

SERMON FOR TRINITY 19 | 22.10.2017

There is no easy way to talk about the massive changes that occurred in our laws in 1967 relating to pregnancy, abortion and same sex relationships. Yet the 50th anniversary of the law to make abortion legal for the first time – and to allow physical relationships between consenting same sex adults over 21 - was truly momentous. Today I want to talk about both in the context of our Christian concern for a fairer and more tolerant society – but one that is based on God’s concern for the world that he has made.

Because it would be very easy to simply repeat the mantra of Andrew the hairdresser on Gogglebox last night: *I don’t see what the problem is. So long as it doesn’t hurt anyone, why shouldn’t people do whatever they want.* (If I had a £1 for every time I have heard that, I would be a very rich man!)

It is part of the world in which we live that each and every person seems to believe they are entitled to make the final decision about everything. *I do what I want; you do what you want. What is the problem?*

The problem is that we don’t live entirely on our own and we both need and are hugely influenced by the opinions of those who live around us. We love the idea of being free, but most people are also anxious not to break the conventions or be classed as ‘abnormal’.

The trouble with heterosexual relationships is that what is done out of sight and in private becomes a very public issue when a woman becomes pregnant. And many of us have been involved in the anguish of women who have found themselves to be in an unplanned pregnancy. I have, and you may have too, sat with someone who is suddenly faced with a life-changing ‘fact of life’. They find their lives turned upside down, all their future plans apparently shattered. There may be difficulties with parents, or with the father of the child – or both. Career choices are one thing but there may be even more basic challenges like accommodation or enough income to live on.

Very few women today are unaware of the issues: on the one hand the prospect of a so-called unwanted child; on the other the prospect of being labelled selfish, a murderer of the unborn. In our minds eye we see the banners being rolled out by the respective sides of the debate: on the one side *'Her Body, her choice'*. On the other *'As a former foetus, I oppose abortion in every case'*.

Quite rightly the Church has always been pro-life. The miracle of life is not ours to give or to take away. And while there have been philosophical debates about when life begins – whether it is at the moment of conception or later – Christians have been at the vanguard of every campaign to protect the life of the unborn, the lives of those with handicaps, right through to the lives of those who are terminally ill and those on death row in various countries for capital crimes.

Sadly we have been rather less good to providing the wherewithal to support those positions: the stigma attached to unmarried mums in the not so distant past and the lack of welfare support today (universal credit being the issue of our day) - despite what the Daily Mail might claim - is still all too obvious. The care given to the mentally ill remains the Cinderella end of the NHS and the support for those with learning difficulties or other issues still depends hugely on voluntary and charitable giving. The growing demand for compassionate 'end of life' solutions for the chronically ill is a pretty poor reflection on our ability to care for those in constant pain.

But it is also a symptom of the same mantra: *my body, my choice*. It comes from that body of scientific study that believes that the 'selfish gene' is the dominant power in our lives; that there is no objective standards which can legitimately say: *even if I want to do this, I shouldn't*.

While, in a liberal society like our own, we want to allow people to develop in whatever way is best for them – and we allow people freedom of expression and every encouragement to 'be themselves' – surely that should not encourage us to give up on ethics. Ethics are the way we regulate behaviour to enable the greatest outcome for the greatest number of people.

Ethics stops us taking the easy way out by defending what we might do as ‘the lesser of two evils’. And Christian ethics wants to shout from the rooftops: *to terminate the life of a child is not a ‘lesser evil’: it is intrinsically wrong.*

Yet the 1967 Abortion Act is not going to be repealed. There is not even a national consensus that the cut-off point of 24 weeks should be reduced. If anything the move is in the other direction and there is also growing pressure to allow terminations with just one doctor’s agreement rather than two. Changes since 1967 already allow girls as young as 12 to have abortions without the knowledge of their parents where psychological harm may occur.

We as Christians, sadly, have to bear some of the blame for these trends. The public statements in some Churches that contraception is sinful have not helped. Nor has the turning away of children from baptism because the parents are not married. The churches have also sent out mixed messages about the adoption of children by same-sex partners and of course there is the issue about whether people in such relationships should be given the dignity of marriage for those who want it.

It is a sad fact that if there was to be a poll to find out why people are turned off Church, its attitude to sex would be at the top – or at least very near the top. Child abuse by the clergy was quoted as being the no1 reason why people left in studies conducted in both Australia and Italy recently.

So it was heartening to read a statement by the Roman Catholic bishop of Limerick, looking forward to the great Congress on the Family, to be held with Pope Francis in Ireland next year. In his statement, Brendan Leahy talked about the need to build bridges with those born in this Millennium, with the disconnected and the young, and in that context he looked forward to ‘all family types’ being welcomed to the Table of the Lord. What a welcome ‘turn-around that is!

And that is my experience too. Doing a House blessing on Friday afternoon, I was hugely impressed with the way a family had embraced the arrival of a child to their son and his partner, now living with them in their house. No stigma, no judgementalism, just the kind of loving support that this young couple so desperately needed.

While abortion may have been a consideration if the mother had been unsupported this happy, chubby baby is testament to the way in which the acceptance by ordinary, older people to changing norms of family life is ultimately the right way forward - because it is that which is saving the lives of the unborn.

If the Church is going to be relevant and to have anything to offer to the wider community, it has to start where people are. Rebecca Weiss, a professional journalist has written: *Every abortion destroys something precious. But the emphasis of the Church should be recalibrated from campaigning for the abolition of legal abortion to creating a society in which no women will feel she has no alternative because life with her child would have been unbearable.*

The story we read today of King Solomon threatening to kill a baby is always a shocking one. The thought of the poor child being carved up in front of the two women is unthinkable. But it should make us wake up to the scale of children in this country who never get the chance to live. The numbers of terminations (186,000 in 2016) will always be too high.

So while we recall that before 1967, the back street clinics hid the trauma of abortion away from ordinary people's eyes we have to admit that there is still work to be done. Our job, 50 years on, is to challenge the prevailing 'My body, my choice' slogan. The value of life does not depend on the people who created it; it depends on God. As Christians that is our base-line ethical position.

But we need to back up that statement with the willingness to care for every child, whatever kind of family it is born into or adopted by. And we have to push for the kinds of welfare reforms that show that bringing up a child, any child, is a joint responsibility in which all of our society must share.

Not 'her body, her choice' but 'her body; our baby'.