



Listening for the truth in love

**Worcester Diocesan Listening Process
on Human Sexuality**



***Looking at the hard texts
of the Bible:***

a resource for those who want to explore further

Preface

There are specific texts of the Bible that are often used in discussion, debate and argument about the sexual activity of gay and lesbian people. This booklet, which looks at them, is a longer, and optional, companion to the leaflets in this pack. It is intended to help those who want engage in a more extended exploration of these texts, and some of the issues involved in interpreting and making use of them.

As far as possible we have tried to avoid using the texts to make a particular case, but instead tried to reflect on the wider range of interpretative issues and questions raised by these parts of Scripture. We have tried to avoid either giving answers or arguing for a single view. We hope, instead, to encourage you to explore the questions and think about your own answers.

The main version of the Bible used here is the New Revised Standard Version. Others referred to are the New International Version (NIV), the New Jerusalem Bible (NJB), the King James Version (KJV), the English Standard Version (ESV), the Revised English Bible (REB) and the Good News Bible (GNB).

Introduction

On one occasion an expert in the law stood up to test Jesus. "Teacher," he asked, "what must I do to inherit eternal life?" "What is written in the Law?" he replied. "How do you read it?" He answered: "'Love the Lord your God with all your heart and with all your soul and with all your strength and with all your mind'; and, 'Love your neighbour as yourself.'" "You have answered correctly," Jesus replied. "Do this and you will live."

But he wanted to justify himself, so he asked Jesus, "And who is my neighbour?" In reply Jesus said: "A man was going down from Jerusalem to Jericho, when he fell into the hands of robbers. They stripped him of his clothes, beat him and went away, leaving him half-dead. A priest happened to be going down the same road, and when he saw the man, he passed by on the other side. So too, a Levite, when he came to the place and saw him, passed by on the other side. But a Samaritan, as he travelled, came where the man was; and when he saw him, he took pity on him. He went to him and bandaged his wounds, pouring on oil and wine. Then he put the man on his own donkey, brought him to an inn and took care of him. The next day he took out two silver coins and gave them to the innkeeper. 'Look after him,' he said, 'and when I return, I will reimburse you for any extra expense you may have.'

"Which of these three do you think was a neighbour to the man who fell into the hands of robbers?" The expert in the law replied, "The one who had mercy on him." Jesus told him, "Go and do likewise." (Luke 10: 25-37 NIV)

The familiar story of the Good Samaritan is also a story about interpreting the Bible. The question Jesus is asked: "Who is my neighbour?", could to all intents and purposes be paraphrased: "In this verse (Leviticus 19:18) what does 'neighbour' mean?" That question would have sounded like a common sense one to those who were listening. If you want to obey the law, you need to know what the law asks you to do.

Jesus' roundabout way of answering the question with a story first of all implies that the text of the law does not go far enough. Leviticus 19:18 is narrowly focused: "You will not exact vengeance on, or bear any sort of grudge against, the members of your race, but will love your neighbour as yourself." (NJB) By telling a story about a good Samaritan, Jesus takes the law as a starting place, but ends up in a significantly different and more wide-ranging position.

By the time Jesus has reached the end of the story, it's his turn to ask a question: "Which of these three do you think was a neighbour to the man who fell into the hands of robbers?" (Luke 10:36 NIV) That's a very different question from the one the expert in the law started with. He had asked: "Who is my neighbour? (Which

groups of people am I obliged to love?)” Jesus suggests the right question is “Who can I be a neighbour to? (Where do I see another human being in need?)”

The discussions, arguments and sometimes, quite frankly, slanging-matches the Church has been having over what the Bible says about homosexual ethics are not going to be easily resolved. But exploring the different questions people ask of and about the Bible’s meaning are going to be an important part of that discussion. In this short booklet, We can only scratch the surface, and so we are not even going to attempt to find answers to any of those questions, but only attempt to identify some of the major questions we need to explore.

As Jesus shows in the above example, finding the right questions is fundamental to getting the right answers. That, however, is harder than it sounds, and makes it especially important to listen to each others’ questions, as well as reflecting on our own. There seem to be two questions that underlie all the specific ones. The first is “What does it mean for gay and lesbian people to follow Christ faithfully?” The second is “How does the Church care for gay and lesbian people in ways that help them follow Christ faithfully?” If those are the questions, then it should be obvious that more than 90% (say) of the answer will be exactly the same for gay and lesbian people as for straight people. We’re only talking about one specific, though very important and influential, aspect of discipleship, mission and pastoral care. We’re also talking about people, not issues.



We suggest there are two key questions: (1) What does it mean for gay and lesbian people to follow Christ faithfully? (or, What does it mean for gay and lesbian people to love the Lord their God with all their heart, soul, mind and strength?). (2) How does the church care for gay and lesbian people in ways that help them follow Christ faithfully (or, What does it mean for other Christians to love their gay or lesbian neighbour as themselves?) Do you think those are the right questions? What do you think the starting questions should be if you think those are wrong?

Specific Old Testament texts

There are some specific texts that are regularly used in discussions about the sexual ethics of gay and lesbian people. They have been examined backwards and forwards by people who simply disagree about them, and often generate more heat than light. However, it is important that we both ask questions about them, and let them ask us questions too. The Old Testament texts come in two pairs: two commandments and two stories.

Two commandments

The two commandments are both found in Leviticus:

You shall not lie with a male as with a woman; it is an abomination. (Leviticus 18:22)

If a man lies with a male as with a woman, both of them have committed an abomination; they shall be put to death; their blood is upon them. (Leviticus 20:13)

They say pretty much the same thing, but the second also includes the prescribed punishment. It seems highly likely that “lie with a male as with a woman” primarily forbids anal sex between men, but the term is euphemistic enough to leave a wider interpretation open. It is clear as well that it is forbidden in the strongest possible terms, and with the ultimate punishment.

The section of Leviticus within which these laws come is usually seen as a specific block of tradition (Leviticus 17-26) and referred to as the Holiness code. This section contains a range of laws. It includes laws that are reinforced in the New Testament and are regarded effectively as universal moral laws, such as “You shall love your neighbour as yourself” (Leviticus 19:18). It includes laws that no Christian even begins to think might be applicable today, such as “You shall not round off the hair on your temples or mar the edges of your beard.” (Leviticus 19:27).

It contains laws that the Church now regards as incompatible with its understanding of the will of God: “As for the male and female slaves whom you may have, it is from the nations around you that you may acquire male and female slaves.” (Leviticus 25:44). Nonetheless, for a large part of Christian history, tradition saw this law as perfectly acceptable. It contains laws that the Church, or modern society, has effectively sidelined, and which are rarely debated: “Do not take interest in advance or otherwise make a profit from them, but fear your God; let them live with you. You shall not lend them your money at interest taken in advance, or provide them food at a profit.” (Leviticus 25:36-37). By contrast with the law on slaves, for the larger part of Christian history, the church thought this law was of ongoing significance, and revealed the will of God for Christian society.

Another text?

A third commandment has sometimes been quoted: “There shall be no whore of the daughters of Israel, nor a sodomite of the sons of Israel”. (Deuteronomy 23:17, KJV) However, modern translations agree that the Authorised Version is misleading here: what the text actually says is: “No Israelite man or woman is to become a shrine prostitute” (Deuteronomy 23:17 NIV). Male cult prostitutes no doubt were sexually used by other men, but it is a particular form of religiously sanctioned prostitution for both men and women, not same sex behaviour that is in view here.

There is a huge variety of laws in the Old Testament, and in this specific section of Leviticus. What criteria do we use for deciding whether any particular law is of significance? What makes the church change its mind (e.g. on slavery, or lending money at interest)?

Before moving on from these laws to other passages of the Old Testament, we should note that there is also a wide variety of laws in this same section that deal with sexual practices. These laws are mixed up with laws dealing with sacrifice, conduct for priests, general ethical behaviour, and other matters, but there are quite a lot of them.

They include the laws that form the basis for the traditional *Table of Kindred and Affinity* setting out who one may not have a sexual relationship with (Leviticus 18:6ff). There are various other prohibitions, which include a man not having sex with a woman who is having her period (18:19), and not having sex with animals (18:23). All these are linked together in the same passage as the first law against sex between men. They cover men having sex with female slaves (19:20), adultery with a neighbour's wife (20:10), and various forms of incest (20:11ff)—these are all just the laws in the immediate context: there are many others elsewhere.

These various laws reveal a significant gulf between the world of the Bible and much traditional culture that believed the community needed to regulate the sexual practice of its members, and today's society that believes sexual practice is largely a matter of individual ethics and personal lifestyle.



What do you make of the gulf between the world of the Bible and today's society? How should we bridge it? How much should we let the Bible question our society's views on sexual matters (such as individual choice and private morality) in every area? In interpreting what the Bible says about homosexuality, is it possible to talk only about sex between men, without also discussing a wide range of sexual practices? Do you think the church needs a more wide-ranging perspective on sex and good and bad sexual practices for all people? Or do you think the Church talks too much about sex anyway?

Here is a list of sexual offences for which Leviticus prescribes the death penalty: adultery with a neighbour's wife (20:10), sex with your father's wife (20:11), sex with your son's wife (20:12), sex between men (20:13), sex with your wife and her mother – possibly at the same time (20:14), sex with an animal (20:15-16). Note how nearly all the sexual offences are men's offences, not women's – “a neighbour's wife”, “your father's wife”, “your son's wife”, “your wife and her mother” and of

course, another man. The law is largely addressed to men, and men are thought of as people who have sex, women are thought of as people you have sex with.



Do you think the way in which we think of men and women today has changed significantly since the time of Leviticus? Do you think those changes make any difference to how we interpret the text? Some people say that the death penalty shows how significant the issue was. Here are the other offences for which Leviticus prescribes death: cursing mother or father (20:9), being a medium or wizard (20:27), the daughter of a priest becoming a prostitute (21:9), blaspheming God's name (24:16), and murder (24:17). Can we draw any conclusions from this use of the death penalty?

Two stories

The first story is the very well known one of Sodom; only the first part of the story is given here. The sequel of course, is the visitor's rescue of Lot, and the destruction of the city.

The two angels came to Sodom in the evening, and Lot was sitting in the gateway of Sodom. When Lot saw them, he rose to meet them, and bowed down with his face to the ground. He said, "Please, my lords, turn aside to your servant's house and spend the night, and wash your feet; then you can rise early and go on your way." They said, "No; we will spend the night in the square." But he urged them strongly; so they turned aside to him and entered his house; and he made them a feast, and baked unleavened bread, and they ate. But before they lay down, the men of the city, the men of Sodom, both young and old, all the people to the last man, surrounded the house; and they called to Lot, "Where are the men who came to you tonight? Bring them out to us, so that we may know them." Lot went out of the door to the men, shut the door after him, and said, "I beg you, my brothers, do not act so wickedly. Look, I have two daughters who have not known a man; let me bring them out to you, and do to them as you please; only do nothing to these men, for they have come under the shelter of my roof." (Genesis 19:1-8)

Less well known, but very similar is the story of the Levite visiting Gibeah. The sequel of this story is battle between the town and the rest of Israel, and a severe defeat for the Benjaminites of Gibeah.

When the old man looked up and saw the traveller in the town square, he said, "Where are you heading? Where do you come from?" The Levite said to

him, "We are travelling from Bethlehem in Judah to the remote region of the Ephraimite hill country. That's where I'm from. I had business in Bethlehem in Judah, but now I'm heading home. But no one has invited me into their home. We have enough straw and grain for our donkeys, and there is enough food and wine for me, your female servant, and the young man who is with your servants. We lack nothing."

The old man said, "Everything is just fine! I will take care of all your needs. But don't spend the night in the town square." So he brought him to his house and fed the donkeys. They washed their feet and had a meal. They were having a good time, when suddenly some men of the city, some good-for-nothings, surrounded the house and kept beating on the door. They said to the old man who owned the house, "Send out the man who came to visit you so we can have sex with him."

The man who owned the house went outside and said to them, "No, my brothers! Don't do this wicked thing! After all, this man is a guest in my house. Don't do such a disgraceful thing! Here are my virgin daughter and my guest's concubine. I will send them out and you can abuse them and do to them whatever you like. But don't do such a disgraceful thing to this man!" The men refused to listen to him, so the Levite grabbed his concubine and made her go outside. They raped her and abused her all night long until morning. They let her go at dawn.

The woman arrived back at daybreak and was sprawled out on the doorstep of the house where her master was staying until it became light. When her master got up in the morning, opened the doors of the house, and went outside to start on his journey, there was the woman, his concubine, sprawled out on the doorstep of the house with her hands on the threshold. He said to her, "Get up, let's leave!" But there was no response. He put her on the donkey and went home. When he got home, he took a knife, grabbed his concubine, and carved her up into twelve pieces. Then he sent the pieces throughout Israel. (Judges 19:17-29)

The first of these stories is often quoted in discussions about homosexual actions, the second hardly ever discussed, and often not even mentioned. Yet they help interpret each other. Both are concerned first of all with a flagrant breach of the laws of hospitality that are both a natural part of Middle Eastern culture, then and now, and are reinforced by the Torah. Both are about acts of sexual violence, interpreted as the most extreme way of violating the code of hospitality. In both stories, the different attitudes towards men and women are blatant. Lot in the first story, and the old man in the second story, see it as a far lesser offence to hand their (virgin) daughters over to be raped. The stress on the virginity of the

daughters may be related to the idea of them clearly being their father's property, and not given to another man. The town of Sodom is judged and wiped out purely for the behaviour of its men: that women were destroyed with them is irrelevant collateral damage. Finally the Levite's poor concubine (note, concubine, not wife, so he's hardly a good example of what we today would see as biblical morality) is not only raped all night long and left discarded on the doorstep, but is chopped up by her owner into twelve pieces in order to ask Israel as a whole to bring justice to the Levite. A slave-woman, as she almost certainly was, may be killed to get justice for a man.



What is your initial reaction to these stories? Do you think it is easy to draw any straightforward moral guidance from either of them? Do you think the attitudes towards the sexual treatment of women affect how we should read these stories' overall attitude to sexuality? Do you think that stories about what is effectively gang rape (and in which the gang rape of a resident woman is less sinful than that of a visiting man) are actually relevant to the current discussion in the churches?

Of these two stories, however, it is the story of Sodom that enters the biblical tradition as a byword first for the utter and complete destruction God might wreak on a faithless people (see Deuteronomy 29:23, Isaiah 1:9, Jeremiah 49:18 among other references), and then wickedness. The prophet Ezekiel refers to it, but the sins he singles out for specific mention are that: "she and her daughters had pride, excess of food, and prosperous ease, but did not aid the poor and needy. They were haughty, and did abominable things before me" (Ezekiel 16:49-50 – It's interesting that he uses the accusation "she and her daughters" when the story is so specifically about the men, and perhaps an example of how free one part of the Bible can be with interpreting another part.) Presumably the sexual sins of Sodom (or perhaps better the sexual expression of Sodom's sins) are part of what Ezekiel finds abominable, but he doesn't single them out in the same way.

Jesus also refers to Sodom as an example of judgement in the gospel tradition. One example only refers to the suddenness of God's judgement (Luke 17:28-32), but two refer to its sinful behaviour and judgement.

If anyone will not welcome you or listen to your words, shake off the dust from your feet as you leave that house or town. Truly I tell you, it will be more tolerable for the land of Sodom and Gomorrah on the day of judgment than for that town. (Matthew 10:14-15; compare Luke 10:11-12.)

And you, Capernaum, will you be exalted to heaven? No, you will be brought down to Hades. For if the deeds of power done in you had been done in Sodom, it would have remained until this day. But I tell you that on the day of judgment it will be more tolerable for the land of Sodom than for you.”
(Matthew 11:23-24)

In the first of these examples, it will be worse for a town that does not welcome Jesus' disciples than it was for Sodom which did not welcome the angels. In the second, Jesus suggests that if Sodom had seen his miracles, wicked though its inhabitants were, they would have repented, unlike the Capernaum of his day, which is worse even than Sodom, because it has not responded to his miracles. Neither of these comments, though they take Sodom as a byword for wickedness, focus at all on the sexual nature of Sodom's sins. The first focuses on inhospitality, the second implies that the sin of refusing to recognise the work of God's Spirit in Jesus' actions is considerably worse even than the legendary wickedness of Sodom.

There is only one New Testament passage that links the destruction of Sodom to sexual sins, and that is Jude 7: "Sodom and Gomorrah and the surrounding towns gave themselves up to sexual immorality and perversion. They serve as an example of those who suffer the punishment of eternal fire." (NIV) Jude's rather unusual language, which literally could be translated "indulged in sexual immorality and went after strange flesh" is still fairly general: it seems to be because he wants to draw a comparison between the wicked angels in the previous verse and the wicked people of Sodom. The reason Jude connects the two is probably because just as the wicked angels in (his and others') later interpretation of Genesis 6:1-2 chase after human women, so the men of Sodom chase after angels. In other words, even though Jude is the only person who draws attention to the sexual nature of Sodom's sins, his point is a rather (to our ears) strange one about wrong relationships between angels and mortals that do not respect the divine order of things.

Curiously, the second letter of Peter, which effectively rewrites the content of Jude as its second chapter (or possibly provides a different version of an earlier writing), does something rather different with this example:

God condemned the cities of Sodom and Gomorrah by reducing them to ashes as a warning to future sinners; but rescued Lot, an upright man who had been sickened by the debauched way in which these vile people behaved – for that upright man, living among them, was outraged in his upright soul by the crimes that he saw and heard every day. All this shows that the Lord is well able to rescue the good from their trials, and hold the wicked for their punishment until the Day of Judgement, especially those who follow the

desires of their corrupt human nature and have no respect for the Lord's authority. (2 Peter 2:6-10 NJB)

Second Peter not only rewrites Jude, it also rewrites Genesis by making Lot an example of a man who has been sickened for a long time by the behaviour of those he lived among. (Genesis implies he's quite comfortable living there). Jude is fairly specific, 2 Peter much more general, and indeed, by specifying "the crimes that [Lot] heard and saw every day" suggests a much broader range of sinful behaviour.

Whether Sodom is referred to by the prophets, by Jesus, or by the apostolic writers, the overwhelming use of the story focuses either on the severity of the judgment, general wickedness (including sexual sins but also a much broader range), or specific sins such as neglect of the poor or inhospitality. Jesus also states in Matthew's gospel that rejecting evidence of God at work in his ministry of the Spirit is worthy of a worse punishment than the (unspecified) wickedness of Sodom. Only in one example, Jude, is "sexual immorality and perversion" singled out, though to make a very different point, and the subsequent rewriting of that passage (or possibly a common predecessor tradition) by the second letter of Peter, interprets it quite differently. Both Ezekiel and 2 Peter in particular (and, to a lesser extent, Jesus) also show a very free retelling of the Sodom story to make their own quite different points.



Are you surprised to find that the main use of the Sodom story in later biblical tradition hardly mentions homosexuality? Are you surprised that the different uses of the story show so much variety? What do you make of Jesus suggesting that the faithless response of his own day is a worse sin? What relevance do you think the story has for today's church?

Specific New Testament texts

Following the interpretation of Genesis has led us into the New Testament. We now need to look at the three specific texts in the New Testament that refer to some form of same sex relations. All three come from writings that bear Paul's name: Romans, 1 Corinthians, and 1 Timothy.

Many people think that First Timothy (as well as the other so-called Pastoral Epistles, 2 Timothy and Titus) is written by someone adapting Paul's teaching, or finishing some uncompleted writings of Paul, possibly after his death, or possibly in his name after conditions of his imprisonment became much stricter. In one sense this matters because it affects the context and therefore the interpretation,

in another sense it doesn't matter because, whoever wrote it, it's still part of the Church's scripture.

The two examples from 1 Corinthians and 1 Timothy have something in common: they are part of what are often called (for obvious reasons) vice lists. Sexual sins clearly play a significant part in these lists, but other sins are equally well featured. Some people see a tradition of interpreting the (second half of) the Ten Commandments here.

Now we know that the law is good, if one uses it legitimately. This means understanding that the law is laid down not for the innocent but for the lawless and disobedient, for the godless and sinful, for the unholy and profane, for those who kill their father or mother, for murderers, fornicators, sodomites, slave traders, liars, perjurers, and whatever else is contrary to the sound teaching that conforms to the glorious gospel of the blessed God, which he entrusted to me. (1 Timothy 1:8-11)

Do you not know that wrongdoers will not inherit the kingdom of God? Do not be deceived! Fornicators, idolaters, adulterers, male prostitutes, sodomites, thieves, the greedy, drunkards, revilers, robbers-- none of these will inherit the kingdom of God. And this is what some of you used to be. But you were washed, you were sanctified, you were justified in the name of the Lord Jesus Christ and in the Spirit of our God. (1 Corinthians 6:9-11)

The word translated as sodomite in both these passages is the same Greek word *arsenokoitai*, whose etymology indicates something like "those (men) who go to bed with men". It's likely that *arsenokoitai* is a made up word, possibly within Jewish or Christian circles (based on the language the Greek Bible used to translate Leviticus), and probably as a term of abuse. Since the first use of the word we know about is in these lists, we don't have much help in finding out whether it had a precise or a general meaning. In practice, 1 Timothy doesn't add anything extra to 1 Corinthians, so here we look to the latter to explore the meaning of the word.

The word in 1 Corinthians 6:9 translated by the NRSV as "male prostitutes" is the Greek word *malakoi*, which etymologically is "soft ones." The idea of prostitution is entirely a matter of interpretation, not translation. The word has a fairly wide range of meaning, but when used negatively suggests effeminate, cowardly, faint-hearted and so on (and thereby reveals also a very clear image of masculinity as strong, brave, etc.) Effeminacy in the Roman world was often attributed to men who were the passive or penetrated partner in anal sex. Being in charge, and penetrating, were part of the image of what a man was.

Because of the way language works, it's almost certain that these two words *malakoi* and *arsenokoitai*, standing next to each other, should interpret each other. Here are some examples of the different ways English versions translate the words:

"nor effeminate, nor abusers of themselves with mankind" (KJV);

"the self-indulgent, sodomites" (NJB);

"nor boy prostitutes nor practicing homosexuals" (NAB);

"nor men who practice homosexuality" (ESV, bringing both words together);

"nor male prostitutes nor homosexual offenders" (NIV);

"sexual pervert" (REB – bringing both words together);

"homosexual perverts" (GNB – bringing both words together).



Some of those interpret more than others. Which do you think translate and which interpret? Which do you prefer and why?

The fact that there are difficulties of translation needs to be noted. Some people have argued that what is in view is the (moderately common) practice in some parts of Graeco-Roman culture that saw the sexual initiation of boys as part of an older man's responsibility and delight. Most, however, agree that more is involved. Where many (but not all Greeks and Romans) would condemn or sneer at only the passive partner (and not the active) in anal sex, these (Jewish-?) Christian vice lists that Paul uses or adapts, condemn the active partner as well.



Do you think these verses can be understood to refer to something both specific and different from anal sex between men? Do you think these verses can refer to other sexual practices in addition to anal sex between men? What reasons might there be for interpreting them differently?

Because these references come in a vice list we can be reasonably certain that they represent a fairly widespread and general attitude. Unfortunately it also means they come with no detailed reflection on why the Jewish tradition and the early church were critical of this among other aspects of the wider world they lived in. Without knowing Paul's reasons, it's much harder for us to understand whether the text relates only to his own cultural world, or also to ours. Clearly he speaks about (at least some forms of) homosexual practice, but there is little clue as to why he says what he does say.

For that reason the remaining text in Romans is the most central to the argument of any of the biblical texts, and more hotly debated.

For the wrath of God is revealed from heaven against all ungodliness and wickedness of those who by their wickedness suppress the truth. For what can be known about God is plain to them, because God has shown it to them. Ever since the creation of the world his eternal power and divine nature, invisible though they are, have been understood and seen through the things he has made. So they are without excuse; for though they knew God, they did not honour him as God or give thanks to him, but they became futile in their thinking, and their senseless minds were darkened. Claiming to be wise, they became fools; and they exchanged the glory of the immortal God for images resembling a mortal human being or birds or four-footed animals or reptiles. Therefore God gave them up in the lusts of their hearts to impurity, to the degrading of their bodies among themselves, because they exchanged the truth about God for a lie and worshipped and served the creature rather than the Creator, who is blessed forever! Amen.

For this reason God gave them up to degrading passions. Their women exchanged natural intercourse for unnatural, and in the same way also the men, giving up natural intercourse with women, were consumed with passion for one another. Men committed shameless acts with men and received in their own persons the due penalty for their error. And since they did not see fit to acknowledge God, God gave them up to a debased mind and to things that should not be done. They were filled with every kind of wickedness, evil, covetousness, malice. Full of envy, murder, strife, deceit, craftiness, they are gossips, slanderers, God-haters, insolent, haughty, boastful, inventors of evil, rebellious toward parents, foolish, faithless, heartless, ruthless. They know God's decree, that those who practice such things deserve to die-- yet they not only do them but even applaud others who practice them. (Romans 1:18-32)

Certainly this is more reflective and part of a broader theological sweep than the simple references of the vice lists. It does show something of how Paul thinks about homosexual behaviour, as well as what he thinks about it. It does not, however, show Paul thinking about how Christians should respond to homosexual behaviour, in the way that, say, he thinks about how Christians should respond to eating food offered to idols, or many other issues. Paul doesn't have to respond theologically or pastorally to the issue in any of his churches, so his references are part of his background thought, not his active, fresh theological thinking.

Here in Romans, Paul's main concern is to get to the point where all his listeners will agree with his main point when he expounds Psalm 14:1-3 / 53:1-3 that "there is no one who is righteous, not even one." (Rom 3:10). The first section of his argument draws on ways in which Jews see the Gentile world, and deliberately echoes a tradition of theological and ethical critique. The passage about

homosexual behaviour falls in this section. This is followed by a section in which typical Gentile criticisms of the Jewish people are listed, and includes some of the basic attitudes of Roman anti-Semitism. His Jewish listeners will agree with the first, his Gentile listeners with the second, and both together will find it harder to resist his conclusion that “all have sinned and fall short of the glory of God.” (Rom 3:23)

For many people the most important thing about this part of Romans is that it locates the issue in a broad theological context of creation and fall. Some people quickly (and without reading it carefully) simply say that it fits in with natural theology. God created humankind as men and women, and nature shows us the natural fit between the respective sexual organs. Moreover, this natural fit is proved by the fact that the command God gives his newly created creatures is the natural end of sexual activity: multiplying the human race. Any other use of the sexual organs belongs to the consequences of the fall, and can clearly be seen to be unnatural. It is this natural theology, reinforced by the scriptures, that continues to lie at the heart of the Roman Catholic teaching that every sexual encounter or act must (from a human point of view) be left open to the possibility of conception (even if in reality, as for Abraham and Sarah, old age means miraculous intervention is required). Opposition to both homosexual activity and contraception form a seamless whole. Now while Paul probably did think something quite like this, it's not precisely what he says here.



How much do you think this view of what is natural actually affects what you or others think? Are “natural” and “unnatural” simple concepts - can we simply agree with Paul that same-sex intercourse is unnatural (and intercourse between men and women natural) while disagreeing with his view that long hair on a man is unnatural (see 1 Corinthians 11:14)? Do views on what is “natural” change from culture to culture?

Paul's argument here is somewhat different. It can be put like this: the knowledge of God is available to everyone through creation, but rather than worship the true God, the Gentiles turned to worship idols, and chose the creation over the creator (a very strong theme in Jewish thought through the prophets to the book of Wisdom). Instead of standing as the image of God to represent the divine Creator to the rest of creation, which is the human vocation, they chose instead to admire, worship and copy the non-human world instead of stewarding it in God's name.

So God let them reap the punishment of becoming less human. Instead of controlling their passions, they became controlled by their passions. (In the way he expresses his thinking he also shows some affinity with the Stoic tradition of

Greek thought, for whom control of the passions is fundamental to proper human living.) Instead of sharing in creation through children, they turned their sexuality into barren and fruitless same-sex engagements. Instead of living in a harmonious world, they began to engage in every kind of factionalism and discord. And so on.

The sins they engaged in show how far from God they are, and are at once both their own punishment (because it makes them less than human) and at the same time deserving of further punishment. But the root of this sinfulness is not lust, passion, or anything to do with sex, it is idolatry. Homosexual behaviour for Paul is certainly a consequence of turning away from God, and perhaps also (though more debatable) proof that someone has turned away from God. The world we experience is not the world as it is meant to be.



Can you simply take an argument from creation (e.g. God made me this way) without also listening to ideas of Fall (e.g. The way things are isn't the way they're meant to be)? If Paul is quite clear that idolatry is the fundamental sin, does that commit us to seeing homosexual behaviour as proof of living apart from God, or are there other (more, equally, or less) fundamental ways in which idolatry needs to be addressed in our society? Is sexual activity, or a sexual relationship something our society does put in the place of God as the means to fulfilment and happiness?



How do you think Paul would respond to Christians who pray, worship, meet for the Eucharist, read the Bible, help their neighbour, visit the sick, comfort the dying, and in virtually every respect show that they are worshippers of the one true God and not idolaters, and yet are in a same-sex relationship? What would he make of them? What does their existence do to his theology?

Taking the texts together

One of the features of the temptations of Jesus is that the devil tries to tempt Jesus by quoting the Bible (Matthew 4:6, Luke 4:10) giving rise to the proverbial saying that "The devil can quote scripture for his purpose." Looking at the specific texts we have examined is not enough for Christians, nor is quoting them in isolation the equivalent of proving a point. They raise as many questions for us, as we have for them. However, it may be worth pausing for a moment to see if looking at these texts has changed anything.



Have you found new questions you want to reflect on? Are there any old questions you have that you think these texts have helped to answer? Are there any points on which you know you need to think further? Are there any issues on which you've changed your mind?



It can fairly be said that insofar as the individual texts talk about any aspect of same-sex activity that they know about, they speak very negatively. Is, as some people say, this negative view sufficient to allow us to say the same with any clarity? Is, as other people say, the difference between what these texts appear to refer to, and the experience of gay men and women wishing to share their lives in a stable committed relationship so great a difference as to make these texts (almost) irrelevant to today's questions? Or is there a position between these two views?

Moving beyond specific texts

Traditionally Anglicans have appealed to Scripture, Tradition and Reason. We should, as a purely practical matter, probably need to add experience to that list as well. However, these are not all the same kind of thing. Anglican tradition, unlike other forms of Protestantism, has never seen Scripture standing alone (*sola Scriptura*) but unlike other forms of Catholicism, it has seen it as standing supreme (*suprema Scriptura*). This is the traditional middle way (*via media*) of Anglicans between Puritans and Roman Catholics. Tradition, Reason and Experience are related to Scripture as means of recognising and appropriating it truthfully and faithfully rather than as equal authorities standing alongside it. We need to look a little more at each of these in turn, not exhaustively, but by pulling out a few examples of the kind of questions we need to pursue.

Scripture

There are a range of other scriptural themes that people can and do draw on to place alongside these texts, and put them, as it were, in different frames. Here are two that have often been referred to.

Marriage and celibacy

Some people turn to the teaching on marriage. Between the texts of God creating man and woman in his image and likeness, and the time of Jesus, there is not a

huge amount of discussion of or support for heterosexual monogamy in the Bible. The varied forms of sexual encounter are as likely to fall outside that pattern as within it, sometimes specifically held up as sin, but quite often not. We really have to wait until the New Testament for this to be presented as clear teaching.

In, for example Matthew 19:3-12, Jesus puts the creation story at the heart of his teaching on divorce, and the various ways in which the gospels record that teaching, and reactions to it, suggest how radical he was being in his view of marriage. The Law, that regulated divorce, is treated by Jesus' not as God's Law, but as Moses' pragmatic acknowledgement of human sinfulness. Rather than being regulated, divorce is condemned by Jesus so severely that the first reaction of his disciples is "Well, if it's that hard to get out of a marriage, we'd be better not marrying." While, elsewhere, the New Testament softens this blow a little (and also opens up Jesus' saying on divorce to more possible interpretations), it is generally committed to stable families and monogamous relationships.

While Jesus intensifies marriage as far as the divorce law goes, in another dispute he relativises it. When the Sadducees present the law of levirate marriage (marrying your brother's wife to perpetuate the family's life and inheritance) as an argument against the resurrection, Jesus sees them off in short order: "For in the resurrection they neither marry nor are given in marriage, but are like angels in heaven". (Matthew 22:30) Luke gives a longer version of the tradition: "Those who belong to this age marry and are given in marriage; but those who are considered worthy of a place in that age and in the resurrection from the dead neither marry nor are given in marriage. Indeed they cannot die any more, because they are like angels and are children of God, being children of the resurrection." (Luke 20:34-36) It is in part this idea that marriage belongs to this age that makes celibacy a genuine option for those like Jesus and Paul who proclaim the presence among us of the age to come, the kingdom of God.



If we take teaching on marriage as fundamental to our overview of sexuality, how do we manage to insist on what the Bible appears to say about homosexuality, while setting aside Jesus' teaching on marriage and divorce?

What does this tradition of marriage being dissolved at death say about all those tombstones engraved "Together again" - has our church overvalued marriage in a way that makes singleness harder to bear - and therefore something much harder to present positively to gay (and straight) people as a fulfilling way of life?

The clearest alternative to marriage, especially seen as sign of the coming of God, is celibacy. Jesus lived in this way, and Paul is proud of his living a celibate life. But part of his teaching is that: "I wish that all were as I myself am. But each has a particular gift from God, one having one kind and another a different kind." (1 Corinthians 7:7) For him celibacy is a gift, a charisma, to rank alongside tongues, prophecy, healing and the rest. He goes on: "To the unmarried and the widows I say that it is well for them to remain unmarried as I am. But if they are not practising self-control, they should marry. For it is better to marry than to be aflame with passion." (1 Corinthians 7:8-9) We saw in Romans how control of the passions is a sign of humanness, and being controlled by your passions a fruit of idolatry. Here marriage is portrayed rather negatively as a way of controlling passion within a framework for those who can't otherwise manage the task for they have not been given the right gift.

We must also note Jesus' own celibacy. How much we should see Jesus as an example here is an important question. Without a doubt, Jesus (for us who believe in him as both fully divine and fully human) by his example makes it quite clear that a full and fulfilled human life does not require anyone to be in a sexual relationship. He seems to find the intimacy he needs from friendships with both women and men among his disciples, and from his felt relationship in prayer with his Father in heaven. Many people who have followed him in the celibate life have also found enough of their needs for intimacy met through friendship, community, and prayer. At the same time, Jesus lived in expectation of the imminently arriving kingdom, and died in his early thirties, never having had to face the possibility of an old age that was both partnerless and childless, in a society where "living alone" in the modern sense was almost unheard of.



Do you think celibacy is valued as a gift in today's church?

How important for you is the example of Jesus in thinking about celibacy?

How many sermons or talks have you heard encouraging straight people to commit themselves to lifelong celibacy? Indeed, how often have you heard sermons on sexual abstinence more generally? If it is a freely given gift from God, how can it be assumed that God automatically gives it to gay people? If a gay person hasn't received the gift of celibacy, what should they do when the advice to a straight person is "it is better to marry than to be aflame with passion"?

Intimacy and community

One of the stories that is often mentioned in this context is that of David and Jonathan. (The story stretches over several chapters but among the key passages are 1 Samuel 18:1-4; 19:1-7, and 20:11-17.) Apart from one possible hint which comes as the views of an angry Saul, determined to get rid of David, and does not necessarily reflect what the narrator thought, there is little to suggest a physical relationship. (The possible hint comes in 20:30 – “Do I not know that you have chosen the son of Jesse to your own shame, and to the shame of your mother’s nakedness?” – the language here, together with the Saul calling Jonathan “you son of a rebellious slut” (NJB) seems to have sexual connotations, though they may just be part of Saul’s rhetoric of abuse, not evidence of any sexual relationship) Generally, however, the story is told as one of surpassing friendship and intimacy.



Do you read the story of David and Jonathan as one of platonic or sexual intimacy? What, if any part does it play in your thinking? How much are we easily able to think about valuing intimate same-sex friendship without reading (post-Freud) a sexual relationship into it?

In common with most forms of traditional culture, the culture of the Bible, both Old and New Testaments, values friendship and intimacy between men. Jesus has his close companions among the disciples, and Paul has his range of fellow missionaries and young men in training. Paul’s communities as a sign of their close-knit relationships are instructed to exchange the kiss which signals family intimacy with one another, and this probably (given the culture) indicates not men and women kissing each other in greeting, but men kissing men, and women kissing women. The family itself is a very different, hierarchically structured, and very extended grouping. By and large, a wife and husband were not expected to be, and were not, each others’ closest friends and confidant(e)s. Except for sexual relations, most other forms of intimacy were between people of the same sex.



If we say that intimacy can be physical and sexual, physical and non-sexual, emotional and spiritual, how do we respond to the world of the Bible where sexual intimacy belonged to marriage, but other forms of intimacy were as likely or more likely to be found outside marriage? In today’s world we often expect one relationship to fulfil all those needs. How do these very different perspectives affect our views about say, two women or two men setting up a home together?

Other themes

There are far more, and larger themes than these. Many people wish to point to Jesus' concern for the marginalised, and his desire to invite them into the kingdom of God. So they argue, the Church should be including gay and lesbian people as God's children. Others want instead to point to the radical demands Jesus makes on those who do join him. Inclusivity, or demanding behaviour?

Others again want to point to the way in which all creation is marred by the fall (whether they take it literally or metaphorically). They point to the way in which heterosexual relationships are far from perfect, and the Old Testament gives a great many examples! Calling on Jesus' summary of the commandments as love of God and love of neighbour, they argue that the test is not whether the relationships are heterosexual or homosexual in the end that counts, but whether they are loving in the kind of way that opens them up to become a sacrament of God's healing and transforming love, and his open-ended commitment to the world he created.

Again starting from the viewpoint of creation and fall, some people want to say that homosexual relationships are indeed one of the signs of that fall, because before the fall the only sexual relationship was man and woman. But from that starting point, some will go on to say that they therefore should have no place in a redeemed community, and others that if a person is incapable, because of the effects of the fall, of entering into a heterosexual relationship, then part of the way of redemption is to follow the pattern of intimacy with the other overcoming estrangement from the other that marriage provides, by entering into a committed relationship. Others again will say that it is precisely because sexual intimacy is about overcoming otherness that it belongs between men and women, and is not the same thing as sexual intimacy between those who are the same, whether men with men, and women with women. Others again will say there's far more otherness between individuals than between genders, and so it is a redeeming relationship for both straight and gay people.



These are just a few of the larger themes that people use from the Bible to think their way through the questions, and help make sense of the isolated texts. Which larger themes do you tend to turn to? Which ones do you think are irrelevant? Do you think that people who hold a different view from your own are still reading and trying to be faithful to the Bible, or trying to find a way to fit the Bible into their own views? Do you choose your themes to support a position you've already taken? Do others do the same?

Tradition, Reason and Experience

We need to make a clear distinction between traditions (the things the church has “always” done – though “always” can often mean “for the last few centuries, at least in this church”), and Tradition, which is the broad stream of Christian reading Scripture, doing theology, and living out faith in practice that has been seriously reflected on. Small “t” traditions sometimes become the basis of big “T” Tradition, sometimes drop out entirely, and sometimes continue to be things that the Church does but has never seriously thought about.

Sometimes the Tradition changes in the light of changing circumstances and new questions. For example, the Church had generally rejected loaning money at interest. As the nature of the European economy changed from rural to urban, and a new class of merchants and bankers came into being, so the Church slowly found itself adapting and changing its long standing teaching. What was once regarded as sinful (and unbiblical) is today regarded as normal. Or again, different views of slavery increasingly came to the forefront at a time when European thought was increasingly moving (very slowly) towards a concept of human rights. Here what was once regarded as normal (and biblical) came to be regarded as sinful.



How much do you think the Church has let, does let, and should let its interpretation of the Bible be moulded by cultural change? And how much should the Church struggle to mould the culture through careful use of the Bible? Does tradition help these processes? How much do both processes go on at the same time?

Partly because the pace of change has accelerated so rapidly, and partly because traditional Christian thought is no longer of any great influence in society at large, modern life is throwing up an increasing number of questions where the Church is having to re-evaluate. Are things it has “always” done and said actually right? Which “traditions” really should be part of “Tradition” and which should not? The view that the Church’s traditional anti-Semitism needs to be repentantly expunged from the Tradition has only in recent decades become generally taught. Views on the place of women are still convulsing and dividing the Church, and different churches are proceeding at very different speeds, and giving different answers. Views on homosexuality have only started being addressed. History gives very little reason for thinking they will be easily or quickly resolved.

There’s little doubt that the general traditions of the Church have been more or less hostile to homosexual behaviour, even though different historical periods have seen greater or lesser tolerance of it. Equally, most of the Christian tradition has

been more suspicious of, or hostile to, sexual activity in general, often regarding marriage as a lower estate than celibacy, and promoting celibacy as a high and holy calling. Being faithfully married for life was a social duty, being faithfully celibate for life was a path to sainthood. It is important to read the traditions about homosexual behaviour in the light of this broader range of views and not in isolation.



What do you think about the importance of Tradition? What do you think of the distinction above between “traditions” and “Tradition”? Do you think today’s discussions have anything to learn from the examples of changing attitudes usury, slavery, or anti-Semitism - are they comparable or completely different? Do you think it was easier for the church to condemn homosexual practice when it exalted celibacy? Do you think modern views of the importance of sexual enjoyment for human fulfilment raise new questions for traditional views? Do you think the traditional views of the church especially about restraint, discipline and celibacy, raise some serious questions about modern cultural views of sexual fulfilment?

We reflect on both Scripture and Tradition using our reason to try to work our understandings into a coherent and persuasive whole. But reason involves more than that: it is fundamentally an attitude that reasoning is part of what it means to be made in the image of God (through the logos, the “word” or “reason” of God), and also a conviction that all truth is God’s truth. What we discover to be true through our observation of the world, and our thinking and reflection about it, needs to be worked into a coherent whole with what we have learnt through Scripture and Tradition.

While it is clear that more work needs to be done, there is a growing consensus based on observation that being physically and psychologically attracted to the same sex, and unable to form a physical or psychological attraction to the opposite sex, is something that most gay people have no choice about. There is still debate about how much of that is genetic, how much is due to hormonal balances in the mother’s womb, and how much to psychological factors in early childhood. There may well be more than one factor operating. It is also the experience of many gay and lesbian people (though not all) that from the first moment they became aware of themselves as sexual beings, they were aware that unlike most of their peers, they were attracted to people of the same sex.

We may know more science than we did, but science is provisional, and keeps evolving. While it is important that we are informed, we should not expect it to provide us with any easy answers, or an absolutely certain knowledge. Nonetheless,

everything we know points to a different understanding to that commonly held in the past, not least by those who lived in biblical times.

In those days, it was thought that a man chose to have sex with another man rather than with a woman, and it was simply that men were men, and women were women. There was no sense that some men might be homosexual, and incapable by nature of a sexual relationship with a woman; they were just men behaving badly. In contemporary understanding, it remains true that everyone has a rational choice to make about how they will act sexually (though sexual choices are often amongst the least rational we make). What is different is that by understanding some people to be gay or lesbian, we see different choices (and those choices differently) to the choices the biblical writers thought were involved.

We also have a significantly different understanding of human biology. The most widely held view in the ancient world was that the energy that activated life came from the man. The woman was essentially a passive incubator for life which grew from male seed. (The man was the efficient cause of new life, the woman only the material cause) This (though it was by no means the only factor) helped shape the ancient view of what a man was and what a woman was. It was possible for both Aristotle in the Greek world, and Aquinas following him in the medieval Christian world to hold that a woman was essentially a less perfect or defective man. This was one (but only one) of the reasons why it was shameful for a man to act sexually in a woman's role: it was distorting male perfection.



How big a place does scientific knowledge play in your thinking, or in debates you have heard? How much do you think modern knowledge should be taken into account? Do you think it makes a difference to moral choices? Do you think it makes us (or should make us) read the Bible differently?

Finally, we need also to briefly consider experience. Taking experience into account is always a risky business: there are as many people who would say it can seriously lead us astray as those who say that it is about being open to the Spirit of God. But in practice, our experience does affect how we read the Bible, and how we think about it. At the beginning of the 20th century, the experience of the early Pentecostal Christians meant that they read the passages about spiritual gifts quite differently from the rest of the church. Much of their new reading has been widely accepted. Some (such as teaching about a second baptism) has been equally widely rejected. A lifelong Anglican and a lifelong Baptist will read stories in the New Testament about households being baptised quite differently. For

the Anglican it will include the baptism of babies, for the Baptist the baptism of children old enough to profess their own faith. Neither the modern Anglican or modern Baptist will normally consider that it includes the baptism of slaves, whose personal views weren't important.

Gay Christians' own experience, and other Christians' experience of gay friends and family members is a significant contribution to the ways in which the Church thinks about this. At one level it is quite extraordinary, given the long-standing hostility there has been within many parts of the Church, just how many gay Christians there are. Even more extraordinary is God seems to go on calling many of them to ordination, at least in their own and the Church's discernment of that vocation. Whereas for the biblical writers (and for many contemporary Christians in other cultures) it was quite clear that homosexual behaviour was something that was for "them – those outside," for many contemporary Western Christians, gay people are also "us – fellow Christians."

A conservative Christian parent whose child is gay may choose to ban their child from their house (some do), or find that their own views are being challenged because their love for their child is as fundamental as their love of the God they meet in the Bible (some have).

A Christian may spend many years struggling with admitting to themselves or to others that they are gay. Some do so, and then reject the Church entirely as a consequence. Some do so, and struggle to live by the Church's traditional teaching. Some do so, and embrace the Church's traditional teaching as a way of freedom. Some do so, and understand a faithful gay relationship as a vocational path God has given them, and they reinterpret Church teaching in the process. All are shaped by their experience, but not all respond to it in the same way. It does, however, make a significant impact on their understanding.



What part has your experience played in reaching whatever views you hold? In what ways has your experience of reading the Bible helped shape your views of the Bible? What role do you think experience ought to play?



How many gay or lesbian people do you know? Would you know if someone was gay or lesbian? Are you the sort of person who people would be able to be honest with about their sexuality? How does (or how would) your personal experience of knowing gay or lesbian people affect your views?

A final word

We regularly say after readings of Scripture: “This is the Word of the Lord.” It is the overwhelming testimony and experience of generations of Christians, however differently they think about it, that their reading of, listening to and reflecting on the Bible has led them to hear and respond to a God who speaks to them through the words of its human writers. The weight of teaching and tradition makes it very easy for us to hear only some parts of scripture. In this debate, it is easy to hear the many very frequent warnings to Israel that she must not become like the other nations (which we must still take seriously). So, just as we began with one story from the Bible that is not usually employed in this debate, we end with another.

The writer of the books of Chronicles gives a more elaborate account of the death of King Josiah than that found in the earlier books of Kings.

After all this, when Josiah had set the temple in order, King Neco of Egypt went up to fight at Carchemish on the Euphrates, and Josiah went out against him. But Neco sent envoys to him, saying, “What have I to do with you, king of Judah? I am not coming against you today, but against the house with which I am at war; and God has commanded me to hurry. Cease opposing God, who is with me, so that he will not destroy you.” But Josiah would not turn away from him, but disguised himself in order to fight with him. He did not listen to the words of Neco from the mouth of God, but joined battle in the plain of Megiddo. The archers shot King Josiah; and the king said to his servants, “Take me away, for I am badly wounded.” So his servants took him out of the chariot and carried him in his second chariot and brought him to Jerusalem. There he died, and was buried in the tombs of his ancestors. All Judah and Jerusalem mourned for Josiah. (2 Chronicles 35:20-24; compare 2 Kings 23:29-30)

Josiah is judged by the biblical writers as one of the faithful Kings of Israel who faithfully follows Yahweh and his ways. For the English Reformers his promulgation of the book of Deuteronomy and his major reforms of Israelite worship provided the model of what they thought in their day they were doing for the Church in England, rediscovering the authority of the Bible and implementing it, just as Josiah rediscovered and implemented the book of the Law in his day. King Edward VI was hailed by Cranmer as the new Josiah.

Yet in this story, Josiah, who had learnt to listen faithfully and implement the teaching of the book of the Law as the word of God to Israel, is unable to hear the word of the Lord when it comes to him from a different source.. One of Israel's traditional enemies, Egypt, starts marching their armies up through Israel on their way to fight another of Israel's enemies, Assyria. Deeply concerned by this

incursion into his territory, Israel's King decides he must try to stop the Egyptian army marching through (or as he sees it, against) Israel. Pharaoh tells Josiah that God has commanded him to fight Assyria, and to get a move on, and tells Josiah that Israel will be safe from his army, and if Josiah tries to stop Pharaoh Neco and his army, he will actually be opposing God.

It's hardly surprising that Josiah does not believe his traditional pagan enemy can actually mean him no harm, far less be doing what Israel's God commands. But the Chronicler tells us Josiah was wrong. Neco is actually carrying out God's will. The problem is that Josiah "did not listen to the words of Neco from the mouth of God." And so he dies unnecessarily in battle. A man accustomed to listening to the word of God in the expected place, the authoritative book of the Law, is unable to hear it when it comes from an unlikely source.

Josiah cannot believe that someone who is both a worshipper of other gods, someone who is an enemy of Israel and her faith, could possibly be carrying out the will of God, or speak the word of God. On most occasions, Josiah would have been entirely right. But on this occasion he was wrong. The pagan enemy of Israel was doing God's work and speaking God's word.

