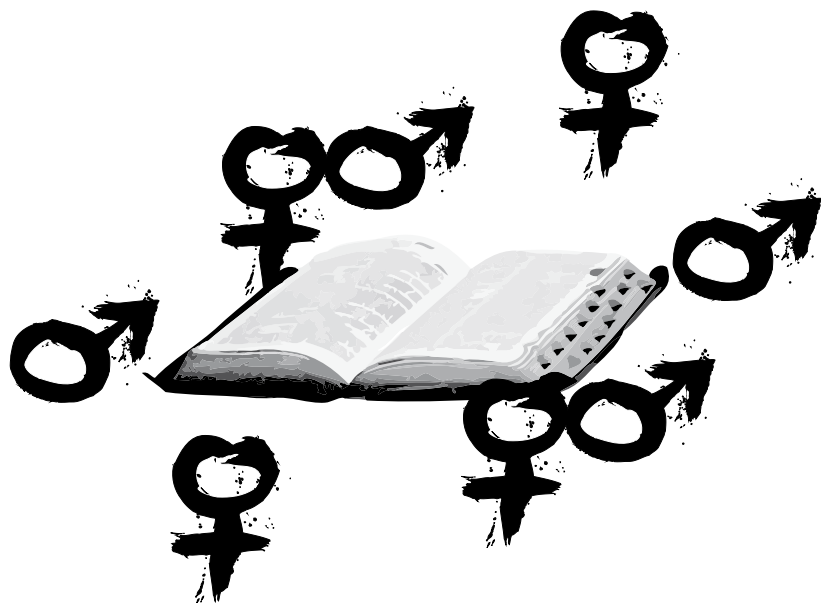




# **Listening for the truth in love**

**Worcester Diocesan Listening Process  
on Human Sexuality**



## **Affirming the received scriptural teaching**

**We live in a changing world where some, but not all change is for the good. There are many things which compete for our attention. This leaflet explores how we respond as Christians reading our Bibles in this fast-changing world.**

## **As faithful disciples where do we look for guidance?**

The Anglican Church appeals to three authorities: scripture, tradition and reason, within which scripture has the primacy. 'Anglicans affirm the sovereign authority of the Holy Scriptures as the medium through which God by the Spirit communicates his word in the Church. (*Some Issues in Human Sexuality* 2.1.4) To jettison the scriptures would be to saw off the branch on which we are sitting! The Church would cease to be the church.

When we think about ourselves, who we are, and what makes for life and growth, we find our true being and identity in God. This is what is meant by being made in the 'image of God'. 'Human beings are created in such a way that their very existence is intended to be their relationship with God.' (Westermann; *Some Issues* 3.1.3) Our home and heart is with God. (See Colossians 3:1-4) We are truest to ourselves when our lives are most deeply hidden in God. It is interesting that only when the prodigal son 'came to himself' was he able to go back to his father.

When we think about our sexuality, what this means is that from a human perspective, the search for fulfilment through sexual relationships has to be seen in a wider context. This context is a right relationship with God and the Christian hope that this life is not all there is. For our desire for fulfilment finds its consummation beyond space and time'. (*Some Issues* 3.1.13)

Very few people do not struggle with their sexuality. There is the adolescent growing up; the single person seeking to be faithful to God within a peer group which sees sexual intercourse as commonplace; those who wonder what their sexual preferences might be; the person who finds their desire is for a person of the same sex; the older single person who would love to be married but is not and feels they have no prospect of marriage; the person who was once married and is now bereft by death or divorce; the person within a marriage which physically has died. Many of us at these times long for intimacy and a human touch. Yet within this broken world where that longing for fulfilment is often unsatisfied; how do we live out our lives as sexual beings?

Society today would say that we have the right to sexual fulfilment but the received position is that scripture has clear guidelines. Normative sexual relations are seen as between a man and a woman. These are found in passages like Genesis 1-3 and Ephesians 5:21-33. The deepest sexual relationships are to be between a man and a woman within the committed relationship of marriage.

Adultery is never right. Promiscuity and prostitution violate ourselves and our being in God. 'Do you not know that your body is a temple of the Holy Spirit?' asks Paul in 1 Corinthians 6:19.

## **So what about homosexual acts?**

The present period is not the first time that the church has had to consider its response to homosexuality. During New Testament times a homosexual lifestyle was universally commonplace in the Roman world from the emperors downwards.

All the passages in scripture which speak of homosexual behaviour as in Leviticus 18:22 do so in terms that say it is not acceptable among the people of God. Though the New Testament supersedes some of the laws of the Old Testament (e.g. Mark 7:14-23), in other places it reiterates and builds on them. This seems to be the case in two passages which mention homosexual practice, 1 Corinthians 6:9-11 and 1 Timothy 1:10 (*Some Issues* 4.3.28 & 4.3.40).

The New Testament Church expected a change of life. When Paul mentions the Corinthian believers in this last passage, amongst other things, he gives positive recognition that some had given up homosexual behaviour. 'And such were some of you'.

We might ask, 'What was it that changed the mindset of the ancient world?' If it was the Judeo-Christian understanding of sexuality then to change now would be to reverse the trajectory of Christian thought.

We live at a time when living openly as a homosexual is increasingly seen as acceptable to society. The Civil Partnership arrangements make that clear. But how should we respond?

We could look elsewhere in scripture and see that what seems reasonable in a society is not necessarily a good guide of what is right before God.

Imagine that you were living in the late days of the Jewish monarchy. The reforms of Josiah in 2 Kings 23 and Ezekiel's vision of the temple, Ezekiel 8 and 9, show that idolatry had a hold on the nation. It came from the pressure to conform to the life of the nations around Israel. The mindset of the Jewish nation accepted it. The leading thinkers of the day must have argued its acceptability. The political pressure made it expedient. It must have seemed

terribly reasonable. The prophets had warned the nation that they were set on a course of disaster. In the end came the sack of Jerusalem and exile.

In Romans 1:24-27 Paul sees homosexual behaviour as a sign of our brokenness and an outworking of the life of a society which has turned from God.

Those who argue for a gay affirmative reading of scripture argue from innuendo or silence. The gospels are silent about homosexuality, but if it was such a taboo in Judaism, as in Islam today, then this is not a surprise. All the passages in the bible which speak of homosexual behaviour do so in negative terms.

Those who want to revise the received position, to be more in line with the society in which we live today, do so in the face of what the bible clearly teaches.

This might best be summed up by Professor Wolfhart Pannenberg in an article published in the *Church Times*, 21st June 1996. 'If a Church were to let itself be pushed to a point where it ceased to treat homosexual activity as a departure from the biblical norm, and recognised homosexual unions as a personal partnership of love equivalent to marriage, such a Church would stand no longer on biblical ground but against the unequivocal witness of scripture. A Church which took such a step would have ceased to be one, holy, catholic and apostolic.'

Or, as *Issues in Human Sexuality* 1991 is quoted in *Some Issues in Human Sexuality*, 2003 4.5.2, in the light of the biblical passages the summary might be: "There is in Scripture an evolving convergence on the ideal of lifelong, monogamous, heterosexual union as the setting intended by God for the proper development of men and women as sexual beings. Sexual activity of any kind outside marriage comes to be seen as sinful, and homosexual practice as especially dishonourable. It is also recognised that God may call some to celibacy for particular service in his cause. Only by living within these boundaries are Christians to achieve that holiness which is pleasing to God."

Our deepest fulfilment and freedom is to live out our being in God, and scripture guides us as to what shape that life should take.

*Issues in Human Sexuality* and *Some Issues in Human Sexuality* are reports from or for the House of Bishops of the Church of England. Further details of them are in the resource leaflet.