

‘Where you go I will go’

Rev David Runcorn’s Address to Accepting Evangelicals meeting ‘Turning the tide’

at General Synod Fringe meeting 14th July 2014



I am honoured to be present and even more honoured to be invited to speak. I add my thanks to Benny Hazlehurst and Accepting Evangelicals for providing a safe and hospitable space to meet and pray across differences over this decade - for being bridge builders.

I was recently reminded of the story of Choluteca bridge. This state of the art, hurricane proof bridge was built across a wide estuary in Honduras as the solution to linking divided communities and economies. Not long after its completion a hurricane swept through. In the morning the bridge had indeed survived but the approach roads on either side has vanished or the river itself had changed course and was now flowing *round* it.

It feels like that in the present relationship of the Church and same-sex issues. With each carefully constructed response in this debate – and we trying *very* hard - the river just keeps changing course and flowing round us. We are left looking inept, redundant and irrelevant. I think we deserve some sympathy actually. But this should be warning us that the challenge is not present as a problem to be solved. While we approach it like that, the river will just on keep flowing round us.

I was approached by Sir Joseph Pilling this time last year to contribute a paper for the WG discussions. They felt that whilst Conservative Evangelical perspectives had been well represented they had not heard from evangelicals who, while sharing the same high view of scripture, had come to an accepting interpretation of same-sex relationships. The decision to publish it was taken later.

I followed it up with a further reflection that the Fulcrum website published which I called ‘How do we know when we are wrong – evangelicals and scripture.’ It seemed to me as important, if not more so, to ask how any strongly held, scripturally based belief might come to an awareness that it was in fact mistaken or at least incomplete – if such it was.

As I reflect on my own evolving understanding in relation to same sex relationships, I trace three journeys (not just my own or evangelical of course but this is our context this evening).

i. An emotional journey

My Christian formation, including Bible College, was as a man in a man centred world. In that world homosexuality drew very particular condemnation. It was the sin of sins: an ‘Abomination’. Sodom gave its name to it. Romans 1 expounded it. This was a given. No further discussion was needed or expected.

I did not know any people who were gay (well I did as it turned out but they wisely had not told me). Images of homosexuality swung between the caricatures and the luridly speculative: so men behaving in ‘feminised’ ways - camp/drag acts etc, or reports of furtive encounters in secret places. The hostility to the ‘feminine’ evident here was never questioned. The focus was male.

I observe that a very powerful *emotional* formation was at work there and still is – though things are changing fast. It takes some unpicking. I notice how often people trying to *think* through their theology also need help reflecting on the feelings and emotions that are present as they do. Emotional anxiety is a huge inhibitor of trusting, exploratory reflection and an even poorer guide to biblical truth.

So I look back over a serious distance between those first perspectives and the men and women I now actually know, love and respect, who happen to be gay. 'They' are not 'them'. 'This' is not 'that'.

Let me risk extending this reflection further.

We are now in the middle of some harrowing disclosures about the extent of sexual abuse in our society. It began with Children's Homes, then monastic/church communities and clergy. It has now reached the boys Private School system – so long one of the traditional foundations of the British establishment. (it is just arriving at the gates of Westminster)

This is throwing up reflections on the culture of private education in general. In a recent article in the Sunday Observer, Alex Renton offered reflections on his own school experience that connected for me too. His focus was not on actual abuse, and nor is it mine. But we were both formed within a very particular male-only educational culture that was characterised by such values as: toughness as character building, devotion to the team, distrust of women, suppression of emotion, assumptions of patriarchal and hierarchical social ordering, mocking of any feminine trait in men and minimal empathy for the weak and ordinary.

Renton notes that the greater part of the political leadership in our society today remains a product of this educational culture. I add that this has historically included a significant percentage of clergy like me and the greater part of the senior leadership of the church. The evangelical tradition also made outreach to Public School boys a strategic priority. This bore very considerable fruit and I am genuinely grateful. But I am concerned that the assumptions of that culture and its formative influence remain to be critically examined in the way they need to be.

Is it surprising that the evangelical world (like others) historically formed in such a culture, should be so resistant to moving beyond a male-centred worldview or even see the need? Or that such a church responds to women with unhealed ambivalence and struggles with such painful clumsiness to work out its response to the presence of gay and lesbian folk in our midst. Running through the present debates are many symptoms of corporate emotional anxiety and confusion.

We are on a complex and vulnerable relational journey.

The truth is we do scripture/theology within a history and a story.

We read the text within a context.

All our theology has a *pathology*.

ii. A hermeneutical journey

The Pilling report noted, 'The nub of the disagreement which has prevented us from coming closer as a result of our deliberations ... turns, as has the church's ongoing disagreement on questions of sexuality, on the meaning and authority of scripture'. (Pilling report p15)

In my piece for Pilling I spoke of the need to trace the 'hermeneutical trajectory' of scripture where it does not directly address a contemporary issue. Perhaps more helpfully, Bishop Tom Wright speaks of a 'hermeneutical bridge'. He likens church in relation to scripture as a

participation in a five-act play. The church's part is in the dynamic improvisation that forms the fifth act. We are not making anything up. To improvise faithfully requires a deep and sustained immersion in the first four acts. This challenges certain understandings of authority and assumptions of a single, controlling interpretation/meaning in the text which is then imposed on issues in our context. Instead we might speak of God's continuing conversation with us - and through a variety of voices. I find a more dynamic authority of scripture on offer here. (*though I acknowledge Tom Wright does not support an including view of same-sex relationships*).

This is not new of course. The relationship of scripture to slavery is one historic example of such a hermeneutic bridge at work in the church and society. But what is often missed is that this already happens within scripture itself actually – a profound example being the narrative of 1&2 Samuel which I reflect on in my book *Fear and Trust*. Far from providing role models for hierarchical, heroic male leadership – an historical tendency among evangelical preachers and writers - the narrative is actually *subverting* that. The 'meaning' is found in the margins, among those ignored, the voiceless and dispossessed. God is found working and speaking from the edges.

Bishop David Gillett illustrates this hermeneutic at work when he traces a journey of interpretation in his lifetime that has led to significant changes in belief and attitude. These are most clearly seen in five main areas -

- Creation and Evolution
- Divorce and remarriage
- Other religions
- Women in Leadership
- Same-sex attraction and partnerships.

He writes, 'this process is so closely linked throughout that it is important to look at the last one as part of a continuous hermeneutical development. In each area we have seen significant changes in what Christians and the Church have accepted as "right in God's eyes". It is perhaps inevitable that the one through which we are living now (namely the issue of same sex-relationships) is seen to be the greatest change and challenge, but some of the previous ones were as radical in their time, if not more so.'

iii. The journey into new community

The greater visibility and audibility of gay people and their stories in society and church means that the reading of scripture is happening in participation with, and not at distance from, those whose lives and relationships are actually being talked about. That does change things.

Prof David Ford, speaking of the more general challenge of being Christian the world, urges what he calls 'daring friendships'. This is not with the aim of forcing consensus - just real meeting across real differences, with real people. This is not a time for drawing back or raising barricades.

Like all of us I am very conscious of the decision made in Synod this afternoon.

At the recent celebration of the 20th anniversary of the ordination of the first women priests at St Paul's, one of the readings was from the Book of Ruth.

'Where you go I will go
your people shall be my people
your God, my God'

In her remarkable commitment to Naomi, Ruth was crossing boundaries - racial, cultural, religious, gender.

She was a bridge builder. She refused to be constrained by prevailing assumptions about relationships. At considerable personal risk, she modelled a different way of being and belonging.

Furthermore her offer was not welcomed. But she persisted.

So it was a journey that began with love and partnership offered and rejected, continued in silent tolerance, but ended in inclusion, celebration and new community.

There are parallels here.

We are a church guilty of long-term patterns of exclusion of a variety of groups and categories of people, often in the name of scripture and often without having any idea of the cost to those this was imposed upon.

I am so grateful to those who have offered, persisted, stayed, endured rejection and isolation and have become more of a source of renewing, partnership and grace than the church can yet acknowledge. Bridge builders.

Those verses are often included at weddings – they were at mine. They said what we wanted to say to each other. But they are not actually about marriage all. We were borrowing from another expression of committed relationship to express what we aspired to in our own relationship. I was single until my late thirties, often ministering within an evangelical tradition that made marriage a primary and central relationship. I have not forgotten how excluding and exclusive that could feel at times and how little serious consideration was given to other expressions of relating (it could feel as if everyone else was ‘not marriage’ or ‘unmarried’). There was a presumed hierarchy of relationship that is not found in Jesus or the epistles. This is still a blind spot and relevant to our context.

I am still working through my understanding of marriage in relation to same sex relationships. But the challenge of this new community for me is to reciprocate in gratitude for the gifts and resources I have so long presumed to draw on for my own relating and loving – and so to offer other expressions of committed relationships the same support, delight and gifts that we know marriage needs; for the sustaining of the varied vocations to faithful, human loving in our world and so for the enriching of the whole.

We haven't been here before.

It is a journey across a hermeneutical bridge.

It requires trust, faith and commitment beyond familiar boundaries.

‘Where you go, I will go
your people shall be my people
your God, my God.’ Ruth 1.16

Sources

Bishop David Gillett. *‘Same-sex relationships’*. Unpublished paper, quoted with permission. But see also his blog: <http://bishopdavidgillett.blogspot.co.uk>

David Runcorn *Fear and Trust – God-centred leadership* SPCK 2012

Bishop NT Wright *How can the bible be authoritative?*

http://ntwrightpage.com/Wright_Bible_Authoritative.htm