

Living in Love & Faith

Session 4 – Sex

They say that at a dinner party you should never talk about politics or religion. And if there's a similar rule for the pulpit I expect it would be don't preach on sex. It's personal, it's awkward, potentially traumatic, just don't go there. But here we are. Sex is part of God's design and one of his good gifts to us, as we'll see later on, but it's also controversial. I'm not here to tell you what to believe but I am going to tell you that we need to listen to one other and we especially need to listen to those who have different opinions and experiences from us, because sex and sexuality aren't just interesting topics for debate, they're about real people, real lives. We need to speak into the silence around sex because silence breeds fear and ignorance. I know this may bring up difficult feelings and experiences. If so please speak to me, Jonathan or Sam or one of the pastoral team for support. Don't let silence continue to cause damage.

So sex – would you say it's private, embarrassing, shameful or dirty? I imagine most of us sit somewhere on that spectrum of attitudes. Or you might say it's simply irrelevant to you. But for some of you it may bring up other feelings, like disappointment, guilt, pain, fear. Because sex is a powerful force; in one of her books Agatha Christie likens it to a raging river, beautiful, awe-inspiring, full of life but with the power to destroy. We don't need to look far to see the devastating physical, emotional and social consequences sexual behaviour can have: STDs, unwanted pregnancies, sexual assault, prostitution, pornography, sex trafficking, infidelity. We can read about them in the pages of any newspaper and even in the pages of the Bible. It's no wonder that over the centuries people have sought to keep sex safely locked up in a cage of rules and taboos, to protect the vulnerable from coercion and abuse. In 1 Corinthians Paul offers a deeper reason for controlling sexual behaviour; *your bodies, he says, are temples of the Holy Spirit...therefore honour God with your bodies*. God made us as physical beings and what we do with our bodies matters. Misusing our bodies causes not just physical damage but emotional and spiritual damage. So there's good reason for that cage of rules and the spiritual fruit of self-control. But sometimes rules can do as much damage as the behaviour they're trying to control – just look at the stigma and discrimination still inflicted on single mothers, rape victims and LGBTQ people. One outcome of this is the high rate of serious mental health problems such as self harm and suicidal tendencies within the gay community.

And today old taboos sit uneasily alongside liberal western attitudes, giving rise to a whole host of confusion. So girls are forced to walk an impossible line between frigid and slut, ex-lovers risk being shamed by revenge porn, gay pride marches are countered by homophobic bullying.

Well then, are we better off without sex altogether, other than the need for procreation? Paul, a single man, appears to think so. He writes to the Corinthians “*I wish that all of you were as I am – i.e. celibate. But each of you has your own gift from God; one has this gift, another has that.*” Is Paul’s grudging concession to sexual relationships the best we can manage?

As with many topics the Bible offers a range of voices and we hear a different perspective in Song of Solomon, a dialogue between two lovers. The song is often treated as a metaphor for the relationship between God and Israel and that may be valid but a metaphor only works because the underlying imagery makes sense. So we can absolutely read it as a celebration of physical intimacy. And it’s interesting that the woman’s voice dominates. She isn’t shamed for her lack of modesty, her desire for her lover is just as appropriate as his for her. Let’s have a look at some features of their songs.

- **Mutual desire**— each one welcomes and reciprocates the attentions of the other, no reluctance or coercion or imbalance of power. *I am faint with love*”.
- **Mutual delight** - they delight in each other, he calls her ‘my beautiful one’, she likens him to a young stag. *Arise, come, my darling; my beautiful one, come with me.*”
- **Self-giving** – See how their gaze is on each other not on themselves – of all the trees in the forest she sees only him. *Like an apple tree among the trees of the forest is my beloved among the young men.*” – so this isn’t a relationship of self-gratification, it’s a relationship of self-giving.
- **Faithful** - Their desire for each other is all-consuming – she is faint with love, he longs to hear her voice. And they belong to each other: *My beloved is mine and I am his.*
- **Fruitful** – They sing of apples, raisins, figs, flowers, blossoming vines - the relationship is fruitful and life-giving, not just in the sense of having children but for the man and woman themselves.
- **Long term** -There’s a sense of waiting and anticipation, like the passing of the seasons - a traditional period of courtship – this relationship has grown over time until they’re ready to take the next step. *See! The winter is past; the season of singing has come.*

There’s also a note of warning: *Do not arouse or awaken love until it so desires.* A hint that once desire is awakened it may prove difficult to control. Paul recognises the intensity of desire when he writes “*better to marry than to burn with passion*”. Better to find a healthy and appropriate outlet for your feelings than to let them break out in ways that will end up damaging yourself and others. So the basic features of these songs are a good foundation for any sexual relationship. Traditionally church and wider society have looked for these to be publicly acknowledged in the vows of marriage, seeing the commitment of marriage as the only appropriate place for acts of such vulnerability, allowing both partners to flourish without any damaging consequences.

But this is a lofty ideal. You know as well as I do that, tragically, marriages can be places of abuse and betrayal. Marital rape and assault take their place in the line-up of sexual immorality. What makes a moral sexual relationship isn't a marriage certificate, it's those characteristics of mutual desire, self-giving, fruitfulness and faithful commitment. Which leads me to ask the question – can these characteristics be found outside the boundaries of a traditional heterosexual marriage? And to push a bit further, can such a sexual relationship be acceptable to God? After all, in the OT we see God blessing a whole range of irregular families and relationships. So, couples who live together before marriage? That's not too difficult – we can see their commitment to each other. But what about same sex relationships? This is an area where people of all sexualities disagree. Many gay Christians feel called to a life of celibacy and recognise that whatever they've given up God has more than repaid. Others feel affirmed and blessed by God in a same-sex relationship characterised by mutual, self-giving love. So who's right?

This is a complex area because it calls for us to question how we read and interpret the Bible, and how we make ethical decisions; when do we accept the plain meaning of scripture and when do we reinterpret it in the light of the context it was written in and scripture's overarching themes of love and grace?

I want to pause and tell you the story of a girl called Lizzie Lowe. Lizzie grew up in a loving Christian family, they belonged to an evangelical church. Lizzie was outgoing and loving, she enjoyed sport and music. But she was also a lesbian. In 2014, aged just 14 she took her own life because she believed that her church and her family wouldn't accept her sexuality. And how would she have known any different? We keep quiet for fear of stirring up a hornet's nest, so people like Lizzie struggle in silence. I said I'm not here to tell you what to believe but I am going to tell you that if our words or our silence lead 14 year olds to believe that they are rejected by God then we're doing something wrong. Because God doesn't reject anyone.

We're going to look at few Bible passages from both a traditional and liberal perspective so that we can get a little bit of insight into each other's views. This is a massive topic and I don't even have time to touch on all the relevant passages let alone explore them in any depth but this does provide a starting point to think about how we use scripture to inform our decisions today.

Then the LORD God said, "It is not good that the man should be alone; I will make him a helper as his partner.... That is why a man leaves his father and mother and is united to his wife, and they become one flesh. Genesis 2:18,24

This story shows that men and women are made to live in relationship with each other and it presents the physical union of man and woman as being God's plan for them. Traditional voices argue this shows that male and female are complementary, they have the potential to have children, they need each other, they complete each other in a way that same-sex relationships

can't do. Liberal voices argue that this is a story of what it means to be human not a text about sexual ethics, it just can't bear that weight. Yes, it presents heterosexual relationships as the norm but that doesn't mean it's normative, in other words just because it's what most people do doesn't mean it's what everyone has to do. After all, we don't say that single people are incomplete or that sex is only for having children or that gender is all that determines whether we're compatible with someone. So same sex relationships can be seen as simply a different way of fulfilling our God-given need for intimacy.

But before they lay down, the men of the city, the men of Sodom, both young and old, all the people to the last man, surrounded the house; ⁵ and they called to Lot, "Where are the men who came to you tonight? Bring them out to us, so that we may know them." Genesis 19:4-5

You probably remember the basic story here; two angels visit Sodom and Lot invites them to stay at his house. The men of the city then surround the house and demand to have sex with them. Lot offers up his virgin daughters instead – what does that say about the ethics of the time? – but the angels strike the men blind before destroying the city. The sin of Sodom has become associated with homosexuality but Ezekiel (16:53) writes that Sodom's sin was pride, excess and failure to help the poor and needy. And actually, what we see here is an attempt to use sex as a weapon, to assert power over another – something I'm sure we all find abhorrent. In particular, to treat a man like a woman was a grave insult because women were considered inferior. So this has nothing to say about loving, consensual relationships.

Do not have sexual relations with a man as one does with a woman; that is an abomination. Lev 18:22

This verse, and a similar one in Lev 20 seem very straightforward – male same sex acts are an abomination. But if you read the whole of Leviticus and Deuteronomy you'll notice many laws that we happily disregard today, covering everything from food laws to worship to health and agriculture to correct treatment of slaves. Let's look at just a couple of the other laws governing sexual ethics.

Do not have sexual relations with your brother's wife - fair enough we think, that would violate your marriage vows, but look at the reason given - that would dishonour your brother. Lev 18:16 It's not about betraying your wife or putting your brother's wife in danger, the objection is that you dishonour your brother by taking possession of what he owns, his wife.

If a man happens to meet a virgin who is not pledged to be married and rapes herhe must marry her. Deut 22:28-29 Would we consider it moral today to force a woman to marry her rapist? It also says in Deuteronomy that if a woman pledged to be married is raped in a town then she is to be stoned to death because she should have called for help.

We can see just from these two examples that these laws were written for a culture that was very different from our own, where male honour was paramount, women were inferior, and economic security could only be found in marriage. That doesn't mean we can just write off all the biblical laws as being specific to their culture but we do need to be very careful in deciding how OT sexual ethics apply to our own context. In particular we need to make sure that we're basing our decisions on good theology and not personal prejudices.

Because of [their idolatry], God gave them over to shameful lusts. Even their women exchanged natural sexual relations for unnatural ones. In the same way the men also abandoned natural relations with women and were inflamed with lust for one another. Romans 1:26-27

This is the only passage in the Bible that mentions female same sex relationships. Traditional voices argue that Paul is showing same sex relationships to be a rejection of God's design in creation and therefore unacceptable. Liberal voices argue that Paul only knows of practices like prostitution and pederasty, where older men use slaves or adolescent boys for sex. These verses certainly condemn promiscuous, lustful, self-centred behaviour but do they really speak into committed same sex relationships of the kind we see today? Another argument raised in relation to this text is Paul's description of such acts as unnatural. Paul also considers it unnatural for men to have long hair and women to have short hair – is he mixing cultural norms with universal norms? Paul understands sexuality in terms of behaviour whereas we now understand it in terms of orientation, part of a person's identity. So what behaviour is natural to someone who is gay? This passage is also part of a wider argument that all human beings are sinners in need of God's grace and in no position to judge another.

You, therefore, have no excuse, you who pass judgment on someone else, for at whatever point you judge another, you are condemning yourself, because you who pass judgment do the same things. (Romans 2:1) In Romans 14, recognising that Christians live out their faith in different ways, Paul writes, *“Who are you to judge someone else's servant? To their own master, servants stand or fall.”* Who are you and I to judge a child of God?

Or do you not know that wrongdoers will not inherit the kingdom of God? Do not be deceived: Neither the sexually immoral nor idolaters nor adulterers nor men who have sex with men nor thieves nor the greedy nor drunkards nor slanderers nor swindlers will inherit the kingdom of God. 1 Cor 6:9-10

This list, and a similar list in 1 Timothy, contain a range of sins which reflect the damaging consequences of self-seeking behaviour. For most of the vices listed here we can readily see the damage they cause, but it's not so obvious why a loving, faithful same sex relationship would necessarily be damaging. Conversely, the prohibition on same sex relationships has caused tremendous damage. Does this provide enough reason to overturn traditional teaching, to make

decisions based on outcome rather than rules? Does a radically inclusive policy offer the outrageous grace of the gospel or does it deny people the chance of transformation? Are liberal commentators working too hard to escape the plain meaning of scripture in order to jettison a socially unacceptable message? Perhaps. But consider that the plain meaning of scripture supports slavery and prohibits me from speaking in church. And we've come to recognise that those passages are out of keeping with the message of the gospel. Yet if we pick and choose, how do we maintain the integrity of scripture?

It isn't an easy subject, is it? It's easier to draw up the battle lines than to truly listen to each other and make space for those whose beliefs and experiences are very different from our own.

You might well be sitting there thinking this isn't relevant to you, you're clear what you believe, these decisions are behind you and you don't need to think too much about it. But I guarantee these issues are relevant to your children, your grandchildren, your neighbours, the young people in our church, vulnerable, frightened people like Lizzie Lowe. And at some point you may need to make a choice – how do you respond to that wedding invitation, do you invite your new neighbours to church, what do you say to that newcomer? Our words, our actions, our silence make a difference to whether others draw closer to God or walk the other way. They make a difference to the decisions the CofE is making around same sex relationships. So please, whatever your views are, continue to listen to God and listen to others as we seek a way forward that discerns truth and welcomes all people in the name of Christ.