice of marriage has developed significantly in Christian history.⁴ Probably the most significant changes to marriage today are among young heterosexuals, particularly with many couples living together and sometimes having children before marriage, which is still seen as an honourable estate.

Experience might lead us to be cautious about the certainty with which moral positions are built with Biblical support. Before Wilberforce Christians in this country saw slavery as having Biblical support for what was the God-given ordering of creation. In South Africa Apartheid was seen in the same way by the Dutch Reformed Church.⁵ Within the churches, Christians conscientiously disagree about the interpretation and significance of the six Biblical passages referring to homosexuality.⁶

Rather than speculating that human rights campaigners may one day pressure churches to accept same-sex marriage, churches ought to notice that to circumvent our opposition the government has decided to step round the problem by creating a new definition of “religious marriage”, i.e. marriages solemnized through a religious ceremony and on religious premises and which would only be legally possible between a man and a woman. This separation of civil and religious marriage should be very disturbing and shows how deeply we have become separated from our wider society.

In this country the number of people going to church has declined fairly steadily for more than a generation whilst the average age of those attending has increased. Yet about two-

³ Coalition for Marriage online petition. The signatories include 11 (out of 44) Church of England diocesan bishops, 2 retired bishops and 1 retired Archbishop.

⁴ E Schellebeeckx Marriage: Secular Reality and Saving Mystery, Sheed and Ward 1965

⁵ Richard Burridge Imitating Jesus: An Inclusive Approach to New Testament Ethics, Eerdmans, 2007.

⁶ See for example, Nicholas Holtam “Homosexuality” in John Bowden ed Christianity the Complete Guide, Continuum, 2005. Three Biblical approaches are discussed. The ‘plain meaning of the text’ proves to be less than ‘plain’. The identification of the context of each particular passage and examination of the meaning and translation of individual words allows for much less certainty about the condemnation of homosexual practices than might at first sight seem obvious. Both these approaches to scripture are undermined by a third, which recognizes that these texts do not address the contemporary reality of homosexual Christians who are homosexual not by deviance from their heterosexual nature, nor by preference or choice, but because of their given identity and who seek to form stable, faithful, adult, loving sexual relationships, and as Christians they want to do so within the context of the church of which they are baptized members.

Others have commented on there being a similar difficulty with the interpretation of ‘the tradition’ which is often also asserted to be ‘clear’ on the matter.

thirds of the population say they believe in God and twice as many people as go to church say they have a personal relationship with God but have stopped going to church.⁷

As a new Bishop of Salisbury I am spending a lot of time visiting my new diocese. In a secondary school rated as outstanding by Ofsted, I was welcomed by a Head of Department, Mrs Smith, who introduced me to her "colleague and wife Mrs Smith".⁸ Not surprisingly in the light of recent publicity, their very bright group of 6th formers asked me about my views on gay marriage. I found myself having to tell them why the Church has difficulty with it. None of them thought what I said made any sense whatsoever. "What about your parents?" I asked. There was a bit of discussion but only one or two said their parents disagreed with them. "And your grandparents?" The students said they hadn't talked about it much with them and thought that probably most would disapprove.

In the evening I went to a well attended meeting of the local Deanery. The average age of these really lovely people must have been over 60. The first question was about how to encourage young people to church and the second was about marriage. I told the story of my visit to the school and most people saw the connection. Some Christians might like to say there are more important issues than gay marriage but we are not connecting with our society and for the churches this should be a mission priority. Most people now see the Church's avoidance of equality legislation as immoral and it undermines us.

The possibility of 'gay marriage' does not detract from heterosexual marriage, unless we think that homosexuality is a lifestyle choice rather than a commitment on the part of people who are homosexual not by deviance from their heterosexual nature, nor by preference or choice, but because of their given identity. They seek to form stable, faithful, adult, loving sexual relationships, and as Christians they want to do so within the context of the church of which they are baptized members. As a parish priest I was struck that I could bless a bridge over the Thames and new toilets (cleanliness is next to Godliness) but not a Christian couple who said they loved each other so much that they wanted to be together for life.

In the Church of England we are a long way from being able to agree that marriage can be extended to same sex couples but we will find ourselves having to accept the new distinction between civil and religious marriages, as we have had to accept Civil Partnerships. Particularly because of the international aspects of the Anglican Communion and our ecumenical relationships, we aren't even able sensibly to discuss the authorised blessing of Civil Partnerships. We have to distinguish between prayers (which are allowed) and a blessing (which is not) so a pastoral practice is developing in parishes that think it appropriate to pray with couples in celebration of their Partnerships. We can expect this to develop in time in much the same way as the Church of England has come to conduct the marriage of some divorcees who want to celebrate a new marriage in the context of the church. No Church of England parish or priest is required to take the marriage of someone who is divorced. It is a matter of conscience.

So, increasingly, there is an evangelical imperative for the Church to recognise that covenantal same sex relationships can be Godly and good for individuals and society; that they are at least like marriage for heterosexuals, and this is a development that many Christians in good faith warmly welcome. For LGBT people it raises question about whether marriage is what they want, but for us as a Church there are things to affirm in this development. It is a disaster that we have allowed the Church to be seen as the opposition to equal civil marriage.

⁷ A report on "Churchgoing in the UK" published by Tearfund in April 2007

⁸ I have changed the names of the teachers.