

SERMON FOR 2 BEFORE LENT | 16.02.2020

Genesis 1: 1 - 2: 3; 1 Corinthians Romans 8: 18-25; St Matthew 6: 25-end

As I began to look at this reading from Genesis for today, containing the words: so God created humankind in his image, male and female he created them, I couldn't avoid the publicity surrounding the recent revelation by Phillip Schofield: *Phillip Schofield has admitted he knew he was gay when he got married in 1993, and tried to suppress his sexuality until his bombshell announcement. The popular television presenter came out in an emotional statement posted on Instagram on Friday morning, followed by an appearance on ITV's This Morning when he was interviewed by his co-host Holly Willoughby. Schofield said on the programme that he felt "guilty" about the "pain" and "upset" he had caused his family, but has admitted he had tried to "suppress" his sexuality throughout his marriage to wife Stephanie Lowe.*

And then came this enquiry on the Church website contact form: My Son (11) identifies as a Christian but was not baptized. His father and I are no longer together and his dad is an atheist. I was raised an Anglican in South Africa...

'My son identifies as...'. I can't think of a phrase which has so totally transformed our thinking over the last few years. It is such a powerful way of challenging the way we see everything. What matters is not what we think we see but the way someone wishes to be understood. We may categorise someone in front of us in faith terms, intelligence terms, gender terms, class terms, political terms: and what may be required of us is that we reinterpret our judgement in favour of the way that person self-identifies. Forget my accent, or the way I was brought up, or the clothes I wear: this is the person I believe I am, now.

We thought we knew all about Phillip Schofield, his wife and his two daughters. And now it is all different.

And is that OK? Is our self-definition enough? Is it right that we can decide how we are to be known or regarded? Because that is not how it has been in the past – and still isn't for many.

Take the marriage service traditionally handed down: in the great preface there are three reasons for a marriage – the mutual comfort, friendship and support of those being married; the appropriate place for sexual intimacy and, leading from that, the place where children may be born and nurtured.

Now I would be the first person to say that marriage is important. When Brian and Flo stand on these steps next Saturday, we will be affirming their love and giving them every encouragement for the life that I am sure God has planned for them. They are still both very young and we hope that they will have many happy years together.

But Maria and I were the first generation to have those three reasons declared to us in that order. Because when the 1662 Book of Common Prayer speaks of these three reasons for marriage, it does so in reverse order: marriage is, first and foremost, the place for the procreation of children. We are co-creators with God of the children of the earth and that is the natural and divine reason why every intimate act should be open to the possibility of the women becoming pregnant. No contraception and, indeed, no sex at all if that ‘openness’ is not present. If you don’t intend to have children, don’t sleep together.

Of course we know that almost no one accepts such teaching today. The Church of England was the first denomination to allow contraception methods (in 1930) and whatever is officially taught, Roman Catholic laypeople have universally followed suit. Responsible parenthood demands it and we all recognize that the wholly necessary physical expressions of affection and love are quite different from the life-changing decision to bring a child into the world. There are times when that bond is absolutely vital for our emotional well-being.

But what about those for whom heterosexual love is not ‘natural’? Those who simply do not feel any physical attachment to members of the opposite sex – but do feel it for other men or other women?

Franklin Graham, son of the famous evangelist Billy Graham, is to lead a crusade in the UK later in the year specifically aimed at denouncing homosexuality as a sin and a disordered state.

In the name of God, he seeks to draw attention to the material in the Bible in which he believes same sex relationships are denounced. In his view, such relationships are the result of society having gone off the rails, doing what it likes – and for no good reason.

Sadly he takes a very selective series of biblical texts and he treats every single one of them in a very literal sense and there is certainly no space in his theology for the Bible to be read in the light of the society in which it was set.

Nor is there any appreciation of modern science: In the words of a report from the US Academy of Pediatrics in 2004: *currently, there is no scientific consensus about the specific factors that cause an individual to become heterosexual, homosexual, or bisexual – including possible biological, psychological, or social effects of the parents' sexual orientation. However, the available evidence indicates that the vast majority of lesbian and gay adults were raised by heterosexual parents and the vast majority of children raised by lesbian and gay parents eventually grow up to be heterosexual. Orientation cannot therefore be considered to be a choice.*

Now if that is so, we are left with a vital question: if God made us strictly male or female, and intended that our physical relationships should only be with those of the other gender, what about everyone else? Are we, as Franklin Graham and some conservative catholic bishops do, going to tell this whole group: *sorry, we understand that you did not choose your orientation but you are condemned to be single and celibate for life.* Or are we to come to another conclusion?

Because the fact is that there are many elements in creation which may not be as God intended originally. Did God intend some children to have special needs, to have Down Syndrome for example or to be blind or deaf; did he plan that some would be mentally unwell or to have a million and one other problems which limits their abilities? Of course not. It is the great test of faith that we have to acknowledge that bits of Creation are mis-formed, have 'gone wrong', in a whole variety any ways. And like gender orientation it is not a matter of choice. As a humane society we spend a fair proportion of our resources (but probably not anything like enough) trying to ameliorate these challenges to give those affected the best possible quality of life.

However we have to be careful here: I am not equating one form of sexual orientation with some kind of disability. That is obviously not true. But this morning I am inviting all of us to try and square what the Bible appears to say with real lived experience. And my tentative answer is that it is his clear desire that each of us, whatever our orientation, should be happy and fulfilled and creative - which means that at least some of those traditional understandings that appeared to be so fixed and immutable in a pre-scientific age, simply have to be adapted in the light of what we now know. I am more convinced than ever that we are being required to take a much more generous and open attitude to what Creation, in all its fulness, has to teach us. As a Christian community, our role has to be to enable everyone - however they self-identify, whatever their background and social status – to live out their lives as children of God, deserving of our love and support.

I can see that new terms like sexual fluidity, self-identification and gender-neutral all feel very ‘different’. Helping people to find their way through this new environment is really hard because the signposts are not in place yet. Trying to buy a card for my cousin’s daughter Hannah who has just given birth with her partner Kiera, forced me to be both sensitive and creative. And the news that the first gay couple had been married in Northern Ireland is not a victory or a defeat for anyone: it is a deeply divisive issue there. The grossest fact is that the journalist Lyra McKee was murdered and did not live to see it.

Perhaps that is why we have been given such an appropriate Gospel today. Setting aside the food and clothes agenda, I think there is a fundamental message here: in a broken world where things are not fair, where injustice can be found in every walk of life, Jesus tells us not to get obsessed with secondary issues and things that don’t matter. Who cares what clothes you are wearing or what name you call yourself? In a world where so much needs to be done to restore Creation as it was first intended be, Jesus tells us to strive for the kingdom of God.

Which means finding ways to cope with the anomalies, the inconsistencies and the things that don’t always make sense. The world won’t give everyone the best all the time. Settling for a solution which fits us and allows us to grow may have to be enough: *Do not worry about tomorrow for tomorrow will bring worries of its own.* Better to love and affirm one another, different or the same: either way the people in front of us are also part of God’s wonderful, diverse, creation.