

From the Dean

This morning I want to share with you why I feel a gay marriage can be consistent with Christian principles, and how I have come to this point of view over time and in love for my LGBTQI friends.

At the same time I want to emphasise that this is my personal view, and that I have every respect for those who hold a different view, or are in the process of thinking through their own views. There are diverse views, conscientiously held, within the Body of Christ. We need to listen carefully to the views of others. I believe God is leading us all in a new journey of discovery, and strident claims of 'right' and 'wrong' are not appropriate to the debate.

Such claims are also very damaging to LGBTQI people who have suffered so much rejection, with painful consequences. Often I have found that the Parents and grandparents of LGBTQI offspring have also suffered by association in the face of church silence or condemnation.

There are two key principles of marriage set out in the Prayer Book: first, that marriage is a gift of God so that "husband and wife should be united in heart, body and soul...and in their union fulfil their love for one another". And second, "marriage is given to provide the stability necessary for family life, so that children might be cared for lovingly and grow to full maturity."

The definition says clearly "husband and wife". But we should note that the Anglican definition of marriage has changed over the years. In the 1662 Prayer Book, for example, there were very different reasons stated for marriage. The first reason was for the procreation of children. The second was as a "remedy against sin, and to avoid fornication". And third, it was "for the mutual society, help and comfort that one ought to have for the other, both in prosperity and adversity". Additionally, the woman promised that she would not only obey her husband, but also serve him. So the relationship was not one of equality, and the union of husband and wife came in as the last of the three purposes, whereas today we regard it as the foundation of everything else.

If the Church's understanding of marriage has changed along the way, can we now modify it again to be inclusive of gay and lesbian couples? Can same-sex couples be "united in heart, body and soul...and in their union fulfil their love for each other"? Can same-sex couples "provide the stability necessary for family life, so that

children might be cared for lovingly and grow to full maturity”? The answer to both questions is Yes, based on the evidence of the number of same-sex couples in long-term committed relationships, and on the basis of research that shows children may be cared for equally well in same-sex families as in hetero- sexual ones.

In our time and place, given what we know about homosexuality not being an aberration, but a natural biological alternative, given that many gay and lesbian people are and have long been faithful members of our church, given that many gay and lesbian couples have shown in their lives the fruits of grace, and service, and given that some gay and lesbian couples are now asking for marriage, let us re-consider what we – in the light of God’s Spirit – think is the essence of this marriage rite.

A very important part of the debate centres around what the Bible says. Many opponents of same-sex relationships believe they are clearly prohibited by scripture. There are several problems with this view:

There are only a handful of biblical texts quoted with regard to same-sex relationships, and in some it is not at all clear such relationships are the subject of the texts quoted.

While same-sex relationships appear to be condemned in passages such as Romans 1.26,27, the context is one of debauched behaviours that belong to people who “refuse to keep in mind the true knowledge about God” (v.28).. “who have no conscience, and show no kindness or pity for others” (v.31). Faithlessness and debauchery are not the marks of the gay and lesbian couples I know.

Nowhere in scripture is the concept of loving, committed same-sex relationships envisaged. One cannot find a biblical text on this subject any more than one can find something about nuclear bombs or genetic modification. Reference must be made to more underlying biblical principles.

Even if a text could be found, scripture always needs to be interpreted in the light of current knowledge. Thus St Paul’s very clear statements that men have authority over women are a reflection of the patriarchal culture of the day. It is a concept seen as inappropriate in today’s context where the biblical principle about equality in Christ is seen as the deeper and over- riding truth. Part of our current knowledge about sexual orientation is that

homosexuality is not a sin or aberration, but is as natural for many in our society as hetero-sexuality is for others.

If we look to scripture for deeper principles that might underlie all relationships, they are ones of love for God and love for neighbour, and the belief that in love for God and others we might come to maturity in Christ, and have a care for the well-being of others.

Within these general parameters there is the special relationship that can exist between a man and a woman, a relationship that can be paralleled in a same-sex context.

After much research, Archbishop Rowan Williams, concluded that biblical teaching on sexual relationships puts as much emphasis on bonding, with its essential ingredients of love and fidelity, as it does on human reproduction. The ethical criterion is to do with the quality of the relationship, not the orientation of the partners.

A final question: why have same-sex marriage? Aren't civil unions effectively the same? For Anglicans marriage is a holy sacrament. Marriage has the potential to acknowledge and strengthen stable, committed relationships. Good marriages benefit the community and for many express values of long-term loving mutuality and faithfulness. I hope that we will have the grace to recognise that some couples of the same gender also exhibit these qualities and want to partake of this sacrament. To continue to deny them is to weaken the integrity of the sacrament itself.

The world is in constant change, and we change with it. Change is seldom easy; it is often marked by controversy and pain. But if we allow our thinking to be guided by the grace of God, and with love and respect for one another, then I believe God will lead us to an understanding that may well lie beyond where any of us have yet got to, one that will be life-giving and inclusive of all.

My heart goes out to my dear faithful Christian friends in long term committed relationships who ache to be married to their partners, and are currently prevented here in Australia from partaking in this sacrament.

Susanna. (Many of these ideas adapted from Bishop Richard Randerson: <http://www.stmatthews.org.nz/sermon-12/i4kzo8o164/Christian-Marriage-Gay-and-Straight> )