

## **The Very Rev David Ison's address to Accepting Evangelicals meeting 'Turning the tide'**

**at General Synod Fringe meeting 14<sup>th</sup> July 2014**

Thank you for your welcome. Rather than trying to be somebody that I'm not, I'm proposing to give you some personal reflections on the areas which David Runcorn has so ably identified as three particular features of evangelical engagement with same sex relationships.



### **1. An emotional journey**

I too was brought up in a single sex school where emotional life was both suspected and stunted: there wasn't much of either hetero or homosexuality. I encountered girls in the church youth group, but it wasn't until being at university that I began to encounter anyone who identified themselves as gay, including a couple of brave souls in the Leicester University Christian union.

I spoke in a debate at the student union in support of ending discrimination against gay people, while being unable to accept a theological equivalence between straight and gay relationships. And once ordained, and knowing the "right answers" about homosexuality in Christianity, I ministered to a number of people struggling with their sexuality, but on the basis of how to help them come to terms with their situation, rather than asking the question as to whether their situation had anything to do with me.

What began to make the difference for me was the publication in 1991 of the discussion paper *Issues in Human Sexuality*. The fact that this was not discussed by the church for over six years, and the nature of some of its arguments, I found disturbing. When it was finally being discussed in 1997, I was asked by a number of Deanery Synods in Exeter Diocese to help them understand what the issues were, and encountered a level of hostility and unreality which again I found disturbing. As part of those discussions, I organised a residential conference where clergy in the diocese could encounter and talk to gay Christian people about their faith and experience, and I sat listening to these conversations with two competing narratives going on inside: intellectually this was very interesting and a new perspective on what I had believed; but the emotional narrative said that I didn't want to listen, because if I did, I would have to change what I believed. To quote a little old lady from the wilds of Devon, "I was brought up to believe it was disgusting".

It's that level of emotional response which makes it harder to deal with issues of sexuality and relationship. The sexualised abuse of power by men against some boys, girls and women also gets tangled up with our understanding of intimate relationships: and I'm sure that among the reasons why many men are homophobic are not only their fear or even suppressed awareness of being gay, but also the fear of being regarded by other men as a sexual object in the way that they know they regard women.

One of the reasons why we need real conversations in the church are in order to explore these things with an element of vulnerability: and one of the things that worries me most about proposed conversations is how to move them from the level of argument and persuasion – on both sides – to that level of sharing and honesty. We don't just need some brave bishops to lead the way: we all need to take a lead in sharing our vulnerability in these areas, painful though it will be.

## **2. A hermeneutical journey**

One of the most disturbing and unpleasant experiences that I've had as Dean of St Paul's was a 90 minute interview with a senior conservative evangelical talking about biblical understandings of homosexuality. I don't think it was easy for him either. Part of the pain was because we had different understandings of hermeneutics: he with a concern for the consistency of the biblical texts and a relatively undifferentiated understanding of the authority of different parts of the biblical revelation; and me beginning with the good news of Jesus Christ and the experience of Christ at work in the lives of avowedly gay Christian clergy and lay people. These approaches also came out of our different contexts: he is concerned for gay people in his church struggling to follow Christ by living out a celibate lifestyle; I have a colleague in a civil partnership whose Christian commitment and integrity I hugely respect, and I see some of the distortions and damage done by the Church's unreality and denial of appropriate intimacy and commitment to gay people, and indeed its lack of support for people who are single – although the latter's not a story for today.

The best debate on sexuality I've heard in the General Synod was in the early 1990s about cohabitation. It was good because it couldn't be judgemental: nearly all those participating had children, siblings, friends and neighbours who they knew to be cohabiting, and so they couldn't speak about people in categories, but as people, like them, with the same loves and hopes and fears and needs. The same has been true over recent years in how we've looked at divorce and remarriage. And how many evangelicals are even aware that artificial contraception has been condemned by the Christian church throughout history, on biblical as well as social grounds, and that its acceptance as an option for Christians in marriage only began with the Lambeth bishops conference in 1930? Our views of what scripture says have changed, like it or not.

Many years ago I was leading an ex-student theological seminar at St John's College Nottingham on the ethics of artificial insemination by donor, and the principal Colin Buchanan pointed out that the logic of my argument was that artificial contraception was not permissible. I replied that, yes, I agreed with the Pope on this issue. At that point, a sympathetic audience suddenly crossed their legs and became both more engaged and more hostile: because a theoretical issue affecting other people had become a personal issue affecting them and their family life. Our context is bound up with our theologising and our interpretation of scripture and tradition, and we need to recognise that.

When my appointment to St Paul's was announced, I was asked to do an interview for the Times newspaper. A headline writer decided to tell the world that I was a supporter of the campaign for gay marriage in church. This was news to me as well. My position on this issue was rather more nuanced and equivocal. I went out for meals with a couple of conservative evangelicals who wrote to me, to talk through what I did and did not think: and I said to them that there would be times when we disagreed on what the Bible said, but that if I disagreed with them, it would be for biblical reasons. That wasn't easy for them to hear: but, as with broader interfaith dialogue, there is a key principle that we must listen to one another in good faith, and look for the best in one another, rather than seek to condemn one another. But it's hard to let go of the belief that there is only one right answer, or that we have the truth, and not easy instead to pray and trust that the truth might have us.

### **3. The journey into new community**

In November 2012 I spoke at the inaugural meeting of the organisation Two.23, set up to continue the work of Jeremy Marks. If you don't know Jeremy, he set up an organisation called *Courage* in order to enable gay evangelical Christians to find healing and change from their condition, and then found that this was unreal, for himself as well as others; so changed his work to support gay Christians in their discipleship including supporting their same sex relationships. When he retired, some colleagues got together to continue that support and encouragement. I was criticised by some conservative evangelical leaders for being prepared to support this organisation. But I'm quite clear that part of the role of a cathedral is to be there for all the Christians in the diocese, which includes Christians who believe that same-sex relationships are ungodly, and Christians who believe that same-sex partnership or marriage is their expression of faithful and godly discipleship of Jesus Christ. Supporting the official teaching of the Church of England and also holding the door open for all isn't comfortable; nor is watching the Church of England tear itself apart over the issue, and be regarded by the rest of the Western world as at best irrelevant and at worst preaching a gospel of hatred, and also be thought by many other churches around the world as almost apostate.

The way forward that I can see at the moment, across what one might describe as the religious divides, is twofold. One is to provide those communities of support and encouragement which straight and gay people together need. A key reason why organisations like Two.23 are so vital is that gay Christians face hostility and misunderstanding from the secular world as well as from the churches, and are called to challenge in both directions by offering authentically Christian role models for gay, bisexual and transgender people, whether in faithful, committed and nurturing partnership or in committed celibacy, or simply in handling what it means to be gay and single. I'm encouraged with the work that Steve Chalke is doing on this, and would commend to you the Oasis conference in April 2015 which offers an opportunity for Christians of different views to engage with one another and listen to people with particular experience to offer.

The other way forward is that of eschatology: what we are called to become. It is in Christ that we come together. All of us across the church, including the wide variety of Evangelicals and our viewpoints, are indeed on a journey. Wherever we start from, we're called to grow into Christ: and as we grow closer to him, and are formed more into his likeness, so we grow closer to one another. For all of us, journeying into Christ will make sex and gender less important, and love more vital. We have a vision of a new community in the kingdom of God, and a calling to make that kingdom more of a reality in this fallen world: and the challenge to us is how we are going to build it.

"As many of you as were baptised into Christ have clothed yourselves with Christ. There is no longer Jew or Greek, there is no longer slave or free, there is no longer male and female; for all of you are one in Christ Jesus."

May it be so.