Editorial

In the modern world there is no subject more widely discussed than human sexuality. Whether we are talking about the family, about so-called 'gender issues' or even about the language we use in worship, sexuality intrudes and very often pushes its way to the forefront of discussion. Most people would probably agree that this is regrettable, and that it colours much of our thinking in an unhelpful way, but we cannot escape the intellectual climate in which we live, and that climate is dominated by sex. There are doubtless many reasons why this should be so, but whatever the causes of the present situation may be, the Church has found itself having to pronounce on a range of sexual issues which until a generation ago were almost unheard of in synodical circles.

It is worth recalling that traditional discussion of this subject has focused on the main issues: 1) can an ordained clergyman take a wife? 2) are marriage vows indissoluble? 3) is polygamy permissible? The Church of England has answered yes to the first of these and no to the third, whilst hesitating on the second. Only very recently has there been any positive acceptance of persons who have remarried following a divorce, and a church wedding for such people is still (officially at least) ruled out.

Given this situation, is it not surprising to find that the Church of England is ill-equipped to deal with the modern avalanche of issues. In most cases it proceeds pragmatically, deciding individual cases on their merits and remaining agnostic or non-committal on matters like abortion, where other Christian bodies have been, probably unwisely, dogmatic. There must be many in the church who would dearly like to treat the issue of homosexuality in the same way, but feelings on both sides are probably too strong to allow this. Homosexuals want to be affirmed in their lifestyle, which to them means full acceptance by the wider community. Many other people recoil from this in horror, and some would want to drive homosexuals out of the Church altogether. Compromise in this atmosphere is hardly possible, and it is probable that the leading spokesmen on the subject do not want it, even if it could be achieved.

In North America, the debate over homosexuality has followed closely on the ordination of women, and most people there sense that the two issues are related, though it is very difficult to say how. In the Church of England, discussion along these lines has been muted at best, and probably most advocates of women's ordination would regard linking these two matters as outrageous. Perhaps it is, but the extraordinary co-incidence must surely be noticed, at least. Would women have been ordained in a society where gender distinctions are clear and sexuality is seldom if ever discussed in this kind of way?

That being said, everyone knows that homosexuality is widespread in the Church of England, especially among certain sections of the clergy, and it has been quietly tolerated in high places for a very long time. A witchhunt against homosexuals now would reek of hypocrisy and would almost certainly affect only those who were unlucky enough to get caught. But at the same time, few people believe that homosexual practice (as distinct from orientation which is often beyond the control of the individual) is acceptable in a Christian community. So how should the problem be tackled?

First it should be admitted that sexuality is part of our fallen human nature, and that sin in this area may take many forms. Nobody has the right to condemn homosexuals as uniquely evil, and emotional, knee-jerk reactions of that kind must be in themselves suspect. The last thing anyone needs is a handy scapegoat. Secondly, the great complexity of the subject ought to be admitted. There is much about homosexuality which we do not understand, and individual homosexuals must be loved and accepted as people, however much we may disapprove of their sin. Thirdly, Christians ought to be prepared to offer genuine non-sexual friendship to homosexuals, which they need just as much as anybody else. A married couple with no time for anyone but themselves is very poorly placed to pass judgment on those who, in their eyes, deviate from the accepted norm.

Lastly, and perhaps most important of all, homosexuals should be encouraged to define themselves differently. Only in a culture where sex is the primary focus does it matter what an individual's sexual orientation is. Most of the time and in most situations it is irrelevant, and so it should be. Furthermore, married Christians ought to remember that the celibate life, consecrated to the service of God, is as highly honoured in Scripture as their own state. A person of homosexual orientation can be encouraged to lead a life of consecrated celibacy as a gift from God with its own special blessing, not as a misfortune imposed by some unmentionable form of deviance.

A mature approach to this emotive issue is all the more essential in that the language of love and compassion is all too often hijacked by those most in favour of equal rights for homosexual practice. If those of us who do not accept that position allow ourselves to be portrayed as unloving, hypocritical judges then we shall not only lose the argument but do incalculable harm to our cause in the process.

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