

Wheatley United Reformed Church
Sunday 3 February 2013
Epiphany 4/2 before Lent (year C)
Gen.2.7-10; Song 7.10-13; I Cor. 13.1-13; Luke 4.21-30
Rev'd. Dr. Colin Thompson

‘When I was a child, I spoke like a child, I thought like a child, I reasoned like a child; when I became an adult, I put an end to childish ways’ (I Cor. 13.11).

On this Sunday in 2004 Desmond Tutu began his sermon with words about an ancient heresy:

Long, long ago, very clever people decided that the human body, flesh, all material things, that all of these were in and of themselves, evil, intrinsically, inherently and always. So there was no way that the good, the pure, the sublime, and, by definition, the perfectly good spirit could be united with the material. For these people...the incarnation - God, pure spirit, becoming a human being - was totally and in principle, and always, out of the question. What people thought was God become flesh in Jesus Christ, well, that was all just playacting, a charade.

The Incarnation hallows flesh, yet those old suspicions are still with us, and nowhere more than when it comes to sex. At creation, ‘The man and his wife were both naked, and were not ashamed’. The body and sex are good and pure. But ‘Then the eyes of both were opened, and they knew that they were naked’; ‘I heard the sound of you in the garden, and I was afraid, because I was naked’. Sex and the body have become shameful and bad. What has gone wrong? What happened in the Garden of Eden is not history; it is a theological narrative told about human beginnings which is intended to explain why the world into which we emerge as conscious beings is not the perfect world we dream of. Nakedness ought to be innocent, but once our eyes are opened to sexuality we are expelled from Eden: our bodies become a source of confusion and shame, a process we all negotiate with varying degrees of difficulty.

Why did sex and guilt come to be so closely associated, even at this early stage in human thought? Musing on the Fall around 400AD, St Augustine famously argued that original sin was transmitted through the lust which accompanied intercourse, and his own struggles with sex are documented with painful honesty in his *Confessions*. He could not reconcile his love for the woman he lived with and the son they had with his conversion to Christianity, and in the end he left her and embraced chastity. Augustine was a great theologian, but left a very negative influence on Western thought when it came to sex.

The problem surely comes from our unconscious selves. It hits us just as we are beginning to negotiate the tricky transition from childhood to adulthood. It thrills, appals, shames us, all at once. Here we become most aware of our animal nature; the pressures it exerts can be urgent and all-consuming; they efface rationality and escape our conscious

control. Sometimes they lead us into behaviour we later regret, especially if we have hurt someone else. Sex connects with deep, often unrecognised emotions: it can appeal to our desire to exert power over others, or to submit to them, or to use them for our own ends.

In the biblical poetry of the Song of Songs we find a very different picture of sexuality from the guilt of Adam or St Augustine. It sings of a love between equals, a love which transforms each into the other, in images drawn from creation itself - lilies and spices, springtime, birds, vines, apples and pomegranates, honey, breezes. At its heart is another garden, to which the lovers repair to join in union. The whole creation unites with them to celebrate their union. It is a much more beautiful and positive vision of the possibilities of erotic love than Genesis offers. How do we make that biblical journey, from sexuality which is guilt-laden to integrating it into our own self-understanding and our relationships with those to whom we are attracted?

People of my generation and older have lived through a period of rapid transition in attitudes towards sexual behaviour. I have been fortunate to spend my working life with educated young adults. They expect to live together before they marry, if they marry at all. They consider same-sex attraction as a natural variant; it simply isn't an issue for them. Sometimes I get the impression that churches are living in a parallel fantasy universe, in which everyone marries, marriages last for a lifetime, divorce never happens, no one has sex before marriage and all homosexual people must abstain or (worse still), be cured.

The truth is that even marriage has changed. Until the Married Woman's Property Acts of 1870 and 1882 all the property of a married woman belonged to her husband, and she could neither own property nor enter into legal contracts in her own right. The Victorians were not afraid to right injustices. Marriage used to be defined as a *lifelong* union between a man and a woman and divorce was virtually impossible. My father's divorce in 1940 was considered such a great stain on his character that the London Missionary Society, for whom he had been working in Madagascar, refused to send him on another posting, since it was scandalous for a Nonconformist minister to have been divorced. That's changed, too. In 2011 47% of babies were born outside a married relationship, whereas when I was growing up a so-called illegitimate birth was still a source of shame. There were clergy in the 1980s - maybe there still are - who would not conduct marriages for people who lived at the same address, but by and large we have got used to cohabitation. Many couples who live together in mutual commitment without being married raise families in a context as loving and stable as that of marriage; sometimes more so. Pre-marital sex - what used to be called fornication, forbidden in the New Testament rather more often than homosexual practice - was regularly condemned by the churches. You don't hear much of that now. When I was young people were being imprisoned for engaging in homosexual acts, or being given aversion therapy by electric shock to 'cure' them. You may remember the tragic case of Alan Turing, the brilliant father of computer science, whose work at Bletchley Park during the war was so important in cracking German codes. He was prosecuted for homosexuality in 1952, accepted chemical castration in lieu of imprisonment, but killed himself by swallowing cyanide shortly afterwards. I honestly

can't say I want to thunder from the pulpit against modern mores, especially when they are more accepting and more compassionate.

The Church needs to reflect carefully on advances in scientific understanding about human sexuality. Some people think that this undermines biblical authority, but it doesn't: it's the flat refusal of fundamentalists to be honest which does the real harm and relegates faith to childish fantasy. We stopped believing that the earth was the centre of the solar system, let alone the universe, when it became clear in the seventeenth century that it wasn't. Slavery was abolished despite the fact that the Bible appears to condone it. We stopped reading the creation story of Genesis as if it were science and have read it as it should be read, as theological narrative, telling us about the meaning of creation (that it is good, for example), not offering an alternative to the Big Bang or evolution. Science has sent us back to Scripture and we have discovered new and better interpretations.

In most surveys, somewhere between 2-4% of the population identify themselves as homosexual, while a larger number claim to have felt some kind of same-sex attraction. It means that in the UK there are somewhere between a million and two and a half million gay people, over 100,000 of whom have entered into civil partnerships in the six years since it became possible - five times the predicted take-up. Scientists have observed homosexual behaviour in some 1500 animal species. It is apparently especially prevalent among rams, about ten per cent of which will not mate with females. We shouldn't ignore these things when doing our theology; we can't, for example, say that homosexuality is an aberration because it occurs only in some humans. You probably have no idea of the anger and the pain which gay people feel towards the church, but I hear it all the time, and I want to say 'it's not like that', but I can't, because so often it is. We have heard some very inappropriate and offensive language from some church leaders of late in respect of same-sex marriage, which seems to fall well short of the simple test, that we should treat others as we would like to be treated ourselves.

God created us as beings with sexuality and with the capacity to express ourselves through it. Our sexual orientation is an integral part of who we are and as such belongs to our God-given humanity. We can use it to demean ourselves and others, or to enhance and complete us as people. That, surely, is the area in which a Christian view of sexuality does have something important to say to a Western culture marked by an almost senseless and blind seeking after the pleasures of purely physical sensation and self-gratification, the casualties of which are all around us, in the abusive relationships we hear about and those we don't. We need to rediscover the incarnational and sacramental understanding of the material world, which does not reject it as fallen or wicked, but sees it as the place which God has embraced and made his own. In that respect, the Song of Songs is a powerful ally: a celebration of the beauties of creation applied to a human relationship characterised by mutuality, intimacy and tenderness, and - for many centuries - understood as the closest likeness possible in human language to the love song between God and the soul. So too is the eloquent hymn to love in I Corinthians 13, that love the Greeks called *agape*, which loves without expecting reward. As Paul might put it now, I may hold every politically correct attitude, but if I speak without love, it is noise in the wind. I may have great

intellectual powers or faith strong enough to move mountains, but without love, they are worth nothing. I can wear myself out in good works, but if they are done without love I am none the better for it. And, more freely paraphrasing: I may be happy in a conventional relationship, but if I have no love of the kind that stretches out to those who aren't and sees in them the image of the divine, I am none the better for it.

We live our spiritual lives through living our physical lives, including, obviously, sex. Christians believe that sex is one of many divine gifts, given for the building up of one another in love. A Christian approach to sex celebrates the values of intimacy, tenderness and mutuality, which are the polar opposites of sex as chase, possession and self-gratification. It understands our bodies to have sacramental value as the forms through which we express our love to God and to one another; every Christian is called to be a sacrament of Christ. Sacraments are incarnational: they hold together the realms of the spiritual and the physical which we normally force apart. They are rooted firmly in earthly matter and in basic bodily needs - food, drink, cleansing - but their source is divine grace - rebirth, redemption. When it comes to sexuality, it's time we stopped thinking and reasoning like children; it's time to grow into a mature kind of loving, where we are not boastful, arrogant or rude; where our sexuality, whatever its orientation, is no longer defined as appetite and gratification but helps to build relationships which mirror the divine.