

Can We Be More Honest About Sex?

Canon Neil Patterson – Sunday 6th October

Job 1.1; 2.1-10, Hebrews 1.1-4; 2.5-12, Mark 10.2-16

‘You have made them for a little while lower than the angels’

Last week we spoke of angels, but now we come down to earth. Although our readings today are not planned to be connected, they all speak to some greater or lesser degree of our human condition – Job the example of enduring arbitrary suffering, the ruminations of the author writing to the Hebrews about humanity lower than the angels but ruling over the animal world, and Jesus in Mark’s gospel commenting on the weakness of human adult relationships, and perhaps comparing them to the innocence of children.

But those words, ‘lower than the angels’ are something of a gift to the preacher just at the moment, because they have been taken as the title of a significant book which I bought at its Oxford launch on Thursday, and which I know at least two other people in our Cathedral community have acquired and are reading! ‘Lower Than The Angels’ by Diarmaid MacCulloch, is definitely not about angels. It is about the history of sex in Christianity for 2000 years. And it is indeed about sex that I want to speak this morning, because the first part of our Gospel reading is regularly, if perplexingly, cited as ‘Jesus’ teaching on sex and marriage.’ Perhaps the Holy Spirit arranged that we should have the Consort rather than the boy or girl choristers this morning! And I also give notice now that I will refer to the further revelations of abuse by Mike Pilavachi, in case that is a sensitive matter for any of you.

At least some of you, I hope, will have heard of MacCulloch – in many ways the foremost Church historian of our times, who has delved in unimaginable detail into the workings of the Tudor court and the life of Archbishop Cranmer, but also written wide-ranging studies of Christian history, of which this is now the latest. And, like all of us, he does not lack a personal context – for, already then a successful academic historian, he was ordained deacon in this very Cathedral in 1987, but his ministry came to an abrupt end when the Bishop found out about his same-sex partner, and he was never ordained priest. Yet, through ups and downs, he remains a part of the Church, regularly playing the organ in an Oxford parish.

The significance of this new study, it seems to me, is that it brings together what I can only describe as the sustained weirdness of Christian thought about sex and sexuality through the centuries. This is where we need to be more honest. It gives the complete lie to the assertion in the Church of England’s *Living in Love & Faith* resources that the Church has always honoured and valued marriage – it hasn’t. For long periods it was seen as second-best, an awkward concession to those without enough self-control to be celibate, or a grubby necessity to make sure there were some children for the future. But, unsurprisingly, it is homosexuality that has brought out the full weirdness. Diarmaid’s prize discovery is the tradition, popular throughout the Middle Ages, of a reason Jesus never mentions gays. Looking down from Heaven before the Incarnation, he didn’t like the look of a world with us in, so the Father ensured that all sodomites miraculously died on the night of the first Christmas. It’s just as well they weren’t expecting clergy and choir for Nine Lessons and Carols.

The recent revelations about Mike Pilavachi are very different and disturbing example of how difficult we find it to be honest. Pilavachi, for those who have not heard of him, was for the last 30 years a phenomenally successful evangelist to young people, attracting tens of thousands to his Soul Survivor summer events. Their internship programme was in its time as large as all those run by dioceses put together, and literally hundreds of younger evangelical clergy in the Church today were formed by his ministry. However, it was revealed recently that the unmarried pastor had a habit of inviting young men both to wrestle with him in private, and to receive massages from him – no more, to be sure, but that in itself is disturbing, as is the fact that other church leaders knew about it. A recent report notes the widespread report that those especially favoured, to join a small group of interns who travelled the world with Pilavachi, were generally “young, male, clean-cut, attractive, white.” I don’t think I need to say any more to show that there was astonishing dishonesty and blind-eye turning about sexuality taking place. Again, people would be right to think the Church is weird about sex.

And this brings me (finally, you sigh) to the crux words of our Gospel reading, about which, I suggest, we have often also been quite weird. “They are no longer two, but one flesh.” Of course, if two people marry, as very many

of you are, you form in a sense one unit in society, bound by a commitment to each other, albeit generally nowadays a much less absolute economic and social unit than in the past. But we often seem, I think under the influence of Augustine, to have said something stronger, that when two people have sex (regardless of the nature of their relationships or indeed gender) they become 'one flesh' in the sense that some sort of strange metaphysical bond is created, with eternal consequences. And hence the reason why this makes a bar on divorce, as sternly enforced through much of history, though not in the Eastern Orthodox churches. I'm sorry, but I think this is quite weird. Bodies meet, and bodies separate again afterwards – the nature of the relationship and the importance of intimacy are what matter, not some sort of magic when particular body parts touch. Except – and it is an important exception – sometimes when a man and woman have sex, a new human being is conceived, 'one flesh' indeed from the two. And that seems to me the best and most useful meaning of 'one flesh' that we can live and work with.

This matters because after much wrestling with these questions in the Church of England during the *Living in Love & Faith* process, I have reached the conclusion that we will not get out of our intractable disagreements until we challenge the distortion of this short text, and a few others, into a complete theory of human relationships. One that bears little connection to the breadth of human reality or the wisdom to be gained from experience, at which many other parts of Scripture, especially the Song of Songs, hint. Because when we do, there is a beautiful potential to be reached, and I saw it here yesterday. In the very Cathedral where Diarmaid MacCulloch was not ordained priest because of his honesty about his relationship, the Beloved community yesterday engaged richly with all sorts of aspects of human diversity, thinking deeply about theological questions but, as far as I could tell, completely free from hang-ups about the holiness or otherwise of particular acts.

Being a latecomer to the planning, I had kindly been designated a 'chaplain' to wander and talk to people, and be ready to listen to or pray with any in need. I had many good conversations, but I did not meet people in distress or needing to share their pain. That could be because of my lack of caring demeanour! But Carolynne was doing it too and she reported the same. People had come to explore, and network, and talk, and they were through with the battles against injustice. Of course, there is still a great deal of healing to take place for all those who have endured discrimination by the Church. But I began to see, with great rejoicing, the beginnings of a better and more honest future.