

Ambiguous Ethical Teaching: Human Sexuality

When the American Episcopal Church decided, in the summer of 2003, to proceed with the consecration of an actively homosexual priest as a bishop, it caused an international sensation. The Church of Ireland is now embroiled in that controversy due to the actions of Bishop Burrows and Dean Tom Gordon. No real debate has taken place within the Church of Ireland concerning the nature of human sexuality. The House of Bishops has called the members of General Synod to meet together in March to discuss human sexuality. This is to be welcomed.

However, it would seem that for those advocating the acceptance of same-sex relationships any debate is to be conducted in secular language of rights and social inclusion. They make little pretence about re-interpreting the biblical and historical teaching of the Church which is hostile to homosexual behaviour. In fact, the actions of Dean Gordon and the compliance of Bishop Burrows, has shown that over 2000 years of Church teaching is not only to be rejected but also jettisoned. Advocates of same-sex relationships state that where the traditional biblical teaching of the universal Church is found to be incompatible with (post)modern morality then the information upon which it is based should be changed, rejected and jettisoned so as to match their lifestyle choices and sexual behaviour.

What has emerged is a rejection of the moral teaching of the Church of the past 2000 years. What the Church condemned as immoral and sinful has come to be seen not as a moral issue but one of human rights, inclusion and welfare. Human sexuality has come to be defined solely as a series of acts, which a person may or may not gratify according to personal inclination or, if appropriate, the compliance or availability of a partner. Sexuality has come to be equated with commission, over which an individual has choice and control. Therefore sexual behaviour is very much an area of moral choice, (and control), which helps to define who each person is.

It is hoped that the Church of Ireland in seeking to overcome the problems of this debate will not follow the Church of England by devising a form of words to which the different parties could assent but whose general expressions are so imprecise as to be universally inclusive. Those who promoted and persuaded the General Synod of the Church of England, (like many present voices within the Church of Ireland), to accept such an imprecise form of words saw their primary duty as the preservation of the unity of the Church. Visible unity came at the expense of Truth, and papered over the deep internal divisions. There are many within the Church of Ireland, even in the House of Bishops, who are advocating for such a compromise for the Church of Ireland at this time.

The extraordinary thing is that the Church of Ireland and the House of Bishops in particular, have spent so long seeking to avoid controversy that they have now been enveloped by it.

The failure of the Bishops to address the members of the Church of Ireland on matters involving sexual morality in general has caused long term damage to the faith of the very flock they promised to guard and pastor. The pulpits are silent and little, or no, teaching is given on the moral standards and sacrifices required of Christians in their sexual behaviour.

The vacuum caused by this lack of teaching and moral leadership has been filled by a media. Liberal social commentators, so called experts, celebrities, and medical technology not only set the agenda but 'educate' the laity (and clergy) in this area of life. Teaching on human sexuality within our schools is either open-ended, in order that children may determine what are imagined to be their own views, or else liberal propaganda is taught as objectively-based facts. The clergy fail to speak up in challenge of such humanistic teaching for fear of being unpopular and viewed as old fashioned. What the Church of Ireland leadership needs first to do is to promote its own teachings on human sexuality. The problem is, the leadership itself cannot agree what that teaching actually is, as witnessed by their pastoral letter on this issue.

The present positions held by the majority within the House of Bishops are not much different from the secular humanism that has governed the teaching and understanding of human sexuality in our educational system and in society generally. The majority of the present bishops hold moral attitudes that can only be described as secularised. They reflect the popular culture of moral inclusion in which the test of acceptable sexual behaviour is identified as 'caring.' Therefore, the moral teaching of Scripture and the Church has gained little understanding or acceptance within the Church of Ireland due to the moral illiteracy of the clergy and the laity. The positive acceptance, affirmation and approval of same-sex relationships clearly indicated a desire of many clergy and laity within the Church of Ireland to distance themselves from biblical and traditional Christianity. This has led inevitably to a 'new faith' of the consecration of liberal opinions about love without moral boundaries or rules.

In response to this vacuum and lack of understanding of Christian moral teaching we are beginning a ten week study on Sunday mornings of the 10 Commandments. I hope and pray that this sermon series will be a blessing to us all and will enable us to articulate our faith (and its moral implications) with confidence.

God bless

Rev Alan McCann