

'But I Have Called You Friends'

One in Christ: Why Do LGBTQI People Feel Excluded by the Churches?

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I've struggled to know how to begin my contribution on the question of sexuality and the church this evening and in such illustrious company! So – after a fair bit of casting around – I've decided to take the advice of the opening stanzas of David Whyte's poem, 'Start Close In'. 'Start close in', he says:

*don't take the second step
or the third,
start with the first
thing
close in,
the step you don't want to take.*

Start with
the ground
you know,
the pale ground
beneath your feet,
your own
way of starting
the conversation.

Well, the pale ground beneath my feet, the ground I know, is Benedictus Contemplative Church – the ecumenical worshipping community I lead in Canberra, Australia. And so I'm going to start by sharing a snapshot of us. We're a mixed bunch in lots of ways – ranging in age from school children to 90-odd; we are teachers, counsellors, scientists, lawyers, doctors, retirees, carers and public servants (it is Canberra, after all); our backgrounds, denominationally, are Anglican, Baptist, Catholic, Methodist, home church, Churches of Christ and no fixed address. In relation to sexuality, we're also a mixed bunch – straight and gay, married, partnered, single, widowed, divorced – and people live with all kinds of complexities.

I think of the single people in our community, both straight and gay, looking for love and struggling at times with loneliness and the vulnerabilities of meeting,

dating, and commitment, and of others recovering from the trauma of sexual assault or childhood sexual abuse. I think of the gay and lesbian couples, and those who are in the process of transitioning gender. There are the long-term celibate, married couples, the widowed and those whose relationships are under strain or breaking apart. As for me – my partner is divorced, and we have (at least for now) chosen deliberately not to get married. That's in large part because of how the so-called 'sanctity' of marriage seems to have become, in some Christian circles, almost idolatrous and of how this false sacred notion of marriage was weaponised against him by the church (he was also an Anglican priest) when his marriage was breaking down. As I said – we're a mixed bunch – and people live with all kinds of complexity.

Tonight we're focusing particularly on the question of LGBTQI people and the church, and you don't need me to tell you that often enough the church has been a profoundly unsafe space in this regard. One of the things I find sad and somehow shaming is when I receive emails from people asking me whether Benedictus welcomes gay and lesbian people – I hate the fact that such a question has to be asked, that the hospitality and safety of Christian community cannot be assumed. And in pastoral ministry, I see time and again what a struggle it can be for people to recover from the effects of ecclesial rejection and its surrounding theological baggage (such minor things as being threatened with eternal damnation, for example). I think of those who have been rejected by their families and religious communities and cases where parents or siblings have died unreconciled; I think of those who find it hard to let themselves be loved by those they love, since they struggle to believe, deep down, that their sexuality is OK with God. There are lots of stories like this.

An obvious and deeply understandable reaction to this state of affairs is for LGBTQI people and those who care about them to want nothing to do with Christian community. A friend told me of being at an Anglican church synod once, in one of the interminable 'debates' on homosexuality, ordination, and welcome for gay people. The tenor of this conversation was all about whether the church might or might

accept 'them' and 'their' ministry. Then a young gay priest got to his feet. He said the question his gay friends all asked him was what made him want to belong to this church anyway – given what the church was like, why bother with it at all? All of a sudden, the Synod got a glimpse of what it might be like to be talked about as 'them', and to be the ones rejected rather than assuming their entitlement to reject. It was a salutary moment!

So to walk away from the church altogether is a deeply understandable reaction and one for which I have considerable sympathy. But if we're here tonight then I guess there's something that doesn't quite satisfy about that response either. Because there's still the call of discipleship, the call of Christ. There's still our vocation to become one in Christ – one in ourselves, our inner dividedness and wounded-ness healed; and one as a human family – so that (as the letter to the Ephesians puts it) the hostility that stands like a dividing wall between different groups may be broken down, and a single new humanity brought into existence for the good of all and the glory of God. That's our vocation as disciples. The question becomes how do we live this out? How do we be faithful to it in the sometimes difficult and hostile conditions of contemporary ecclesiality? I want to approach these questions by asking, in the first instance, what's at stake for Christian life in relation to our sexuality.

Discerning Sexuality

It's sometimes said that the church is obsessed by sex, that it spends way too much energy poking its nose into the bedroom, and pays not nearly enough attention to the boardroom and so to issues of greed, corporate and government corruption, justice for the poor and the natural world. This shows up in various ways, including in the energy of the church's advocacy around certain issues, as well as its assessments of Christian integrity. In my diocese, for example, every three years, we have to be re-licensed as fit for ministry. There's a police check and a large number of questions pertaining to our personal lives. These are almost entirely focused

around matters to do with sexual conduct, together with a few around addiction – drug and alcohol use, gambling. It’s telling (it seems to me) that there are no questions at all to do with our financial dealings, our level of giving, our accumulation of property, or our ecological footprint. There does seem to be something deeply awry here.

Having said that, I believe our sexuality is importantly connected to our Christian life and that the church isn’t wrong to be concerned with matters of sexual integrity. That’s because our bodies and what we do with them matters. John Main wrote: ‘Our body is not just a “means” to salvation which will be discarded when it has served its purpose as in the gnostic vision of the body ... For the early Christian teachers ... the body is the hinge of salvation. We are saved in our bodies and the humanity of Jesus affirms this decisively’.¹ As you know, there’s a persistent dualism in the Western tradition – from Plato’s distinction between the body and the immortal soul, to Descartes’ distinction between body and mind where the mind is assumed to be the seat of identity and the part of us that really counts. But Christianity stands against this dualistic vision of human being – we are ‘embodied souls and ensouled bodies’ as Marc Cortez has written,² and our salvation is wrought in us whole. Bodies matter.

And just as in other dimensions of bodily life, so in relation to our sexual life there are ways of being and behaving that diminish others and ourselves. This means we need to discern our desires, our conduct, and learn what a proper sexual asceticism or discipline might be. The question becomes, of course, on what basis do we do so? Do we simply assume a conventional heterosexist morality as normative and divinely ordained? Or is there more to it? I’ve been helped in my reflections on this question by Rowan Williams’ brilliant essay, ‘The Body’s Grace’ on which I draw in what follows.³

¹ John Main, *Sacrament: The Christian Mysteries* (Singapore: Medio Media, 2011), p.23.

² Marc Cortez, *Embodied Souls, Ensouled Bodies: An Exercise in Christological Anthropology and Its Significance for the Mind/Body Debate* (London: T&T Clark, 2008).

³ Rowan Williams, ‘The Body’s Grace’, 10th Michael Harding Memorial Address, 1989 [accessed <https://www.anglican.ca/wp-content/uploads/2010/10/the-bodys-grace.pdf>, 10 May 2018]

Williams begins by saying something about the nature of sexual desire in general. He notes that we may find ourselves desiring someone, aroused by someone, without that other person being aware of it. But 'for my desire to persist and have some hope of fulfilment', I must let it be known. More than that – and here Williams quotes the philosopher Thomas Nagel – if my desire 'is to develop as it naturally tends to, it must be perceived as desirable by the other – that is my arousal and desire must become the cause of someone else's desire'. In other words, if my desire is to be freely expressed and consummated, the one I want has to want me back. So, he goes on:

this means, crucially, that in sexual relation I am no longer in charge of what I am. Any genuine experience of desire leaves me in something like this position: I cannot of myself satisfy my wants without distorting or trivialising them.

This is an intense case, Williams says, of the 'helplessness of the ego alone' – and we necessarily experience it as a state of risk and vulnerability. He writes:

For my body to be the cause of joy ... for me, it must be there for someone else, be perceived, accepted, nurtured; and that means [in turn, that my body must be] given over to the creation of joy in that other, because only as directed to the enjoyment, the happiness, of the other does [my body] become unreservedly lovable. To desire my joy is to desire the joy of the one I desire: my search for enjoyment through the bodily presence of another is a longing to be enjoyed in my body.

Part of what sexual love means, on this understanding, is 'a sense of the body's capacity to heal and enlarge the life of other subjects' when we are truly with one another, *giving* ourselves to another. Writing of the sacrament of marriage, John Main puts it simply. 'Each person does not become the full person they are called to be except in a relationship of love. And to love is to be other-centred'.⁴ Seen in this light, we understand how the language of desire and sexual union becomes an analogy in our tradition for the experience of desiring and being desired by God.

⁴ Main, *Sacrament*, p.25.

There's the same vulnerability and other-centredness, the same giving over of the self to the other as the condition of mutual delight and fulfilment.

Well, if this kind of vulnerability and mutuality is what's involved in the undistorted expression and fulfilment of sexual desire, two points seem to follow. First, it suggests how we might discern the nature of dis-ordered or perverse sexual expression. Williams proposes that we understand 'sexual "perversion" [as] sexual activity without [this kind of] risk'. It's the attempt to retain control of my happiness and fulfilment, without the risky and 'dangerous acknowledgement that my joy depends on someone else's as theirs does on mine'. Examples of this kind of 'perversion' or distorted sexual activity would be where there is 'an unbalance in the relation such that the desire of the other for me is irrelevant or minimal – rape, paedophilia, bestiality'.

And if this is right, then it follows that discerning when particular forms of desire and sexual expression are 'sterile, undeveloped or even corrupt' cannot be a matter simply of evaluating them with reference to their conformity to heterosexual 'norms'. Instead, it calls us to attend to the meaning of particular relationships, and the way they conduce (or not) to mutual integrity and joy, to the way they communicate grace. Williams dares to say that if what's fundamentally at issue in perverted sexual expression is that it leaves 'one agent in effective control of the situation – one agent, that is, who doesn't have to wait upon the desire of the other', then this suggests that 'in a great many cultural settings, the socially licensed norm of heterosexual intercourse is [itself] a "perversion"'. And later he insists that 'sexual union is not delivered from moral danger and ambiguity by satisfying a formal socio-religious criterion'.

What I find profoundly helpful here is that it gives us a way of moving beyond a crude Christian rhetoric – heterosexual good, homosexual bad – while at the same time not resiling from the fact that we need to discern our desires and their enactment. In a Christian vision, sexual integrity is answerable to the good of the other and to the ways we may enrich, celebrate and grace one another. This

necessarily involves our deepening capacity for other-centredness and fidelity, our coming to know and trust our own loveability, and our willingness to risk ourselves in giving and receiving delight. And this means that properly Christian care for the nature of sexual desire and its expression should not be reduced to propping up a 'socio-religious norm' but rather should enable us to live as sexual beings in ways that conduce to our and others' well-being and joy. And this brings me to consider the way in which our deepening sexual integrity (wholeness) is connected to the process of becoming one in Christ.

Contemplative Sex

We know how profoundly ambiguous sexual intimacy can be. There are many subtle ways in which relationships of such vulnerability, risk and exposure can be occasions for the misuse of power and diminishment of self and other. There are obvious forms of abuse and betrayal – interestingly, in Australia's Anglican church at least, there've been revelations of quite significant levels of domestic violence in clergy families. But there are multifarious ways in which patterns of manipulation, coercion, cruelty, withholding and shame can characterize our sexual relationships – sometimes deliberately and aggressively, but more often unconsciously and unwantedly, the outworking of deeper wounds, anxieties and habits of self-protection. And here's where we see the connection between the process of maturing spiritually – the deepening reconciliation and integration of the self, and the possibility of sexual relationships that are more rather than less creative and generative of life.

At one level, this point is familiar. It's a common-place of teenage sex education, for example, that girls are urged to overcome their low self-esteem so as to avoid being pressured into early sexual activity and risking unwanted pregnancy. But as I imagine we've all experienced one way or another, we can't overcome low self-esteem simply by exercising our will-power. Nor can we let go a sense of shame or habits of control, withholding or emotional manipulation so easily. This is why our tradition testifies that healing of the deepest levels of self-alienation and dividedness

is first and foremost the fruit of Christ's work among us. 'We love because he first loved us', says the first letter of John (4:19). Experiencing ourselves loved by God, accepted by God for no reason other than that's what God is like, means we need no longer strive for anything, compete for anything, justify or defend ourselves. This is the meaning of salvation. And only as we begin to discover ourselves loved and accepted in this way, beyond all fear of rejection (including self-rejection), are we able simply to be ourselves and with one another as God is.

The question is, how do we realise this salvation? How do we make it our own? In the context of being reconciled to our sexuality, as we've already seen, it may require the unmasking of false conceptions about ourselves and God. It may involve discovering and speaking our truth, acknowledging and reclaiming all that's been suppressed and denied in us. Yet almost paradoxically, what I want also to suggest is that this deep work of reconciliation and liberation is enabled through the disciplined and prayerful practice of silence – the practice of meditation. This is not at all the same as being silenced (don't ask, don't tell). Rather it's an entering of the silence that is, as John Main put it, 'filled with God's presence'.

There's a deep mystery here but what we discover in the practice of meditation is that the more we enter into this silence – relinquishing thoughts and anxieties, self-criticism and self-defence – the more we discover ourselves sourced in and transformed by that reality of love which in silence welcomes us all. John Main says meditation is 'a commitment to a silence in which we find our own roots in the eternal silence of God, a silence in which we enter into profound harmony and find ourselves in communion' with ourselves,⁵ with God and with other people. It enables us to become who we are.

Meditation is not magic. It doesn't deliver us from the inevitable vulnerability of real personal intimacy or defend us against all hurt – but it does heal us at a deep level. It makes us less needy for the approval of 'the world' and so less manipulable by the insecure sexual partner, by the pressure of social norms, by the hostility of the

⁵ Main, *Sacrament*, p.24.

church; it frees us to be less self-conscious and inhibited, and so more fully expressed and generous with ourselves; it helps us be more fully present, and so able to attend to the presence and wonder of the other – to be tender, to enjoy the beloved.

Contemplative practice makes us better lovers, you might say, in every sense of that phrase!

Start Close In

I have argued that the real questions of sexual integrity are not resolved by our conforming to licensed norms of what we now call heterosexuality and binary gender identity. Rather, they're to do with our capacity for self-giving, other-centred loving and mutual joy. And I've suggested that meditation is a profound practice for enabling us to realise the promise and possibility of sexual love, as we become more deeply reconciled with ourselves through experiencing ourselves beloved of God.

We began with the question of why LGBTQI people feel and are rejected by the churches. But Jesus tells his disciples that what constitutes them *as* the church and as participants in his ministry of reconciliation is their union with him. 'I am the vine, and you the branches', says the Jesus of John's gospel. 'He who dwells in me, as I dwell in him, bears much fruit'. Indeed, in the light of this mutual indwelling, he goes on, 'I do not call you servants any longer, because the servant does not know what the master is doing; but I have called you friends, because I have made known to you everything that I have heard from my Father'. To grow into oneness, union with Christ, in other words, is to become an insider to the project of the world's creation and redemption. It's to be called to radical maturity of faith and discipleship – and this is the vocation and the meaning of church.

I don't want to be glib about this. The fact that membership of Christ's body is not finally determined by our institutional acceptability, doesn't excuse the injustice of our ecclesial institutions. It doesn't negate the damage inflicted on those who suffer its rejection and whose vocations and gifts for the church's ministry are systematically denied and frustrated. Even so, what's ultimately at stake here is

much bigger than the question of institutional acceptance. The Quaker teacher Parker Palmer says that when 'way' closes in front of you, you can spend all your energy banging on the door that's shut in your face ... or you can turn around and see the whole world open to you, awaiting your contribution and your joy. And I wonder, as we are befriended by and one-d in Christ, how we might discern our part in his mission of love in the world? How might we be more fully reconciled ourselves, and so be agents of Christ's reconciliation for others – even (dare we imagine) for the church itself? I began with the opening stanzas of David Whyte's poem, 'Start Close In'. Let its closing stanzas encourage us to trust the path that is ours to tread.

Start right now
take a small step
you can call your own
don't follow
someone else's
heroics, be humble
and focused,
start close in,
don't mistake
that other
for your own.

*Start close in,
don't take the second step
or the third,
start with the first
thing
close in,
the step you don't want to take.*