

“THE BIG QUESTION”

John 8:1-11

If you’ve been coming along here over the past few weeks, you’ll know that we’ve been looking at some of the issues which confront us as God’s people in our current cultural situation and trying to see what the Bible has to say about them. Things have been changing around us at an alarming rate and, although men and women have been capable of behaviour and attitudes which are not in line with the Bible’s teaching for centuries, things tend to have been held in check by government legislation and societal convention. Since the huge shift that took place really in the 1980s, when personal freedom and rampant individualism became foundations of government policy to underpin an economic plan adopted by a particularly libertarian regime, many of the constraints that once kept us close to some kind of biblical pattern for society have been swept away and we find ourselves part of a very different society indeed.

The trigger for our considering all this was a question that came to us from the United Reformed Church as to whether local churches should be hosting same sex wedding ceremonies. At the moment, this church is licensed to perform what you might call “traditional” weddings – between a man and a woman – but there will come a point where we have to make a decision as to whether we want to register to perform weddings between two women or two men. That point has not yet been reached, but it will surely come. So this morning that’s the main question we’re considering as the final issue in this short series. Are we prepared to allow this church to be used for that purpose?

And once again we seem to be a point where it’s all crept up on us. This is another of those cultural shifts that has probably taken us a bit by surprise, because in the society around us it seems to be pretty well taken for granted that homosexual activity is part of life, it should be embraced by all and isn’t really a cause for any kind of criticism or opposition. If you have any reservations about this, then you are branded old-fashioned, out of touch, bigoted or “homophobic”, that cheap and thoughtless gibe that is used by people who aren’t really prepared to think about the issues or see anyone else’s point of view. But this rush towards accepting homosexual activity as just another item on the ever-lengthening menu of sexual preferences and practices, is part of this assumption that we can all do whatever we want so long as it doesn’t really hurt anyone else and enables us as individuals to fulfil our own self-focussed sense of destiny. It is part of a set of lifestyle choices that we all make, choices which have consequences, both personal and societal, and both temporal and eternal. We may think that’s it’s just a personal thing that allows us to fulfil something deep within us – a popular view since Freud’s theories were first given any credence – but sexual behaviour, like all other forms of behaviour, has its consequences and implications too, even if only to do with our relationship with God. This is what St Paul has to say in *1 Corinthians 6:18-20*:

“Flee from sexual immorality. All other sins a person commits are outside the body, but whoever sins sexually, sins against their own body. Do you not know that your bodies are temples of the Holy Spirit, who is in you, whom you have received from God? You are not your own; you were bought at a price. Therefore honour God with your bodies.”

Now I don't intend to go into the whole homosexuality thing this morning – there are all kinds of issues and arguments surrounding that and we could probably sustain a series of sermons just on that one topic – but there are a couple of general things that need to be borne in mind before we continue. The first is that there are undoubtedly people who, for whatever reason – genetic, cultural, upbringing and so on – have a homosexual inclination: they are physically and sexually attracted to people of their own sex. The question is about what you do with that? How do you express it or repress it? There are people who seem to have an inbuilt desire that they find very strong towards heterosexual activity with more than one partner, or an apparent predisposition to anger, to stealing, to paedophilia, to substance abuse. They all have to choose how they will express or repress that, and as a society we put things in place to help them. There are choices to be made, is what I'm saying.

The second thing to say is that, whoever you are, whatever choices you make, God still loves you and Jesus still died for you. And the church – you and I – should still welcome and support those who have not necessarily made the right choices, but are looking for help and for God. Actually, we should still welcome and support those who *aren't* looking for help or God, because if God loves them unconditionally, so should we.

Anyway, the issue before this morning is same-sex marriage. What are we going to do about it? What should our attitude be to it? Where, if anywhere, does it fit into what we do as a church? Well, as you are probably aware if you've had a look at this issue yourself, the Bible doesn't actually have a great deal to say about homosexuality – certainly not as much as you'd think from the amount of heat it generates in discussion, and certainly not as much as it has to say about, for example, greed, gossip and idolatry, and we don't appear to be doing very well on that front at the moment. Jesus says nothing about it, which is a great shame as I'm sure we'd all like to have it down there in black and white so that we could turn it into another of our religious tick-lists. There are a few references to it in the Old Testament and in some of Paul's letters, but they are in contexts where, it has to be said, the point isn't really to give instruction about sexual ethics and there are all kinds of different interpretations about the exact sense of what's being said.

So, if we're thinking about same-sex marriage, and there isn't a great deal to look at about same-sex relations, then we need to focus on what the Bible says about marriage and see if we can squeeze our

ideas into that. Now, how you look at all that will be dependent on your view of Scripture – on its authority and interpretation. Just so you know (because I'm aware some of you think I'm a raving fundamentalist and others see me as some kind of softy liberal), I would like to think I have a very high view of Scripture: the Bible as we have it is inspired by God, it speaks into our contemporary situation and for me it is the supreme authority for our everyday lives: it's the main way in which God communicates with us. And when it comes to interpreting it, I tend to lean towards interpretations which have stood the test of time and tradition, but listen carefully to those who come at it with new insights as well. All of which means that, if I want to find out what the basic Christian teaching is on something, the Bible is the first place I look.

For me, the basic foundation of what the Bible has to say about marriage is that which is apparently God's creation ideal. If we look into the way God kind of set the world up to run in the first chapters of *Genesis*, you will find that he says this (*Genesis 2:22-24*):

“Then the Lord God made a woman from the rib he had taken out of the man, and he brought her to the man. The man said,

*‘This is now bone of my bones
and flesh of my flesh;
she shall be called “woman”,
for she was taken out of man.’*

That is why a man leaves his father and mother and is united to his wife, and they become one flesh.”

Now, you may want to quibble with the mechanics of the creation of woman, but the underlying principle there seems to me to imply that this is all about a man and a woman in a permanent covenant. What I suppose we'd call a “traditional” view of marriage. And that is reaffirmed by Jesus in *Matthew 19:4-6*:

‘Haven't you read,’ he replied, ‘that at the beginning the Creator “made them male and female,” and said, “For this reason a man will leave his father and mother and be united to his wife, and the two will become one flesh”? So they are no longer two, but one flesh. Therefore what God has joined together, let no one separate.’

There seems to me to be an emphasis there on the covenantal nature of it, as well – but clearly again it is a man and a woman who are involved. And St Paul also refers to it in *1 Corinthians 6:16* (*Do you not know that he who unites himself with a prostitute is one with her in body? For it is said, ‘The two will become one flesh.’*) and in *Ephesians 5:31* (*‘For this reason a man will leave his father and mother and be united to his wife, and the two will become one flesh.’*). Nowhere in the Bible can I find any alternative suggested to this permanent union between one man and one woman. There are plenty of examples of people who go against it – even the great kings David and

Solomon liked the variety of not sticking to just the one wife – but they are in no way commended for it (in fact, it is part of Solomon’s downfall).

This seems to me to be God’s ideal for his creation – this is the way we should go. And it does not allow for marriage between two people of the same sex. As always, though – and we saw this when we were looking at Jesus’ teaching on divorce last year – although God sets an ideal, he recognises that we fall short of it time and time again, so there are ways of escape for us. God pours out his grace on those who have struggled to make the grade and gives them opportunities of redemption.

That’s why we read that short passage from John’s Gospel this morning. It’s the story of Jesus’ response to someone who had missed that ideal, who had, in this case, committed adultery. There are, of course, all kinds of other things going on in this story, things to do with people’s attitude to Jesus and to women and to sin, but the way Jesus deals with it is very instructive for us. Despite the way in which this woman has missed the ideal, Jesus continues to love her and to show her his grace. As the shamefaced Pharisees and Teachers of the Law slope away, Jesus look up and tells the woman that he does not condemn her for what she has done – after all, there is time to change her life and sort it all out. But she does need to do that – to change. “*Go now and leave your life of sin*”, he tells her.

That’s the example for us. We have an ideal which God has given us – and, as with everything else he tells us to do, if we keep to the ideal then things work in the way God wants them to: best for him and, just as importantly perhaps, best for us, his creation. But when we find we cannot quite keep to the ideal, as so frequently happens, then he extends his grace to us to deal with what has already happened and to help us in the future. Our calling, as followers of Jesus the Kingly Messiah, is to show grace, to be welcoming and not condemnatory. We all struggle to attain the ideal in different areas of our lives and for those who are struggling with this particular area, our demonstration of grace should be no less powerful and positive.

But Jesus didn’t just leave it at the “I don’t condemn you” moment. He went on to say that change was necessary. He was not going to endorse her lifestyle. And we cannot bless those things which God has said are not acceptable. To hold a same-sex marriage ceremony in a church and to ask God to bless that relationship would be trying to get God to bless something that he has not endorsed himself. After all, a marriage service is essentially about asking God to bless the couple who are being wed. If that couple do not fit the template that God has given us, then we have no business asking God to bless them – indeed, he cannot bless them.

I currently believe that homosexual practice is against the ideals that God has given us – just as I believe adultery and greed and pornography and gossip and paedophilia and so on are all wrong – so there is no way it can be blessed in a church ceremony and, as things stand at the moment, I would not be prepared to participate in that nor to let this building be used for that purpose. I'm afraid that is a black and white answer – which is what many of you wanted to hear and probably a few of you didn't. If you disagree with me, that's fine – we can discuss it and look at the issues (I may have missed something vital) – but please don't simply resort to name calling and cheap sound bites, because that does none of us any good. And if you want to discuss it further, then go along to one of the housegroups that is using this material.

But never, ever forget that, before Jesus said, "*Leave your life of sin*" he said, "*I do not condemn you*". My prayer is that this church will always be a place of welcome and support for all people, whoever they are, whatever they've done, and that we will all be prepared to share the limitless and undeserved grace of God with whomsoever we meet. After all, were it not for God's grace, we wouldn't be here ourselves.

"THE BIG QUESTION – SAME SEX MARRIAGE"

John 8:1-11

The trigger for our considering this is a question that came to us from the United Reformed Church as to whether local churches should be hosting same sex wedding ceremonies. At the moment, this church is licensed to perform what you might call "traditional" weddings – between a man and a woman – but there will come a point where we have to make a decision as to whether we want to register to perform weddings between two women or two men. That point has not yet been reached, but it will surely come.

In the society around us it seems to be pretty well taken for granted that homosexual activity is part of life, it should be embraced by all and isn't really a cause for any kind of criticism or opposition. If you have any reservations about this, then you are branded old-fashioned, out of touch, bigoted or "homophobic". But this rush towards accepting homosexual activity as just another item on the ever-lengthening menu of sexual preferences and practices, is part of this assumption that we can all do whatever we want so long as it doesn't really hurt anyone else and enables us as individuals to fulfil our own self-focussed sense of destiny. It is part of a set of lifestyle choices that we all make, choices which have consequences, both personal and societal, and both temporal and eternal. Sexual behaviour, like all other forms of behaviour, has its consequences and implications too, even if only to do with our relationship with God. Look at *1 Corinthians 6:18-20*.

There are undoubtedly people who, for whatever reason – genetic, cultural, upbringing and so on – have a homosexual inclination: they are physically and sexually attracted to people of their own sex. The question is about what you do with that? There are choices to be made. But whoever you are, whatever choices you make, God still loves you and Jesus still died for you.

The Bible doesn't actually have a great deal to say about homosexuality. Jesus says nothing about it. There are a few references to it in the Old Testament and in some of Paul's letters, but they are in contexts where, it has to be said, the point isn't really to give instruction about sexual ethics and there are all kinds of different interpretations about the exact sense of what's being said.

So, if we're thinking about same-sex marriage, and there isn't a great deal to look at about same-sex relations, then we need to focus on what the Bible says about marriage and see if we can form our ideas around that. The basic foundation of what the Bible has to say about marriage is that it is apparently God's creation ideal. Look at *Genesis 2:22-24; Matthew 19:4-6; 1 Corinthians 6:16; Ephesians 5:31*.

As always, although God sets an ideal, he recognises that we fall short of it time and time again, so there are ways of escape for us. God pours out his grace on those who have struggled to make the grade and gives them opportunities of redemption. *John 8:1-11* tells the story of Jesus' response to someone who had missed that ideal, who had, in this case, committed adultery. Jesus continues to love her and to show her his grace. There is time to change her life and sort it all out. But she does need to do that – to change. "*Go now and leave your life of sin*", he tells her. Jesus didn't just leave it at the "I don't condemn you" moment. He went on to say that change was necessary. He was not going to endorse her lifestyle. And we cannot bless those things which God has said are not acceptable. To hold a same-sex marriage ceremony in a church and to ask God to bless that relationship would be trying to get God to bless something that he has not endorsed himself.

Homosexual practice is against the ideals that God has given us, so there is no way it can be blessed in a church ceremony. But never, ever forget that, before Jesus said, "*Leave your life of sin*" he said, "*I do not condemn you*". The church should always be a place of welcome and support for all people, whoever they are, whatever they've done, and we must be prepared to share the limitless and undeserved grace of God with whomsoever we meet. After all, were it not for God's grace, we wouldn't be here ourselves.

Questions for discussion

1. What has influenced your attitude to homosexuality? The Bible, tradition, peer pressure, prejudice?

2. How should we express our views on all this in a society that seems to take little heed of religious principle?
3. If we are not prepared to marry same-sex couples, what other implications might that have for church policies?
4. What is more important for you – “I do not condemn you” or “Leave your life of sin”?
5. How should Wade Street Church respond to people who are struggling with their sexuality?