



Listening for the truth in love

**Worcester Diocesan Listening Process
on Human Sexuality**



A lesbian/gay affirmative approach to Scripture

**Reclaiming the Bible as a means of liberation instead of control,
of outreach instead of exclusion.**

In the Old Testament...

...the love of David and Jonathan, and of Ruth for Naomi, offer two examples of same-sex relationships which may or may not have had sexual overtones.

The story of David and Jonathan is told in 1 Samuel 18: 1-9; 19: 1-10; the whole of chapter 20; and reaches its tragic conclusion in the first chapter of 2 Samuel. David and Jonathan were two men dedicated to each other with passionately strong commitment. The yearning desire and delight of the relationship are highlighted in 1 Samuel 18:1; 19:1, 20:17 and in 2 Samuel 1:26. In other contexts where the Hebrew words occur, sometimes the implication is sexual, sometimes not. In the Song of Songs the words are used in the explicitly sexual declarations of a woman to a man, and a man to a woman.

The story of Ruth and Naomi is told in the Book of Ruth—especially the first chapter. Ruth was deeply attached to Naomi and expressed her commitment in an outpouring so powerful it has been compared to marriage vows (1:16-17). When Ruth clung to Naomi (1:14) the Hebrew word is the same as is used in Genesis 2: 24 (“a man...clings to his wife”). As the provider of food, Ruth acts towards Naomi as a husband would do, and the phrase “A son has been born to Naomi” (4:17) treats her and Ruth as if they were a married couple.

Sexual connotations cannot be ruled in or out of these texts, but they provide for male/male and female/female relationships models of fidelity, commitment and self-sacrificing devotion.

Also in the Old Testament...

...the depravity of Sodom and the regulations on sexual relationships apparently condemn homosexual relationships.

The story of Sodom is told in Genesis 19:1-11 and it has often been cited to justify intolerance of gays. But the abhorrence expressed may be directed towards the abuse of hospitality in the ill-treatment by hosts of their guests. Also, it is difficult to draw conclusions about present-day consensual same-sex relationships from an ancient account of gang rape.

The strictures about sex in Leviticus 18 were framed for a time and a society completely different from our own. The reference to homosexuality in 18:22 is sandwiched between the prohibition of child sacrifice in verse 21 and of bestiality in verse 23. All three arise out of a revulsion at heathen cultic

practices utterly irrelevant to our own time and circumstances. We do not put homosexual people to death (20:13).

In the New Testament...

Jesus in the Gospels says nothing about homosexuality, though there is an intriguing possibility in Matthew 8: 5-13 (The Healing of a Roman Officer's Servant). The Greek translated 'servant' in 8:5 means 'beloved boy'. Did Jesus commend the faith of the master and heal the servant, aware of a homosexual relationship between them?

Jesus did do and say much about vulnerable people, and may himself have grown up on the margins of society, if his carpenter father was a peasant dispossessed of his land. Both a collaborator (Matthew the tax-collector) and a freedom fighter (Simon the zealot) find a place within his chosen disciples. The Samaritan leper (Luke 17:11-19) is doubly oppressed, until Jesus makes this outsider an insider. In Luke, 13:10-17, Jesus enables a crippled woman quite literally to hold her head up high, taking a view in conscience about the Sabbath which showed his God turned towards her, whereas the equally conscientious leader of the synagogue would have shown her a God turned away from her. The unconditional welcome of the Loving Parent of us all is supremely depicted in the Parable of the Prodigal Son (Luke 15:11-32). In the attitude of the elder son there is a warning for the Church.

Jesus' opponents in the Gospels were often preoccupied with questions of purity, exclusiveness and the holiness of God. This contrasts with Jesus' own concern with those looked on as dirt, with inclusiveness and with the astounding mercy of God.

Paul in his letters appears several times to condemn homosexual relationships (Romans 1: 26-27; 1 Corinthians 6:9; and 1 Timothy 1:9,10). As we try to understand these texts we need to bear in mind that:

- translation can obscure rather than elucidate meaning;
- the context is invective against surrounding heathen culture (like Leviticus in the Old Testament);
- Paul was no more capable of envisaging today's committed same-sex civil partnerships than Luke the Physician was of anticipating organ transplant surgery.

The Greek words *malakoi*, *arsenokoitai* and *pornoï* used in these verses

variously refer to men abusing boys, masters abusing slaves, men posing as women, pimps, prostitutes and their clients. Today's lesbians and gays entering stable, unique, faithful, mature, consensual, committed relationships are likely to be insulted if references to them are read back into these texts.

But we should not assume on the basis of these verses that Paul was 'homophobic'. If he were alive today, would he have added 'there is no longer straight or gay' to his list of those between whom there is no difference (Galatians 3:28) and ended as before, 'for all of you are one in Christ Jesus'?

Finally, from the Acts of the Apostles

A hopeful model for a Spirit-led Church

In Acts 10: 1 to 11:18, Peter has a vision in which his Jewish definition of what is clean and unclean is challenged. The horror in Peter's reaction to the prospect of eating 'unclean' food (God forbid!) is akin to the revulsion some people feel at contemplating homosexual love-making. The command of the voice from heaven ("Do not call anything impure that God has made clean") resonates with the situation of would-be gay Christians today as it did with the position of the Gentile Cornelius then. Peter takes a leap of faith and removes any obstacle to membership, ending his justification of his actions to the rest of the Church with the words '...who was I that I could hinder God?'

As more and more non-Jews become Christians, a Council is held at Jerusalem to review the situation. Some are for imposing circumcision as a condition of membership. Peter argues passionately for unconditional acceptance. Again, what resonance there is for gay people in his words, '...why are you putting God to the test by placing on the neck of the disciples a yoke that neither our ancestors nor we have been able to bear?'

Pragmatic institution as it has always been, the Church reaches a compromise and imposes a lesser condition (Acts 15:20). Two thousand years later, does the international, multicultural Church still impose even that condition? Should it now deny intimacy with God to any who are on the margins of its life?

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