

May 26th. - How the church uses Reason to decide about sexuality

Acts 11:1 - 18
John 9:24 - 34

So we've talked about the gap between church and world, and what is going on in the world, and now we're looking at how the church decides things- the 3 legged stool of Scripture, tradition and reason. Last week was scripture and before we looked at tradition, and now we're looking at reason.

Reason - the 3rd leg of the stool.

To be honest - I've found this the hardest bit to write about. Tradition - we know what it is, and we can all see how its not something fixed, but has changed over the years, but slowly. And Scripture - I think we can all see how you can both read the bible in plain English and get one view about sexuality, and read it in greek and get a broader view. But what is Reason?

It could be reasons for or reasons against?

It could be using logic, or rational thinking?

Is it finding arguments for and against from sources outside church or the bible?

Perhaps we can talk about it on Weds night.

For now, I'm going to define reason in the following ways -

Reason means logic, but it also means understanding and experience.

Reason also means the way we apply tradition and Scripture - let me give an example -

The Pharisees were certain that Scripture and tradition told them that sin causes sickness - think about the old testament food laws, which everyone knows kept them healthy in the hot desert. If you didn't keep the laws about not eating the blood in animals you'd get poorly. Or if you didn't keep lepers away from others you'd all get it. So sin = sickness. And therefore, **reasoned** the Pharisees - sickness is because of sin. So the man born blind - he sinned, his parents, someone must have sinned. They were sure.

Then Jesus heals him, but they do not like that. If being blind was the punishment then who was Jesus to take the punishment away, to forgive him?! Worse still - they think that Jesus is a sinner - after all he is claiming to be God and healing people on the sabbath - so if he's a sinner - how could he have healed this person? Their reason and logic won't allow it - no wonder they think its by the power of Satan that Jesus heals people. They were really cross, they would not let it go.

Jesus must have read the same Scriptures, knew the same traditions - but he **reasoned** to a different conclusion. Perhaps he had a different understanding of God? Perhaps he weighed some verses more than others - I desire mercy not sacrifice perhaps, or love your neighbour as you love yourself.

So 1 persons reason overturned 500 years of temple and a religious ruling class - but he was Jesus. And I'm not saying that just because someone thinks differently or challenges the status quo they must be right. He was the son of God, and we, 2000 years later in a church that is his body - we agree with him, not the pharisees. But it does make you think that its possible for anyone to have got it wrong, even very religious people, even people with theology degrees, even people who work for the institution. There is room for God to correct our reasoning.

Lets see another example from our readings.

Peter, a good Jew, so we imagine, so brought up knowing that all kinds of food is off limits - the 4 footed animals without cloven hooves, the reptiles, the birds. Its written in Deuteronomy and Leviticus. He also knows that Jews aren't allowed In Gentiles houses - that's why Jesus didn't go in the Centurion's house. And he knows that the Messiah is coming for Israel, Jews, and has

nothing to do with Gentiles. But then he has an experience... a vision. The sheet comes down, full of forbidden animals, and a voice says - "kill and eat".

Now its really interesting becuase if you have a vision from God, telling you to break God's own laws - well I wonder what you'd do? Would you say - it can't be from God? Or would you say God's changed his mind? Or would you say well I must have misunderstood what I thought were God's laws? How would you decide?

Well Peter didn't have much time to decide - becuase there was a knock on the door from some Gentiles - asking about Jesus, saying come to our house! Oh no! He's having a bad morning! But he decides to go with them, and go in their house, and as he's talking about Jesus - the Holy Spirit comes on them - just like it did on the apostles at Pentecost! And it kind of confirms that the vision was from God. A bit like the man born blind actually being able to see again, kind of confirms that Jesus was right and the Pharisees were wrong. So Peter's experience changes his theology, his view of God.

Can you see how reason is a mixture of experience, and logic, and understanding and a view of the whole of scripture and our relationship with God. And as it says in proverbs - wisdom is proved right by her actions. Or in another place- by their fruit you shall know them.

So - how are we to reason with sexuality?

In the light of tradition actually being changeable - it does not give us a clear pointer. We can't say, we've never done this so we're never going to.

In the light of the actual verses about sexuality being debatable.

What else do we have to go on, to help make our decisions?

Here are 4 than I came up with..

Character of God

God is love - yes? God loves all he has made - yes? God wants all to be saved - yes?

So if God made people black and white, why would his character say - you're black you're not ok. You can't come in? So people are born gay, like they're born black, - so why would he say - you're gay, you're the exception? The rational argument about that is that its not being gay that is wrong, its acting on it - being in a loving relationship. Then you have to wrestle with a god who would make this world so hard for people. It feels like we're back with the Pharisees saying - well I can see that healing this poor blind man is a loving, kind, good thing, but God forbids it! You start to distort the character of an all loving God.

Is it a salvation thing?

The bible is written and Jesus came to earth, that all might be saved - or healed. And the thing to do to be saved is to believe in Jesus - that's all - faith alone. Your actions will follow your beliefs - because you know yourself to be loved, you will love otehrs, becuase you're forgiven you will forgive. So loving God, and loving others, is the main thing we should be about. Whether we have real bread or wafers for communion - its not as important. Whether we sing hymns or choruses - its not as important as salvation. I'll go further - whether its church of England, or methodist - its not as important. Whether you speak in tongues or not - its not as important. Whether gay people get married or not - its not as important. And if you say it is - you're an idolator and a heretic, You've literally made a golden calf.

Marriage

If you think that was controversial - wait for this - there is no outline in the bible for marriage - many people have 4 wives or more. Jesus says, a man shall leave his mother and father to get married - but that is statement of fact, not a point of doctrine - otherwise the couples I got married last week have broken teh law becuase neither grooms were living with their parents. God is not interested in marriage - he is interested in faithful relationships - not the number of

wives, not the gender - but faithful commitment. In the old testament prophets like Hosea literally say - God is like a faithful husband to you. Song of Songs is all about God and his people - and how amazingly faithful God is. So does Isaiah and Jeremiah, and Paul takes it up in Ephesians when he says - I am speaking about Christ and the church.

Procreation

Some say the reason for heterosexual marriage is procreation - that's what marriage is for. So gay marriage must be wrong. Well, you're entitled to that view - but it's not in the bible. You can't point to a verse or doctrine where it is. Adam and Eve are told the "fill the world" - but a) there's no limit on how to do that, and b) some might say we've filled it enough now.

Procreate IS in the Book of common prayer, 1662, from which some Church of England people get their doctrine. But it's not in the book of common worship. And, if you say that marriage is only for procreation - you sign up to 'sex is sinful and only for procreation' and you're in the no contraception area of ethics. Plus - you make infertile and older couples sinful as well, as they are getting married but not having children

(but that might fit in with God made gay people but they're not allowed to express love - God allows you to get married, but being infertile makes your marriage null and void?)

Natural

Natural before the fall - we talk to animals

Natural after the fall - we eat animals - the world is not as God intended.

Be very careful arguing from the world around us..

This is a big subject, and I appreciate it's uncomfortable for some of you, and others don't like the tension, and some of you don't understand the fuss. So let me say this

Next week I'm going to talk about living with difference, how we disagree and still live and worship together. There are some other inclusive church topics we will look at. - including mental health and neurodiversity, and we'll carry on with Weds nights until you get bored or no-one comes anymore! Then sometime in July, we will have a vote after church. Probably with little tokens. And we will see what the congregation feel. The PCC will then discuss and either decide to support the inclusive church statement or not. Hopefully we'll know by St James Festival. And whatever the outcome I am very proud of you all for your willingness to engage with this difficult material, for your honesty and openness, and for sticking with the programme. I think we are all growing and learning through it.