

## “What has Changed in Christianity and Sexuality?”

Jayne Ozanne, 2016 Lent Address, St Mary's Warwick

Well, it's very good to be with you this evening in what's such a wonderful church. Vaughan has been telling me a bit of its history and it seems like this has been a stage over the years for quite a few dramas – and now here am I standing here talking about sexuality from the pulpit! Please forgive me as this is going to touch on probably some quite a difficult issues tonight. I will do so as sensitively as I can – but it's important I talk about some real issues. So do bear with me.

What's your favourite Love film? Romantic film? Cast your mind back.... We've had a whole plethora from Hollywood of late, and they go back through the years - from *Gone with the Wind* to *Titanic*, *Four Weddings and a Funeral*, *Love Actually*. I wonder what comes to mind? The Guardian did a survey a couple of years ago, and much to everyone's surprise, the nation's number one love film is still *Brief Encounter*, followed closely by *Casablanca*. The oldies are the best! Perhaps because they capture something of that deep romance that makes us so human.

Now have a think about the Bible. What's your most famous Love Story in the Bible? Probably a bit more difficult to think about. But there is a whole book that's devoted to the love story of a lover and a beloved seeking each other. To save your blushes, I'm going to read a little bit of the not certificate 18 part of it:

*'Like an apple tree among the trees of the forest, is my beloved among young men. I delight to sit in his shade, and his fruit is sweet to my taste. Let him lead me to the banquet hall, and let his banner over me be love. Strengthen me with raisins, refresh me with apples, for I am faint with love. His left arm is under my head, and his right arm embraces me.*

*My beloved spoke and said to me, 'Arise, my darling, my beautiful one, and come away with me. See! The winter is past; the rains are over and gone. Flowers appear on the earth; the season of singing has come, the cooing of doves is heard in our land. Arise, come, my darling; my beautiful one, come with me.'* (Song of Songs 2:3)

It's a beautiful passage from a beautiful book that very rarely gets read. And it is about romantic love – “Eros” as we call it in the Greek.

Romance and love gets quite a hard time in the Bible if we're terribly honest – just think about David and Bethsheba or St Paul talking about how it's better to be celibate, but if you *must*, instead of burning with passion, you should marry.

I would suggest that sadly, for many of us talking about love and sex, marriage, lust and desire, has been quite a taboo for some time. All those words get muddled into one. So here we are with a title (forgive me Vaughan) on “sexuality”. It might have said “human sexuality” or even “homosexuality”, but the focus is very much on sex. However, I tonight want to talk about *love and desire*, and what it is to be human.

I'm gay. I happen to desire women as opposed to men.

I've spent many years trying to change that because I felt my faith did not allow that compatibility. Sadly, after two spells in hospital that nearly cost me my life, I decided to go back to scripture and look more closely at what I believe God says through His Word. I'm not going to unpack all that

tonight - I'm very happy to do that after in the Q&A. But I want you to know that this is a deeply personal issue for all of us, and for me personally because I can say thanks to God, I am alive today for having looked at it.

So, "Eros" that sensual desire. that desire of two humans for each other. The word is not mentioned in the New Testament. We do have the concept in the Old Testament for we have the lovely stories of Rebecca and Isaac and the way they meet. Of Adam and Eve even and obviously of David and Bethsheba – but perhaps it's best if we don't go there!

C.S. Lewis looked to unpack this in his seminal work, 'The Four Loves'. It is probably the only well-known book about *Eros* in a Christian setting. Lewis said this:

*"Without Eros sexual desire, like every other desire, is a fact about ourselves. Within Eros, it is rather about the Beloved. It becomes a mode of perception, entirely a mode of expression. It feels objective; something outside us, in the real world. That is why Eros, though the King of pleasures, always (at its height) has the air of regarding pleasure as a by-product. To think about it would plunge us back in ourselves, in our own nervous system. It would kill Eros, as you can "kill" the finest mountain prospect by locating it all in your own retina and optic nerves. Anyway, whose pleasure? For one of the first things Eros does is to obliterate the distinction between giving and receiving."*

It's an important chapter and if you haven't read it I really recommend the book to you.

Why am I emphasising this? Well this whole difficult topic is about recognising, I believe, our God given desire to love and to be loved intimately and to receive God's blessing on this. I believe that God blesses my desire to be loved. That's how He's created me - to be fully human. To recognise the depth of that love, I hope one day to find a partner who I can enter into a life-long union with and have that blessed in front of my friends and family. More importantly, I want to be able to make our vows in front of God. I call that "marriage".

I'm happy to explain how I get to that point, but at this point, what we're looking at in our Church, is the right for some of us to believe that we can be in a union that is committed and faithful, and also to serve God at every level within our church. and to be accepted for who we are.

Sadly, my own church background (from a very different tradition) meant that once I'd decided to embrace who I was, I had to step down from any form of church leadership. I used to be very involved in the music and prayer and intercessory work as well as leading in communion. I was asked to step down from all of that, just because of my desire to love and be loved. I cannot go forward for ordination, well not authentically anyway. I don't want to have to sign a piece of paper that says that I will never one day get married. That's why we *have* to look at why we believe what we believe. and what God is truly telling us in this Age - about what it is to be human and what it is to be loved.

You see the truth is that there is no mention of "homosexuality" in terms of *desire* for someone of the same sex within the Bible. The actual phrase "homosexuality" or word, is a word that was first coined about 100/150 years ago. So it's a relatively new concept. Actually, during biblical times, the concept of same sex desire really didn't get talked about. It certainly wasn't really understood or known. The only potential picture there is in the bible is between David and Jonathan.

I'll read it - it's 1 Samuel 18: *"The soul of Jonathan was knit to the soul of David, and Jonathan loved him as his own soul."* And later, sadly, when Jonathan dies, David says: *"I grieve for you, Jonathan my brother, you were very dear to me; your love for me was wonderful, more wonderful than that of women."*

Now we could do a Bible Study on those verses, and I'm sure many of you may want to read those verses slightly differently from the way I have done. But that's a very deep level of love for another human being that I would suggest goes well beyond what it is to be friends. This was a deep covenantal love. It doesn't say anything about sex. It does not need to.

What we're talking about is that desire to be fully understood, fully known, fully intimate, fully chosen - by another individual. In fact, the truth is, if we look at biblical times, the whole concept of friendship, of gender, of the role of women, of what it was to be in a marriage, is very very different to what it is today.

Back then, arguably, you met someone, you got married, you had sex, and if you were lucky, you fell in love. I suggest, about 100 years ago, you'd meet someone, fall in love, get married and *then* have sex. Well today, you'd probably have sex, fall in love, and then get married - if you're lucky! We've changed the order of things due to social norms. That doesn't mean to say that God changes. But it does mean the culture in which we read things becomes very very different.

Take the concept of friendship. I suggest that in today's world, it's quite difficult for men in particular, to have deep friendship publicly with each other. Whereas, back in biblical times it was extremely normal. That does not mean to say men don't have friends (and I'm sorry to single you guys out) but it's a very different type of friendship. It's far more competitive now between men.

There also isn't any understanding in the Bible about the inter-sex question. We tend to see things very black and white. Certainly when we look at Genesis 2 - God created man and woman. It seems so black and white. But what about our many brothers and sisters who are actually somewhere in between on that spectrum? And I'm talking biologically - let alone from a gender standpoint. It's all far more complex. The studies in science over the last 20, 30 years mean we understand the formation of identity, of gender, of sexuality at a much deeper level than we did back then - so it is a complex issue. And it's one that forces us to go back to understand what is truly being spoken about in the bible.

There are quite a lot of difficulties around this topic as I've already suggested. For some of us it's deeply personal and to talk about it is to bring yourself to the table. Many of you will possibly have heard me on the radio here in BBC Radio Coventry - indeed I've done quite a lot of media work over the past few months.

Only this week I did a full hour programme with the BBC that will go out in April in which I was talking with a Canon from cathedral in Jos, Nigeria. Obviously a gentleman who had very different views on all this to myself. The programme which is called "Agree to Differ" was purposely set up so it brought two people with very differing views around the table. The presenter, Matthew Taylor, tries to navigate the way through our differences to try and find out not if we can agree, but where the fault lines are so that we can agree to move forward. At the end of this two hours of quite intense debate we finished, and Matthew looked at both of us and said, "Did you enjoy that?". I looked at him and said: *"Matthew, I'm not sure that enjoy is quite the word. You do realise that this is deeply personal? For you it might be an intellectual debate about theology, but*

*for me it's about my very identity, my soul and myself. But I'm happy to do it because I think it is terribly important - I don't want any young person going through this trauma that I've been through again."*

So it is deeply personal, but that's no excuse not to talk about it.

We do have difficulty, I think, in our English culture - we probably find it easier than our Nigerian friends, but perhaps not as easy as our Italian or French friends to talk about love and sex. And if you add in to that being Anglican, then I do think we really do have quite a difficult situation! We don't often hear sermons on this and I'm sure there haven't been so many open direct talks from *this* pulpit, - or perhaps there have, Vaughan - I'm doing my best.

One of the difficulties is that we don't want to offend. So it's easier to say nothing than it is to say something that can be misconstrued. Many of us literally feel that we're dancing on eggshells.

When I first came out after my time in hospital - when I felt that I had no choice but to look at who I was and embrace who I was - I decided to write a letter. It was at the suggestion of Bishop James Jones who was a very dear friend of mine during what was a very bleak period. He suggested to me that it would be important for me to tell my story as I wanted it heard, as opposed to allowing the media to tell it. So I wrote quite a long letter to my colleagues on the Archbishops' Council and friends, and those within my current church base. Many of you may know that I was known as a rather senior evangelical. I'd been very involved within New Wine and Holy Trinity, Brompton circuits - I spoke at a lot at those gatherings and I was very involved at a parish level, also with the Evangelical Alliance. My closest friends were some of the most ardent, anti-gay - well, I suppose they would call themselves Conservative Christians. Coming out to them was naturally going to be very difficult, let alone my family who were all from a very, very conservative background. I come from Guernsey in the Channel Islands and for those of you who have been there, it's a beautiful island but it is caught in a little bit of a time warp. I suggest we're about fifty years behind the mainland. So quite a difficult environment to come out into. And so I wrote, and what struck me most was the silence. A few people decided to write back and said that they didn't quite agree with me but we could still try and be friends, couldn't we? But gradually I came off their Christmas card lists. But the thing that I remember most was the silence from those who decided not to talk at all. I found that really quite difficult, if I'm honest. When I shared that with a friend recently, Angela Tilby from Radio 4, she took me to one side and said: *"Actually, Jayne, silence is an interesting response. It means that people are confounded, they don't know quite what to say so they'd rather say nothing than say something that would offend."*

I understand that but actually I think these days we now need to try and find words and risk, with as much love in our hearts as we can, talking about something we might find difficult. Because it's the silence that has caused this issue to fester for too long.

I've recently started something that I've called 'A Good Disagreement' on Facebook. This was a space to try and help people who have very differing views come together to try and learn how to talk about where they stand because it's only, I think, when we talk and risk sharing where we are that we start to understand our own thoughts and beliefs. Frankly I don't think it's a matter of right and wrong in terms of views. It's more about a matter of right and wrong in the *tone* in which we talk about this. Do we do so in a way that respects someone of a different view? Do we do so in a way that thinks the best of them even if we vehemently disapprove of what they are saying?

It's the way we respect each other that matters - and I'd seriously urge us to use words rather than silence.

It is a complex area, there is a lot of biology, science that has changed. We don't need to be experts in that, although some might find it interesting to go and read some of the recent papers.

What may be of interest to you is that there are only actually *eight* verses in the whole of the Bible that actually talk about homosexuality, or acts, as we call them, out of thousands. We've managed to put together over the years a belief system based on a few texts which, if you go back to the Greek and the Hebrew (which I can do, but I'm not sure that would be that interesting for you), which actually mean very different things from how we understand things today.

So, why do we believe what we believe? I'd suggest it's because we've never really known anything else. It's the culture in which we've been brought up and the norms that we have imbibed from our own childhood. That was exactly the same problem when Wilberforce confronted slavery, when Copernicus looked at the world being flat, and more recently when we looked at the issues of divorce and women. We've had to go back and look again at what we believe Scripture is saying. And I would suggest this is exactly the same situation.

*"What's changed?"* is the headline on the Lenten address. I suggest quite a lot has changed, which is why we need to look at things.

Most importantly is that the actual nation's views have changed. Some of you may well know that I commissioned a survey about a month ago which is a repeat of a survey was done in 2013 which tried to look very simply at the question *"Do you think same-sex marriage is right or wrong?"*

It was a YES/NO answer or I DON'T KNOW - they could tick the "I don't know" box. What I was interested in seeing was in how quickly opinions might have or might not have changed - or were they just changing among young people? Were they just changing in London? in the metropolitan south, if you like? Were they changing amongst men or just women? As you may have read, we were quite surprised by the results. The rate of change has been astronomically fast. Now, 56% of the British public think that same-sex marriage is right and just 27% think it's wrong. That's a significant change from just three years ago where only 46% thought it was right. The area that has perhaps changed the most is amongst young people; you won't be surprised to know that. Today about 80% of young people between the ages of 18-25 think that same-sex marriage is right. If you talk to those with no faith background, which is sadly the largest part of the sample, 93% of the sample, think same sex marriage is right. That's quite a significant change. When we look at young people who have a faith, it's still high. It's about 72%. Now please hear what I'm *not* saying. I'm *not* saying we immediately change our doctrine, but I do think we need to understand the world in which we are trying to evangelise and spread the gospel of Jesus.

I was very keen to look at what church members felt. It's very difficult to define what a Church of England member is. There were two measures we looked at; one was if people called themselves C of E and amongst those now 45% across the ages think that same sex marriage is right. And then I asked if you attended church regularly, and similarly 45% thought it was right, so it didn't seem to be swayed by how frequently people went to church.

There were some differences. Typically, the one group who found it most difficult to change and accept were Anglican men over the age of 55. I hate to reflect on how our House of Bishops is

made up or indeed who many of our church clergy are, but I suggest that is a very strong profile. Anglican women over 55 are far more accepting. and actually amongst Anglican men and women under 55, more felt it was right than it was wrong. It was consistent across the UK and it wasn't just confined to London. So attitudes are changing and I think we need to think carefully how we position what we believe as a church, given this seismic shift.

Other things that have changed are arguably the Primate's views. Many of you will know, I hope you will know, that there was a big meeting of the Primates in Canterbury recently. Obviously much of the church press, but also the nation's press were very concerned that there was going to be a split in the Anglican communion. The press were camped outside. Just before that meeting, I had managed to get a letter signed by 105 senior Anglicans, deans, archdeacons, senior members of the clergy and the laity from across the country straight and gay, who wrote to the archbishops saying that they felt the time had come for an apology to be made to the LGBT - the lesbian gay bisexual transgender - community for the way the church had failed them over the years. It was a letter I'd written hoping anyone could sign it, independent of what their views were. It was a letter saying we had seen this community as a problem to be solved, rather than a community to be celebrated. That we'd often caused great pain in the way we'd talked about this issue and we'd certainly had not welcomed them, as Christ would have done. Much to my surprise, the Archbishop of Canterbury in front of the world's press gave a heartfelt personal apology (as we'd asked) for the way he felt the church treated the LGBT community. This was then echoed by a statement the Primates had unanimously agreed which did not quite use the word "apology", but used the words "deep sorrow". In case you are not aware of it, I'm going to read it to you now.

*"The Primates condemned homophobic prejudice and violence and resolved to work together to offer pastoral care and loving service irrespective of sexual orientation. This conviction arises out of our discipleship of Jesus Christ. The Primates reaffirmed their rejection of criminal sanctions against same-sex attracted people." Just as an aside, you may know that in Uganda and Nigeria it is a criminal offence punishable with 14 years in prison, to be actively gay.*

*"The Primates recognise that the Christian church and within it the Anglican Communion have often acted in a way towards people on the basis of their sexual orientation that has caused deep hurt. Where this has happened they express their profound sorrow and affirm again that God's love for every human being is the same, regardless of their sexuality, and that the church should never by its actions give any other impression."*

It was an outstanding statement of words. I'm keen to see what *actions* follow. Archbishop Justin said in General Synod this week that he himself will be actively working to look at how criminal sanctions against the gay community in Africa could be lifted. We watch to see what actions result. But certainly what has changed is the willingness to embrace and acknowledge the pain that's been caused. So a lot has changed and is changing.

My bigger question however is "What is God doing through all of this?" Now I cannot obviously offer to speak for God, but I have spent some time reflecting on this and wondering why as a church have we got ourselves into such a mess. Why has this issue been allowed to fester for so long? It has caused such pain and risks splitting us right down the middle.

I'd suggest that there is something much more powerful at work at the moment. There is a deep darkness rising in the Middle East. Vaughan mentioned that I had been very involved with Coventry. I used to be one of the advisers at the International Centre for Reconciliation. I was

brought on board by Bishop Colin Bennetts to review the work at the centre, and I then helped launch and lead Andrew Whites' Foundation for Reconciliation in the Middle East. With Andrew and Baroness Cox (whom I also helped set up an organisation for) I travelled a fair bit in the Middle East and Asia. These were places where religion sadly is the cause of much conflict but is also working to hopefully create lasting situations of peace. There is an evil at work in our world and it needs a Church that really understands the power of God's love and the power of the Gospel.

I suggest that our Church at this time has really got to rediscover the true heart of Christ for this nation. For too long, we've had, dare I say it, unspoken divisions between our different tribes. Again it's another taboo we do not often talk about but the relationship between the evangelical wing of the church and the anglo-catholic and the liberal and the traditional wings is not good. We tolerate each other but if I'm terribly honest, many parts of the church, do not see the other parts of the church as actually even Christian half the time. I think that needs pulling apart and reforming into something that can truly take on a darkness that is coming. That may sound terribly evangelical but I do think that what we need is a powerful Gospel of love.

I think, dare I say it, this issue is taking us right to the heart of what it means to be human, takes us right to the heart of the Gospel and it takes us right back to scripture. My hope is that trying to unpack this together we can as a church, become a church that is truly fit for purpose.

How do we deal with this when there is so much pain? Well as I've already touched on, I think we need to apologise and be honest when we've got things wrong. We then we need to come to the table and start talking in a way that honours the other, independent of our views.

Can we walk together despite our differences? That's the ultimate question that I get asked in every media interview I've ever done. Jayne will this cause a split? I suggest that unity for unity's sake, is not what Christ intended. Unity should always be a fruit of what it is to love someone, not a goal or an objective. Therefore, if we're just trying to be unified *because* we believe that's what God said, I think we'll find that very hard. However, if we can truly see the Christ in each other despite what we believe, or perhaps *because* of what we believe, if we can truly understand that we need each other despite our differences and allow that love for the other to keep us united, then I think we will find our way through this.

It's what we've seen modelled with the Episcopal Church in the United States. Many feel very angry with what happened there, when they were put on the "ecclesiastical naughty step", but they've chosen to keep walking - the primates have chosen - to keep walking together. I think as a Church, we need to try and keep walking together, despite our differences on this, and look to find a better, and more Christian way.

This evening's reading from Matthew, was a challenge to us to look at the power of *fruits* and to judge a tree by its fruits. I believe that's what Christ calls us to do. It is to look and judge whether something is right by the fruit it bears. My challenge to you is to look at the *fruit* that is born out of faithful same sex, monogamous, life-long relationships and see the peace the love the joy that emanates from that. I'd also challenge you to look at what's happened where we've believed that it's wrong to be gay, and it's wrong to have a partner, and look at the deep pain that's caused and look at the negative fruit, if I can put it like that; where there *isn't* any fruit. For me it meant I was in hospital.

So, why do you believe what you believe? What *changes* what you believe? *Who* changes what you believe? When do you stand fast and never change? Those are fundamental questions each one of us needs to ask ourselves. I would suggest what helps us change and what causes us to reflect, are people we respect, challenging us and touching our lives. It is through *relationship*.

The overarching phrase I hear these days, when people take me to one side and say *“Jayne, I’m pastorally with you, but theologically, I just cannot get there.”* What they mean is they can see the fruit – or lack of it, they can see the pain, they can see the love command and yet they cannot quite see where scripture is on all this. And my challenge back to them is, *“How much time have you actually spent looking at scripture? How much time have you spent really looking into this, or have you just taken it as rote?”* The normal answer is they’ve never really spent any time at all!

There are a lot of resources that can help you unpack this. So my challenge to you tonight is to think through *“Why do you believe what you believe? What has brought you to that point? What would help you change that if that’s necessary?”* I’m not going to try and change your mind, but I’d be interested to know when *have* you changed your mind? What was the basis for that? I would suggest it’s probably an encounter with someone who you respect. So my heartfelt ask to you is to look at relationships that you know. If you don’t know any gay people, try and encounter some - maybe come and talk to me. Look at why you believe, what you believe, and ask Christ to show you where His fruit is in it all.

In the name of the Father, and of the Son, and the Holy Spirit. Amen.

Jayne Ozanne  
February 21<sup>st</sup> 2016