

## What does the Bible really teach about same sex relationships?

Last week when the British tennis player Joanna Konta reached the Australian Open semi-final one commentator joked that the last time this happened Elton John was married to a woman. His point was that a whole lot has changed in the UK since 1983. The age of consent for hetero and homosexual sex has been equalised, we now have civil partnerships and even civil marriages of same-sex partners and there are broadcasters, footballers, MPs and even rugby players who are openly gay.

And it's not just society that has changed. The American Anglican Church now ordains actively gay clergy and blesses same-sex weddings, with the Canadian church not far behind. In many countries across the world sexual ethics are changing fast and there is huge pressure from outside and from revisionists within the Church of England to fall in line with the rest of society.

That's why the Archbishop of Canterbury called the meeting with all the other archbishops from across the Anglican Communion a few weeks ago. Their decision to reaffirm the traditional understanding of marriage and the Bible's teaching on same-sex relationships led not just to the suspension of the American Anglican Church but also to a huge amount of anger being directed at Archbishop Justin and the others. You may have seen the letter in the Comet a few weeks ago, or read one of the many articles in the newspapers, or on various websites condemning their decisions.

It's also increasingly becoming a personal issue. Many of you, like me, will have family members who are in same sex relationships, or who have friends who are gay, lesbian or bi-sexual.

Against this background it seems to be getting harder and harder to stand up for what the church has always taught and when we find ourselves swimming against the stream of public opinion we need to be certain that what we have been brought up to believe is the truth. That's why today I want to give a whole sermon to deal with the issue of same-sex relationships. But before we come to look at what the Bible says about same-sex relationships it's important that we establish six key truths that will be the foundation for what comes next.

### **6 Foundation Stones:**

**1: This is God's world:** God made the world, he sustains the world and so he, rather than us, is the one who gets to set the parameters about which things are morally right and wrong.

**2: We can trust the Bible:** The Bible is God's inspired and reliable Word which tells us the truth about God, ourselves, and how we as God's creations need to relate to him. And because the Bible is God's Word it is equally relevant to every age, so when our opinions contradict the Bible, it is we who need to change.

**3: God's character is good:** Through the pages of the Bible, through God's words as well as God's actions, we can see that God is good, holy, righteous, loving, merciful and gracious. Therefore we have no reason to doubt the wisdom and goodness of his commands, even if we don't like them.

**4: We are all sinners:** As well as proclaiming God's holiness and righteousness the Bible is also clear that all human beings fall short of God's standards. We are all sinners so we all need a saviour. So there is no room for throwing stones or pointing fingers at others or speaking of gay or lesbian people with vitriol or condescension. Too many Christians, and too many church leaders, have done that in the past and caused great hurt and pushed people away from Jesus. We need to be humble and honest and recognise that we are all sinners.

**5: Actions not orientation:** As we go through the scriptures we need to keep in mind that what the Bible speaks about is same-sex sex and activity which can be controlled, not homosexual orientation which can't.

**6: No one is beyond God's forgiveness:** The great news of the gospel is that however we fall and fail to live by God's standards, God will forgive us if we come to him in true repentance and faith. The blood of Jesus can purge every stain so no one is beyond forgiveness.

As we go on to consider what the Bible does say about same-sex relationships, it is vital that we remember those six points.

**So what does the Bible say** about same-sex relationships? One of the arguments that revisionists use is that the Bible doesn't really say very much about homosexuality and that Jesus never mentions it at all. And because of that, they argue that homosexuality isn't much of a big deal so it's okay for Christians today to change what has been the settled and clear teaching of the Christian church for 19 ½ centuries.

Now it is true that the Bible doesn't say a lot about homosexuality. In fact there are really only six passages in the entire Bible which talk about it, and none of those are in the Gospels. But what we will see is that the Bible's view about same-sex sex is consistent through both the Old and the New Testaments. Same-sex relationships may be a hot moral topic today but that was not the case at the time of Jesus or the centuries before and after. That's why the Bible is largely quiet on the same-sex sex, because everyone understood what God thought about the issue.

So I want to look very briefly, and it will be very briefly, at all of those passages of Scripture so we can see what the Bible says on this issue. But I want to start with a few thoughts on Genesis 1 and 2, because it's there that God establishes his pattern for human relationships.

To turn to page 4 of your Bibles, Genesis 1 and 2, and will see God's creation design for men and women.

### **Genesis 1 and 2 – God's Creation Design for Men & Women**

Much of society thinks that God hates sex, but nothing could be further from the truth. Sex was very much God's idea in fact in Genesis chapter 1 verse 28 He commands human beings to have lots of sex so they would be fruitful and fill the world and subdue it.

But the Bible has a lot more to say about sex than just as an act of reproduction. Throughout chapter 2 we find that God had placed the man he created in a beautiful paradise we call the Garden of Eden. There he had everything he needed and wanted except that he was alone. Dogs may be called man's best friend, but they are not the right kind of companion for life. So from verse 21 onwards we read how God created woman, made from the flesh of the man, but different to him, to be his companion, lover, helper and friend. And that section concludes with these words in verse 24: verse 21, *"That is why a man leaves his father and mother and is united to his wife, and they become one flesh."*

You see the kind of human sexual relationships that God created and blessed is that between a man and a woman. You see the man and the woman are similar, made of the same stuff, but different, so sex between a man and a woman is more than a union, it's a re-union. That's why there is a complementarity found in male-female sexual relationships which is not found in even the most loving and committed same-sex relationships. And that isn't just a physical complementarity, but one that is written into the fabric of creation. And of course God's creation mandate to fill the world and subdue it is only possible when there is sex between a man and a woman.

But let's be clear here, this isn't just speaking about any kind of heterosexual encounters. When verse 24 speaks of a man leaving his father and mother and being united to his wife it is talking about marriage. Right from Genesis 2, the Bible is clear that the only place for sexual intimacy is in a marriage between a man and a woman meaning that sex outside of marriage, whether casual or in a committed relationship, is sinful.

Jesus may not speak about same-sex sex in explicit terms, but in Matthew chapter 19 he restates that God's design for marriage is between a man and a woman which should be for life. And of course as we read through the New Testament we see that marriage is also a picture of the Church and Christ; each part different and belonging to each other but neither interchangeable. That is something that cannot be pictured in terms of a marital union without the differentiation of male and female.

Now there are some huge issues here which I have only scratched the surface of, but I hope you can see that when the Bible speaks about sexual relationships they are always within the context of heterosexual marriage. That is God's design. That is God's plan. And anything else is a distortion of God's perfect creation. And that is certainly what the Bible teaches when homosexuality comes to the fore. So flick on to Genesis chapter 19 on page 19 of your Bibles.

### **Genesis 19 – Sodom and Gomorrah**

I'm not going to read the account to you, but it's clear from the verses 4 & 5 that this was not a good place to spend the night. Lot takes in two visitors and when evening falls all the men from every part of the city of Sodom come and bang on his door and demand that he hands over his visitors so they can have sex with them. This is a horrifying aggressive rape that is being planned, not by one or two, but by the whole city.

Now of course this is very different from this kind of behaviour to the kind of loving and faithful same-sex relationships we may know amongst our friends and family, but when you read through other parts of Scripture, and writings from before the time of Jesus, it's clear that Sodom and Gomorrah were known as cities where sexual immorality, including homosexual behaviour, was commonplace. So the book of Jude verse 7 says this *"in a similar way, 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."* What was condemned and dramatically judged by God wasn't just the violence of Sodom and Gomorrah's inhabitants, but the nature of their cravings as well- including their same sex relationships.

Now if same-sex relationships were going to be condemned by God you would expect to see them in the Old Testament Law and that is what we find. So turn over to page 120 and Leviticus chapter 18.

### **Leviticus 18 + 20 – The Law**

Chapter 18 verse 22 says this *"do not have sexual relations with a man as one does with a woman; that is detestable."* This verse is part of a whole chapter which sets parameters for acceptable sexual behaviour amongst God's people because God's people should live by different standards to the rest of the world. The first part of the chapter lists sexual relationships that are too close to be allowed - with sisters, mothers and close relatives- nothing we would object to there. Neither would we have a problem with God condemning adultery, ritual sexual activity or bestiality. But verse 22 prohibiting same-sex sex, well, that raises many a hackle doesn't it.

Flip over to chapter 20 verse 13 and in the chapter which deals with the punishments for such crimes you'll see that once again same-sex sex is condemned and that the punishment God gave is severe. That's

because sexual sin matters to God. It isn't just a personal thing. We can't say "I'm not harming anyone else; it's just a private matter." If we are following Jesus as our Lord and saviour, and remember these were laws for God's people, then sex can only be within heterosexual marriage.

Some people have suggested that we should dismiss the book of Leviticus both because of the harshness of the sentences for these sins and because there are so many other laws in Leviticus that we ignore, such as not allowing fields to be sown with two kinds of crops or clothing to be made of two kinds of fibres.

So let me deal with those issues now.

Firstly, since Jesus came the way we treat the Old Testament has changed- but that doesn't mean we can ignore it. Jesus himself said that he came to fulfil the law, not to abolish it. So we don't worry about the Old Testament commands about ritual purity which allowed Old Testament believers to approach God, or the sacrifices which they needed to make to deal with their sin, because they are all fulfilled by Jesus' death on the cross in our place. But Jesus never did away with the moral law in fact he upheld it and lived by it and then commanded his followers to do the same. So the 10 Commandments still apply to Christians. We are still to love our neighbours as ourselves and we are still to abide by God's standards on sexual ethics because God is a holy God and if we are his people we should be like him.

And secondly we need to understand that the civil penalties for these sins do not necessarily apply either. These commands were given to God's people who were living under God's law in God's land. They were living in a theocracy so their situation was very different to ours. We live in a secular democracy where the state decides which activities are crimes and how those crimes should be punished. And as the primates made clear at their gathering this month whilst God's standards haven't changed, civil secular society can't impose those standards on those who reject his Lordship, and so harsh punishments for people in same-sex relationships should no longer apply. In fact the primates condemned them in very clear terms, and I think we should too.

Another argument which is often thrown at these Old Testament (and indeed passages in the New Testament also) is that they refer to a different kind of homosexual activity. In ancient times, so the argument goes, homosexuality was oppressive and violent; the action of a master over a slave or to do with Temple prostitutes – things that have nothing in common with the type of lifelong, faithful same-sex relationships that we often see today.

Sadly for those who want to change the church's standard that has no foundation in history and when you look closely at the Bible, it's abundantly clear that when the Scriptures condemn same-sex sex, they are not simply thinking about violent and abusive relationships but any kind of homosexual activity. So turn to in your Bibles to page 1148 and we will look at two tough words.

### **1 Corinthians 6 and 1 Timothy 1 – Two tough words**

Now fortunately you won't see the two difficult words in verses 9 and 10, because if you did they would be in Greek, and I suspect most of us would be flummoxed by them! The two words in question are *malakoi* and *arsenokoitai* - and they are what the new NIV has translated as '*men who have sex with men*' at the end of verse 9. Other Bible translations have used slightly different phrases, but it is absolutely clear that homosexual behaviour is what Paul is speaking about.

Now some people have argued once again that these two Greek words refer to Temple prostitutes or abusive homosexual encounters, but that simply won't stack up against the evidence. Now without going

into too much detail the two words that Paul uses here, and he uses the second of those two words again in 1 Timothy 1 verses 9 and 10, refer to both partners in male homosexual activity – the passive and the active partners if you will. And the point Paul is making is that participants in homosexual sex are in real danger of missing out on the kingdom of God.

Once again we need to remind ourselves that this sin is not a special case - and Paul is clear about that isn't he. He's also clear that neither the sexually immoral (a phrase which includes all sex outside heterosexual marriage) along with idolaters, adulterers, thieves, the greedy, drunkards, slanderers and swindlers will not share in God's glorious eternal kingdom. And remember, Paul is writing here to Christians. He's telling them that as those who have been saved by God's grace, as those who used to indulge all the time in behaviour like this, that now that they have been sanctified from their sin, washed clean of their guilt and justified in the name of Jesus Christ they should not be behaving like this anymore. Whatever we were like before we came to Christ, if we have come to God in repentance and faith, then we cannot live in those ways any longer.

And that point comes through absolutely clearly in the reading we had earlier from Romans chapter 1. It's on page 1128 of your Bibles. Because what we see here is God's unambiguous verdict.

### **Romans 1 – God's Unambiguous Verdict**

Now Dan unpacked this passage very well for us last week but let me just remind you of some of the key points.

Firstly, as a whole, human beings have suppressed the truth about God and dismissed his righteous moral commands by ignoring the clear evidence that this is his world and that he is in charge. Secondly, as a result of ignoring the creator they started worshipping false gods and images of created things instead of the living God. Thirdly, since they had rejected God and his ways, God has allowed them to walk further away from him and so he gave them what they wanted. This led human beings deeper into slavery to false religion and sexual immorality.

Very often when God gives us what we desire the effect is to bring us to our senses because we find that those things do not satisfy. But since humanity as a whole was walking further from God and his ways, the Lord, in his active judgement, allowed humanity to sink further into darkness with the increase in same-sex sex being one of the key signs of God's displeasure and anger. And if that wasn't enough, Paul goes on to say at the end of the chapter that although people know deep down what is right, they not only continue to disobey God's righteous commands themselves, but they approve of those who do so.

This is pretty blunt isn't it? It says that same-sex sex is a sign of God's on-going judgment on mankind because we have rejected him and his ways. It's a clear and demining verdict on homosexual activity but it is only what we have seen everywhere else in scripture. In fact it is impossible to find anything in Scripture that says anything positive or praiseworthy about same-sex relationships. That isn't to say that there is not real love or deep compassion or true faithfulness in gay or lesbian relationships, nor is it to say that those things are always found in heterosexual marriage. Sometimes heterosexual marriages are unloving and lack true compassion and service and faithfulness. But the Bible's verdict on same-sex relationships is clear. They are against the created natural order and against God's design for his world, and they are against God specific commands that are clearly there in both the Old Testament and the New Testament.

## Answering the Critics and Moving On

As well as the arguments I've tried to deal with already, plenty of other criticisms have been thrown at the traditional biblical understanding of sex and human relationships.

One of those charges is that the times have changed and the church needs to get in line with society. But since God's word is true for all generations and in all contexts we can't simply ignore what God has said.

Another one of those charges is hypocrisy – that the church has focused on this sin and ignored or downplayed others. That may be sadly the case but the right response is not to ignore something else that the Bible clearly says is wrong but to teach the whole of God's Word. Jesus says that if we love him we will do what he commands. So if we are seeking to follow Jesus we must daily repent of our sin, whatever it is and seek, with God's help, to live lives of holy, humble obedience.

Others have said that since the Church is supposed to be a place for broken people no one should be made to change to fit in. In one way that is right. Every one of us is a sinner and so everyone should be welcomed into our gatherings: old or young, male or female, gay or straight, and I hope we will warmly welcome everybody.

But there's a difference between joining a church and becoming a Christian. Becoming a Christian involves both confession and repentance. In that passage from 1 Corinthians Paul tells his readers that they used to behave in certain ways since now they have become Christians they don't do that any longer. So the thief should stop stealing, the liar should tell the truth, the violent should reject that way of life and those who have been active in same-sex relationships should live celibate lives because, as we've seen, the only form of sexual activity which God accepts and blesses is in the context of heterosexual marriage.

I do not underestimate how difficult such a decision and change in lifestyle might be for some people. For a person who experiences same-sex attraction to turn their back on the person they love or even simply to accept that they would not be able to enjoy physical intimacy, perhaps for the rest of their lives, means that taking a decision to follow Jesus is incredibly difficult and costly. And the cry that many people would make in that situation is *"It's not fair! If God is good, how can He possibly deny me love?"*

But of course God doesn't deny us love. In fact God showers his love upon us each and every day, whether we turn to him or not. What's more He demonstrated the depth of his love for us by coming to Earth in the person of Jesus Christ and dying on the cross in our place so that we might be forgiven, adopted into his family and have eternal life. And so to turn away from his love and reject him because the cost is too high means we also reject his offer of forgiveness and so will bear God's righteous judgment ourselves and face an eternity away from God and everything good.

Those are the stakes, but those are the stakes for all of us. All Christians face strong temptations; all Christians battle with ungodly desires; all Christians are called to turn away from sin, and take up their cross and follow Jesus and that does always mean sacrifice.

But the rewards are so much greater than anything we give up. How can we doubt that when we compare all eternity with the few short years we lived on this Earth? How can we doubt that when we compare even the best and deepest human love with the perfect and unceasing love of God? And how can we doubt that when we look at the cross and see the depth of the suffering that Jesus Christ endured for us?

Friends contrary to what our culture preaches, and what we often feel, our true identity is not defined by our sexual orientation or our marital status. The greatest need of every human being, gay or straight, is to know the love that was made perfect in Christ Jesus and to be drawn through Jesus into a relationship with the God who made us, sustains us and who offers us everlasting life in his glorious and eternal kingdom.

That's why we need to be a community of people here at St Nicholas who love and welcome whoever walks through those doors. That's why we need to love and serve our neighbours whether they are gay or straight and whatever their struggles. And that's why we need to point everyone to Jesus and, if they become Christians, why we need to walk with them in the way of Christ. And if we can do that all in humility and love whilst still holding on to the truth of the scriptures then we will not only confound the critics who want to label us as bigots but we will see lives transformed and eternal destinies changed. That after all is why Jesus came and died.