

WHAT DOES IT MEAN TO BE AN INCLUSIVE CHURCH? ARE GAYS WELCOME AT CENTRAL BAPTIST CHURCH, CHELMSFORD?

A presentation given by Paul Beasley-Murray 14 April 2013

Where do we stand as a church on ‘inclusivity’? I believe that as a church we need to give some hard thought to our policy toward gays. As Christians we cannot afford to be like the proverbial ostrich. We need to face up to the realities of life around us and look at the facts without prejudice or irrational emotion.

For some the question of how we deal with gays is primarily a pastoral issue, for others it is primarily a justice issue, but for me it is primarily a missiological issue. Sadly the traditional evangelical approach to same sex relations is a massive stumbling block to the younger generation, with the result that for most people under 45 the church and its message are now a total irrelevance. This should be a cause of massive concern.

Jesus was inclusive: he had a reputation for being a friend of sinners (Matt 11.19; Luke 7.34). But although Jesus loved the sinner, he did not love the sin (John 8.11). I want gays and lesbians to feel welcome in our church. However, although I want our church to accept gays and befriend gays, I have difficulty with the practice of gay sex – let alone the idea of gay marriage.

I am conscious that in speaking on this topic I am walking through a minefield. For all I know, there is someone here who is struggling with their sexuality – or there may be somebody in your wider family who has ‘come out’ as a gay or as a lesbian. And as far as younger members are concerned, many of you will have gay friends. As a result, there may well be sensitivities present. Let me therefore make clear that in what I say, I do not wish to give any personal offence. .

I intend to look at what the Bible has to say about gay relationships. We Baptists sometimes call ourselves ‘radical believers’ – we are radicals in the sense that we seek to root our lives in God and his Word. However, before we look at the Bible’s teaching, I want to begin with a story and then make five preliminary statements.

Tina’s story

Tina recently attended an Alpha course run by her local Baptist church. She received an invitation to the course at the parent and toddler group to which she brought her son Jake. The toddler group leaders had assumed she was a single parent and were pleased to welcome her and 18 month old Jake. When asked how she would manage for babysitters during Alpha sessions, Tina said there was no need to worry as her partner would babysit. Several sessions into the course Tina shared with the group that she was gay and living with her partner Suzie. She had become pregnant with Jake after IVF treatment. Tina and Suzie both regarded themselves as Jake’s parents; Suzie supported the family financially whilst Tina stayed at home to look after Jake. Towards the end of then Alpha course, Tina seemed close to making a commitment. The minister felt it was time to visit her at home and arranged to go one evening when Suzie would also be at home. Both women were very welcoming. Tina asked him if he would dedicate their son. Now that she wanted to give her life to God, she had talked to Suzie. They had decided to take a further step of commitment and were planning to have a civil partnership at the local registry office in the near future. After that they would both also like a service of blessing on their relationship. Did the Baptist church do that?

FIVE PRELIMINARY STATEMENTS

1. WE ARE ALL SINNERS – THERE IS NO PLACE FOR HOMOPHOBIA

The Evangelical Alliance 1998 statement on homosexuality says:

We recognise that all of us are sinners, and that the only true hope for sinful people – whatever our sexuality – is in Jesus Christ. Our earnest prayer is that his love, truth and grace would characterise evangelical responses to debates on homosexuality, both now and in future.

We affirm God’s love and concern for all human beings, whatever their sexuality, and so repudiate all attitudes and actions which victimise or diminish people whose affections are directed toward people of the same sex. We are encouraged that many Christians now recognise and deeply regret the hurt caused by past and present failures in their responses to those who experience same-sex attraction.

Both of these affirmations are key:-

1. The first affirmation recognises that all of us are on a level playing field. In the words of Paul: **“all have sinned and fall short of the glory of God”** (Rom 3.23 NRSV) – **“everyone has sinned and is far away from God’s saving presence”** (GNB). There is no place for spiritual one-up-manship! This comes to clear expression in Rom 1.18-32, where Paul denounces homosexual practices – but also the sins of greed, jealousy, and gossip. For Paul, sexual sins were no worse than other sins; sexual sins and sins in general all stem from the key sin of not honouring God (see Rom 1.24)
2. The second affirmation recognises that God loves us all in equal measure. John 3.16, which proclaims that **“God so loved the world that he gave his only Son”**, includes everybody, whatever their sexual orientation and practice. To hold a sign declaring ‘God hates fags’, as some American evangelicals have done, is a denial of the Gospel. .

2. WE NEED TO MIND OUR LANGUAGE – AND NOT BE OFFENSIVE

Clearly the term ‘fag’ is totally unacceptable. An abbreviation for ‘faggot’, it is a North American slur on gay people, and probably has its origins in the idea that gays – like faggots (sticks) are for burning.

There are equally offensive terms. The old English word ‘sodomite’, which has its origins in the would-be abuse of Lot’s guests in Sodom, is clearly pejorative. The word ‘homosexual’ is also regarded by many as pejorative, for the roots of this term go back to the days when homosexuality was regarded as a mental health condition. NB the word homo-sexuality derives from the Greek ‘*homos*’ (‘same’) and refers to people with same sex attraction. The word hetero-sexuality refers to attraction of the ‘other’ (*heteros*) sex.

I am told the acceptable terms to be used are ‘gay’ and ‘lesbian’ – although I wonder whether it might be better to emphasise our common humanity by talking of ‘gay and lesbian people’.

I am sad that the word ‘gay’ has been taken over to describe men attracted to the same sex. Originally, ‘gay’ meant ‘care-free’ or ‘happy’, or even ‘bright and showy’: that is probably true of many ‘gays’, but not necessarily so. Some gay people are quiet and retiring, not least as a result of

prejudice they have experienced by other members of the community. Furthermore, the term 'gay' is in danger of suggesting that unlike the rest of society, people with a gay orientation do not encounter problems in life!

The word 'lesbian' is derived from the name of the Greek island of Lesbos, home to the 6th century BC poet Sappho, who gathered together a group of young women. Whether or not they were all involved in same sex relationships, I don't know – but certainly Sappho's poetry was about the beauty of women and about her love for women.

3. WE CANNOT IGNORE THE GAY COMMUNITY – IT IS SUBSTANTIAL

In 1948 the American AC Kinsey's published his monumental study, *Sexual Behaviour in the Human Male*: this reported that 4% of white American males were exclusively gay after the onset of adolescence; while as many as one man in three had "at least incidental homosexual experience or reactions" for at least three years between the ages of 16 and 65.

The UK 2011 Census gave the following figures:-

- 1.1 per cent of the surveyed UK population, approximately 545,000 adults, identified themselves as Gay or Lesbian,
- 0.4 per cent of the surveyed UK population, approximately 220,000 adults, identified themselves as Bisexual,
- 0.3 per cent identified themselves as 'Other',
- 3.6 per cent of adults stated 'Don't know' or refused to answer the question,
- 0.6 per cent of respondents provided 'No response' to the question.
- 2.7 per cent of 16 to 24 year olds identified themselves as Gay, Lesbian or Bisexual compared with 0.4 per cent of 65+ year olds.

These statistics are much lower than has been suggested by the gay community, which has maintained that 10% if not 20% of the UK community are gay. However, it is probably true that those who are attracted by the same sex, but who do not regard themselves as gay, are a much larger percentage.

The 'gay-spectrum' within society can be divided into three categories:

1. Those who experience same-sex *attraction*
2. Those whose experience of attraction is of such a strength, durability and persistence, that we can say their *sexual orientation* is for same sex relationships
3. Those who find their *identity* within the gay community – they have 'come out' as gay. It is probably people within this third tier who in the UK 2011 Census identified themselves as 'Gay' or 'Lesbian'

The general consensus is that perhaps as many as 5% of the population are either latently or actively gay. This is a sizeable section of the population. There are over 63 million people in the UK: this would mean that some 3.15 million are either latently or actively gay, which is slightly more than the number of people living in Wales. This is too large a community to ignore. We cannot just write off this group of people because we disapprove of Gay Pride. Christ died for them too.

Incidentally, if our church were truly reflective of society, then of our 370+ committed members (and here I am not including people who are not formally in membership, but nonetheless belong to

our church community) some 18 would be latently or actively gay. We cannot afford to ignore the pastoral issues presented by people with gay tendencies in our church.

4. WE NEED TO ACCEPT THE REALITY OF SAME SEX ATTRACTION

I wonder whether some Christians who condemn same-sex practice, take seriously the reality of same sex attraction. As one who is well and truly hetero-sexual, I freely confess that I find it difficult to understand same sex attraction – but this is no reason why I and other heterosexuals in our church should deny its reality. There is no doubt that a good number of people are strongly attracted to people of the same sex – and that for Christians who are gay it is extremely difficult and challenging to be or become celibate.

Why do people have feelings for the same sex? There appear to be a number of factors involved.

i) Genes or Hormones

Some in the Gay Movement say it comes from their genes or hormones. In other words, people are born gay – from birth they are ‘wired’ in a particular way which causes them to be attracted to people of the same sex. There has been all kinds of research into genetic mutations of people’s DNA and of how our genes are structured. Likewise there has been research into the influence of sex hormones on people’s genes. I am told that the chances of a male child becoming homosexual increases with the number of older brothers (but not sisters) within a family. I am not qualified to judge the science. But I am prepared to believe that some are gay because of their physiological make-up.

ii) Upbringing

There is considerable evidence that homosexuality has its roots in the way we are brought up. People’s attraction to others of the same sex can have a lot to do with their ‘nurture’ and not just with their ‘nature’. To quote Elizabeth Moberley: *"Homophilia stems from a break in attachment between the same-sex parents and the child in the early years of life. The ways a child may 'lose' this parent and be unable to receive their love are death, divorce, absence, adoption, fostering, orphanage, illness, ill-treatment, transfer of attention to a new baby. None of these guarantees later homosexuality; but they may induce it, if the breakdown in same-sex attachment is not resolved and healed"*.

iii) Social conditioning

Kinsey's research showed that nearly half of American males fell somewhere between being "exclusively heterosexual" and "exclusively homosexual"; i.e. in 50% males there are at least some homosexual tendencies. Such tendencies can be encouraged and developed. John White, former Professor of Psychiatry at the University of Manitoba therefore writes: *"What I do determines what I am just as much as what I am determines what I do"*. I am sure that many young people, who would normally develop healthy heterosexual relationships, end up becoming gay or lesbian because while they were still at a vulnerable stage of their sexual development, they were told it is fine to be gay.

But whatever the reasons for same sex attraction, we need to accept that for gays and lesbians their feelings for the same sex are real – the fact that most of us don’t share those feelings, doesn’t make them less real

5. WE NEED TO UNDERSTAND THAT IN THE ANCIENT WORLD GAY PRACTICE WAS WIDESPREAD AND WILD

In the world of ancient Greece and Rome, gay sex had the same if not even a higher profile than it does today. Far from being disapproved of, it was celebrated. Plato's *Symposium*, called one of the finest works on love, is all about love for the same sex. Fourteen of the first Roman Emperors indulged in gay sex. The Emperor Nero for instance, took a boy Strobos, castrated him and married him publicly. When Nero was eliminated, one of the first things his successor Otho did was to take possession of Strobos.

The concept of orientation was then unknown. Men enjoyed sex with one another for the sheer pleasure. In Greece the most widespread form of same-sex relations was between adult men and pubescent or adolescent boys ('pederasty'). Although same sex relations between adult men were known, they were frowned upon and regarded as 'unmanly'. Or rather, the so-called 'passive' partner was regarded as unmanly and effeminate. A man by definition was a person who penetrated women!

In ancient Rome men were free to enjoy sex with other males, without a perceived loss of masculinity or social status, as long as they took the dominant or penetrative role. Acceptable male partners were slaves, prostitutes and entertainers.

Promiscuity in the ancient world abounded. Many married men had at one and the same time both mistresses and same sex partners. The concept of a faithful partnership for the most part was not present. We need to understand this when we come to see what the Bible has to say about same sex relationships.

WHAT DOES THE BIBLE HAVE TO SAY?

The Evangelical Alliance 1998 Homosexuality statement also says: *"We affirm that marriage is an institution created by God in which one man and one woman enter into an exclusive relationship for life. Marriage is the only form of partnership approved by God for sexual relations and homoerotic sexual practice is incompatible with His will as revealed in Scripture. We do not accept that holding these theological and ethics views on biblical grounds is in itself homophobic"*

Although the Bible has a good deal to say about marriage, it has relatively little to say about same sex relationships. The traditional view has been that the Bible condemns all same sex relationships – but more recently this view has been questioned.

GEN 19.1-11: SODOM'S SIN WAS GANG-RAPE

In Gen 19 we find the story of two men (angels) who came to Sodom and were invited to stay the night with Lot. Vv4-5: **"Before the guests went to bed, the men of Sodom surrounded the house... They called out to Lot and asked, 'Where are the men who came to stay with you tonight? Bring them out to us!'. The men of Sodom wanted to have sex with them"**

As a result of this attempt to rape Lot's guests, Sodom became a byword for 'gross indecency', i.e. homosexuality. Peter refers to this story, and speaks of "**those who follow their filthy bodily lusts and despise God's authority**" (2 Pet 2.10). It is as a result of this story that homosexuality has often been called 'sodomy'. But the truth is that these verses have nothing to do with faithful, loving same-sex relations. It is rather an example of gang rape, which would not be approved even by members of Stonewall.

LEV 18.22; 20.13: GOD'S PATTERN FOR HOLINESS INCLUDES SEX

Holiness is one of the great themes of the Book of Leviticus. God's people are called to a distinctive way of living. "**Be holy, because I the Lord your God, am holy**" (19.2; 20.7).

Chapters 17-22 are particularly concerned for the outworking of this holiness – so much so, that we call these chapters 'the holiness code'.

Chapter 18 focuses on forbidden sexual practices. After listing all those with whom sexual intercourse is forbidden, it lists four further practices which are forbidden:

1. Not have sex with a woman during her monthly period
2. Not having sex with another man's wife
3. Not having sex with another man
4. Not having sex with an animal

Our concern is with not having sex with another man: "**No man is to have sexual relations with another man; God hates that**" (literally as the NRSV puts it: "**You shall not lie with a male as with a woman: it is an abomination**") (Lev 18.22). At first sight this appears to be quite clear – same sex relationships are taboo. But the verse immediately preceding v22 is about the worship of Molech, which involved child sacrifice. Is there a link between this and same sex relationships? Is this in part a reason for the condemnation?

However, if there is a link, it is not present in Lev 20.13, where amongst a host of further regulations, we find: "**If a man has sexual relations with another man, they have done a disgusting thing, and both shall be put to death**". Here we have a clear condemnation of same sex practice. There is no implication of rape or coercion – otherwise only the rapist would have been executed. Rather we have homosexual intercourse by mutual consent.

[Some commentators, have drawn another inference from the expression: "if a man lies with a male as with a woman". Samuel Balentine in the Interpretation Commentary on Leviticus asserts that this "*is an idiom used only for homosexual acts performed by heterosexuals. The text does not address homosexuality in terms of permanent sexual orientation. Moreover the text does not proscribe all acts of male homosexuality. It focuses instead on heterosexual males performing homosexual acts with other males in the family unit.*"]

But although the Holiness Code may ban men having sex with men, the question arises as to why we choose to regard this law as having permanent value, but not the laws which ban the wearing of clothes made of two kinds of material (19.9), short sideburns and tattoos (Lev 19.27,28), and the practice of charging interest on loans (25.37)? To what extent are we as Christians still under the Law of Moses as distinct from the Law of Christ where love is central (see Galatians 5 & 6)? The authors of the *Biblical & pastoral responses to homosexuality*, published by the Evangelical

Alliance, state: “*The continuing relevance of these laws is confirmed in the New Testament, especially by the apostolic reaffirmation of them in Pauline texts dealing with homosexuality*”

THE GOSPELS: JESUS HAD NOTHING TO SAY ON GAY ISSUES

Jesus was more concerned with the sins of the mind and heart, like pride, greed and selfishness, rather than with sexual sin – this is an important corrective to our modern preoccupation with sexual sin. Furthermore, when Jesus did talk about sex, he had some strong things to say about faithfulness in marriage – Jesus was a hard-liner as far as divorce was concerned (see Mark 10.1-12). It is strange that as evangelical Christians we can be more accommodating in this area than we can be in the area of same sex relationships!

PAUL CONDEMNS GAY AND LESBIAN SEX – AND ALSO GOSSIPS, THIEVES, AND THE GREEDY!

Here we have two key texts:

1 Cor 6.9-10: “**Do not fool yourselves people who are immoral or who worship idols or are adulterers or homosexual perverts or who steal or are greedy or are drunkards or who slanders others or are thieves – none of these will possess God’s Kingdom**”

The GNB lumps two Greek words together when it translates somewhat pejoratively ‘homosexual perverts’. The NRSV speaks of ‘male prostitutes’ and ‘sodomites’ (NIV: ‘male prostitutes’ and ‘homosexual offenders’). The scholarly consensus is that Paul is referring to the ‘passive’ and ‘active’ partners in a male homosexual relationship

The first word translated as ‘male prostitutes’ (*malakoi*) means ‘soft’ – it became a pejorative term for men regarded as ‘effeminate’ or ‘sissies’, and described the younger ‘passive’ partner in a homosexual relationship. In the Greco-Roman world of Paul’s day young men sold themselves as ‘mistresses’ for the sexual pleasure of men older than themselves. In our terminology, consenting gay youths.

The second word (*arsenkoites*) translated in the NRSV as ‘sodomites’ (NIV: ‘homosexual offenders’), is not found anywhere outside of the New Testament. Paul seems to have taken the standard rabbinic term for gay sex (‘one lying with a male’) and translated it using two Greek words, one for male, and one for bed. A certain coarseness is perhaps present: so we should perhaps translate the term as ‘male copulators’.

There is no doubt that Paul is condemning gay sex. But what precisely is he condemning? Is he condemning promiscuous gay sex? The concept of a loving, faithful gay partnership may well have been unknown to him.

1 Tim 1.8-11: “**We know that the Law is good if it is used as it should be used.... Laws are made, not for good people, but for law-breakers and criminals, for the godless and sinful, for those who are not religious or spiritual, for those who kill their fathers or mothers, for**

murderers, for sexual perverts, for kidnappers, for those who lie and give false testimony or who do anything else contrary to sound doctrine....”

Instead of ‘sexual perverts’ the NRSV speaks of ‘fornicators’ and ‘sodomites’ (NIV: ‘adulterers’ and ‘perverts’); i.e. Paul condemns here both heterosexual and homosexual offenders. [The word translated ‘sodomite’ is the same word used in 1 Cor 6 (*arsenkoites*) for gay sex.] People who engage in sex outside of marriage, whatever form it may be, are breaking God’s law.

Significantly, as the authors of *Biblical and pastoral responses to homosexuality*, note: “*Homoerotic sexual practice here... belongs to a catalogue of sins, apparently no better, and no worse, than fornication, adultery, theft, greed, drunkenness, slander and robbery*”. Do we as Christians have double standards?

PAUL REJECTS GAY SEX AS UNNATURAL

In Romans 1 Paul talks about the anger or wrath of God being directed against all those who do not honour God, and as a result he says that God has given up humankind to wallow in their sin. There is a fascinating distinction here between sin and sins. This is the context in which Paul wrote: “**So God has given those people over to do the filthy things their hearts desire, and they do shameful things with each other.... God has given them over to shameful passions. Even the women pervert the natural use of their sex by unnatural acts. In the same way the men give up natural sexual relations with women and burn with passion for each other. Men do shameful things with each other, and as a result they bring upon themselves the punishment they deserve for their wrongdoing**” (1.24-27).

Paul rejects gay sex on the grounds that it is “unnatural”. Immediately the question arises, ‘in what sense is it unnatural?’

- Is it unnatural in the sense that it goes against God’s creation order as found in Genesis 1-3, where God’s pattern for sexuality is clearly hetero-sexual?
- Is it unnatural in the sense that heterosexual men were going against their natural inclinations in the name of fashion and culture, and often in so doing exploiting minors?
- Is what is unnatural for heterosexuals also ‘unnatural’ for people of a homosexual orientation?

Is Paul’s clear revulsion here caused by the wild kind of promiscuous sex which abounded in the ancient world? Would he have equally condemned a same-sex couple loving one another within the context of a faithful partnership?

Paul goes on: “**They are filled with all kinds of wickedness, evil, greed and vice; they are full of jealousy, murder, deceit and malice. They gossip and speak evil of one another; they are hateful to God, insolent, proud and boastful; they think of more ways to do evil; they disobey their parents; they have no conscience; they do not keep their promises, and they show no kindness or pity for others**” (vv29-31). Paul condemns not just homosexual practice – he weighs in against sin in all its forms. Paul does not distinguish between one kind of sin or another – they are all equally reprehensible – for they are all the result of our turning our back upon God

JESUS BY HIS SPIRIT OFFERS HOPE TO ALL

Paul does not just condemn sin; he also offers hope for all sinners. In this respect 1 Cor 6.11 is a key verse. After listing all those who will not possess God's Kingdom – including those who engage in sexual sins of various kinds – he writes: **“Some of you were like that. But you have been purified from sin [literally “washed” from sin, a clear allusion to baptism]; you have been dedicated to God; you have been put right with God by the Lord Jesus Christ and by the Spirit of our God”**

“Some of you were like that”. According to David Prior: *“There are few more exciting and energizing statements in the New Testament than this little phrase”*. The church at Corinth was made up of former drunkards, robbers, adulterers, as also people who used to engage in gay sex. But a radical change had taken place in their lives. Whether or not their orientation had changed, we do not know. But one thing for sure: not only did their life have a new direction, they also had a new power at work in their lives, God's Spirit. In the words of one New Testament scholar: *“The Spirit belongs to the creed and to our theology; but he is all too often left there, so that his genuinely transforming and empowering work is often left until the Eschaton, rather than experienced in the present”* (Gordon Fee).

God through his Spirit can change people – can enable people to live different lives. In the words of an Anglican statement on homosexuality: *“It is a matter of Christian experience that faithful acceptance of a difficult way of life in response to a moral demand always finds reinforcement in a powerful movement from God towards man”* [*The Problem of Homosexuality*]

THREE FURTHER STATEMENTS

1 THE LORD HAS YET MORE LIGHT AND TRUTH TO BREAK FORTH FROM HIS WORD

John Robinson, the pastor of the ‘Pilgrim Fathers’ before they left on the Mayflower, and one of the founders of the Congregational Church, said: *“God has yet more light and truth to break forth from his holy word”*; a statement reminiscent of what Jesus had to say about the Spirit: **“When the Spirit comes... he will lead you into all the truth”** (John 16.13). Here we have a reminder that it is sometimes not enough to ask ‘What does the Bible say?’ The Bible does not address every issue directly: down through the centuries Christians have had to work out how Biblical principles are to be applied to a changing world.

This is the context in which some have argued that *“the Bible does not provide the final answer to a whole number of issues to do with inclusion with which Christians have subsequently wrestled”* (Steve Chalke, *The Bible & Homosexuality*). They point, to the way in which the Bible deals with women in the church and also the way in which the Bible accepts slavery as a norm.

There is some strength to this argument. As a church, for instance, we do not follow the teaching of Paul in 1 Cor 14.34-35 and 1 Tim 2.11-15 where Paul forbids women to speak; nor do we follow the teaching of 1 Cor 11.2-16 where Paul speaks of the need for women to cover their head in church. We say – and rightly so – that these passages relate to particular cultural situations and do not have force today. Nor do we as a church attempt to justify the practice of slavery. When preachers

today expound Paul's instructions to masters and slaves, they change the context and apply Paul's teaching to today's work context.

But the reality is that both Jesus and Paul brought about a new approach to women as to slaves, which revolutionised their standing, and ensured that eventually women and working people were given their 'human rights'. Paul declares of the new community God is forming – **“So there is no difference between Jews and Gentiles, between slaves and free people, between men and women; you are all one in union with Christ Jesus”** (Gal 3.28). Here is a wonderful charter for inclusivity.

What's more, although the thought of sexual orientation was not in Paul's mind, this charter for inclusivity can be applied to gays and lesbians too. There is room for them in the family of God – indeed, if we are to be truly inclusive, then they need to belong. BUT this does not mean to say that God therefore approves of gay and lesbian sex.

The fact is that the Bible promotes loving relationships between men and women – and in particular within the context of marriage. Think of the Song of Songs – in which a woman and a man passionately declare their love for one another. At this point, however, a new argument is brought forward by those who question current attitudes in the church toward gays and lesbians. On the basis that in the Scriptures God is primarily a God of covenant relationship who blesses all forms of faithful relationships, they argue that what God condemns is promiscuous, covenant-free sex – and not committed gay partnerships. Again, one cannot deny that faithfulness is a cardinal Biblical virtue – but in the light of the Bible's wider teaching on relationships, I find it difficult to relate this to gay relationships.

But one further point needs to be made: our primary concern as a church should not be about relationships between couples, but about relationships within the church in general. If Judaism is the religion of the family, then Christianity is the religion of the new community called the church. When his family came looking for him, Jesus made it clear that they were no longer his priority. **“He looked at the people sitting round him and said, ‘Look! Here are my mother and my brothers! Whoever does what God wants him to do is my brother, my sister, my mother”** (Mark 3.34). An inclusive church is a church where everybody is - and feels - welcome. That is the challenge!

2. WE NEED TO DEVELOP AN INCLUSIVE SEXUALITY POLICY WHICH REMAINS TRUE TO THE BIBLICAL IDEAL

Churches have tended to adopt three different basic stances:

- Being welcoming and affirming of same-sex partnerships
- Being welcoming but not affirming of same-sex partnerships
- Being not welcoming

But is there another possibility? Can a church adopt a sexuality policy where community is more important than sexuality? Queen's Road Baptist Church, Coventry, has developed an innovative approach. They agreed a lengthy document on human sexuality and the church, which affirms that *“within the mutual, covenant commitment of male and female the pattern of what God seeks is found”* – and yet refuses to exclude from baptism and the body of Christ *“anyone who is seeking to follow Christ”*. They then developed a sexuality policy, which includes the following statements about church community and membership:

- *As a church community we commit to seek to be welcoming of all, regardless of sexuality, in recognition of the love and grace revealed by Christ*
- *As a church community we commit to be sensitive to others, regardless of sexuality and considerate to all*
- *As a church community we recognise the ideal that is revealed to us in scripture and do not recognise a necessity to affirm all lifestyle choices made by others.*
- *As a church membership we will seek to encourage all, regardless of sexuality, in their journey with Christ and in a sense of belonging within the church community, the body of Christ*
- *Even where we do not agree on key issues we commit to seek to be accepting of each other, regardless of sexuality, as fellow children in Christ and to work for unity within the body of Christ*
- *Wherever we can recognise the reality that we are all sinners and accept that our personal behaviour does not live up to the ideals of scripture, we recognise that baptism and membership are an appropriate response to someone, regardless of sexuality, giving their life to Jesus*

Significantly they also have a key section on role models in the church:

Not affirming lifestyle choices that some might take, particularly in regard to sexuality, has consequences for the role some might be able to play within the life of the church. Therefore whilst accepting all within the community, this does not necessitate the community calling all to any or every role within the church and particularly where these roles act as a role model to others.

I believe that we as a church need to ponder this approach to the vexed question of including gays within our church.

3. SAME SEX FRIENDSHIPS DO NOT HAVE TO BE EROTIC [see: www.paulbeasleymurray.com/blog/07/03/13]

With civil partnerships and gay marriage making the headlines, the common assumption seems to be that same sex friendships are always erotic. What utter nonsense! My mind goes to the friendship between Jonathan and David. They became the closest of friends –and yet there was nothing sexual about their relationships. They were just the best of friends, who loved one another, were committed to one another, and as a result gained strength from one another for all the ups and downs of life. Yes, they loved one another: or in the words of 1 Sam 18.1, “the soul of Jonathan was bound to the soul of David, and Jonathan loved him as his own soul”. Precisely how this love arose, we are not told. It may be that initially Jonathan was attracted to David by his bravery, while David may have been attracted to Jonathan by his integrity. But whatever, there developed a strong friendship – indeed, what the Bible calls a love – between one another. As a result there was no room in Jonathan’s heart for jealousy or envy when the women of Israel celebrated David’s military conquests over against those of his father (see 1 Sam 18.7). The truth is that David’s exploits threatened not just Saul’s position, but David’s position too. But as it was, we read that “Jonathan delighted much in David” (1 Sam 19.1). Sadly it is sometimes easier to weep with those who weep, than rejoice with those who rejoice. The success of others is sometimes difficult to cope with. Not for nothing has it been said, ‘A true friend is one who sticks by you, even when you become successful’. Jonathan was such a friend, who because of his love for David was able to delight in David’s success.

As a result of their love for one another, they committed themselves to one another: in the words of 1 Sam 18.3 “Jonathan made a covenant with David, because he loved him as his own soul” – or as the GNB puts it, “Jonathan swore eternal friendship with David”. A sign of this ‘partnership’ to use the

word much in vogue today, was that “Jonathan stripped himself of the robe that he was wearing, and gave it to David, and his armour, and even his sword and his bow and his belt” (1 Sam 18.4). This was far more than a generous act of a prince to a shepherd boy who wasn’t dressed aright for court or for battle. No, in giving his clothing and his armour Jonathan was giving of himself to David; he was in effect saying ‘all that I am and all that I have is yours’.

As a result of this love for one another and commitment to one another, they gained strength from one another. An illustration of this strength in togetherness is found at a time when David, afraid for his life, was on the run from Saul. On that occasion “Jonathan strengthened his hand through the Lord” (1 Sam 23.16) – or in the words of the GNB “Jonathan went to him and encouraged him with assurances of God’s protection”. It has been said: “A true friend will strengthen you with his prayers, bless you with his love and encourage you with his hope”. Jonathan was a true friend. Jonathan and David formed a great partnership. But there was nothing sexual about this relationship. The truth is that same sex friendship does not have to be erotic.

On reflection Jonathan and David provide a great model for relationships in the church. For Christians are also called to love one another and to be committed to one another. As I say whenever I welcome new members into our church, ‘church membership involves entering a dynamic covenant relationship with one another’ in which we commit ourselves ‘to love one another and stand by one another whatever the cost’. And as a result of entering into such a ‘covenant’ or ‘partnership’ we find mutual strength to cope with all the ups and downs of life. The fact is that even the deepest of partnerships do not have to be erotic.