



*An Open Letter to the Diocese of Worcester*

**The Rt Revd Dr John Inge**  
THE BISHOP OF WORCESTER

Dear Friends in Christ,

In our recent letter to the clergy of the Diocese of Worcester, the Bishop of Dudley and I wrote that we think the time has come for the Church of England to celebrate and honour monogamous, faithful same-sex relationships. We added that we believe this to be consonant with the scriptural witness but did not set out our reasoning. We merely commended the Bishop of Oxford's booklet, *Living together in Love and Faith*.<sup>1</sup> I feel I should summarise my own thinking on the subject and shall attempt to do so here.

Before I do, I should perhaps respond to those who have wondered why I am questioning church doctrine when, as a bishop, I should be upholding it. I want to make clear that I consider it my duty to uphold church doctrine even when I argue for it to be changed. I would not marry a same-sex couple in church any more than I would have taken part in the ordination of a women as a bishop before the Church of England allowed it. I did, however, argue at that time for a departure from what, similarly, had for centuries been the general understanding of what scripture and the tradition of the Church required.

I also want to emphasize at the outset that I desire to live my life under the scriptures and believe that it is possible to do so whilst holding to the understanding to which I have come about same-sex relationships. Those things having been said, I shall endeavour to explain my current thinking.

In 1889 a book entitled *Lux Mundi* was published. It was edited by my predecessor as Bishop of Worcester, Charles Gore. His own essay in the book, *The Holy Spirit and Inspiration*, caused a furore. George Denison, Archdeacon

of Taunton, wrote that the temper of mind which had called *Lux Mundi* into life 'finds, or thinks it finds, that its own discoveries cannot be reconciled with Holy Scripture and that, of the two, Holy Scripture is the one that must give way.'<sup>ii</sup> There were protests when, in 1901, the 'heretic' Gore was nominated for the see of Worcester. His offence? To suggest that not all the Old Testament – the Genesis creation accounts, the stories of Jonah and Job, for example – are literal historical accounts.

Most Christians would now take for granted the insights for which Gore fought and would consider those who hold to creationism a gift to atheists and vocal agnostics like Richard Dawkins.<sup>iii</sup> Those of us who accept the theory of evolution and still hold to the scriptures as being the inspired Word of God 'containing all things necessary unto salvation', find in the passages in question truth at least as profound as literal historical fact.

The above shift involved a reappraisal of the scriptures in the light of what was happening in the world of science. I was trained as a scientist – my first degree is in chemistry – and I have had to ponder hard and long how science and the biblical witness can be reconciled. I suggest that something similar to Gore's time is happening now. Until recently it was thought by many that the expression of homosexuality was simply a perverse lifestyle choice. Though, as yet, there is no scientific certainty about what factors determine sexual orientation, there is general consensus that it is not a choice. There is even stronger consensus that 'sexual orientation change efforts' (SOCE), sometimes called 'conversion therapies' for homosexual orientation are both ineffective and harmful.<sup>iv</sup>

Much has been made of the analogy between the present debate over same-sex relations and the grudging acceptance by the Church of England of contraception and marriage of divorcees in church, as well as the long battle for the acceptance of women's ministry as priests and deacons. I shall come back to these, but I think the analogy with 19<sup>th</sup> Century biblical criticism in the light of scientific progress is at least as strong. My understanding of Anglican polity is that we are bound by the scriptures, interpreted within the living tradition of the Church through the application of reason and experience.

Reason and experience have caused me to come to the scriptures anew and reassess my reading of them. Scientific insight is part of that experience.

Alongside such engagement with the scriptures, over the years I have observed good, faithful, monogamous relationships between people of the same sex which I cannot believe to be inherently sinful. Equally affectingly, I have been moved by the pain inflicted on gay people by the Church. That pain has remained constant even though society, in my view, has become more enlightened. My nomination as Bishop of Huntingdon was announced at the same time as that of Jeffery John to the See of Reading. That is almost exactly twenty years ago. He is one of the many casualties of our present discipline. His book, *Permanent, Faithful, Stable*,<sup>v</sup> was first published in 1993. He has suffered for nearly thirty years for expressing the approach I am now proposing. Friends of mine have resigned as priests and many have left the Church altogether because of the attitude towards and the treatment of them by significant numbers of Church members. I have been forced to ask myself the question, how is the Church's teaching good news for gay people, created in God's image? I feel bound to say, rather late in the day, that it is not. I apologise to all those whom my silence has wounded in the past. My reticence was motivated by a commitment to the unity of the Church. I believe the time has come for all of us to be honest about the convictions we have reached after prayer, study of scripture and theological reflection, often over many years. My prayer is that such honesty might lead us into a deeper understanding of one another and so into a richer unity. How can we expect the Spirit to lead us into all truth if we are less than honest with one another?

It will be clear from the above that I do not think there is anything wrong with re-examining the scriptures in the light of science and what is happening in the 'secular' world. God is quite capable of speaking to the churches from outside them. In reassessing my understanding of what they have to say to us on this issue I have been helped by the brilliant Old Testament scholar Walter Brueggemann, who tells us that we should start 'with the awareness that the Bible does not speak with a single voice on any topic. Inspired by God as it is, all sorts of persons have a say in the complexity of Scripture, and we are under mandate to listen, as best we can, to all of its voices.'<sup>vi</sup>

As the biblical scholar R T France suggests

A truly biblical hermeneutic must not confine itself to the overt pronouncements ... but must be open to the biblical evidence as a whole, including its narrative and incidental parts. When this broader approach is undertaken it may lead us to re-examine the way in which we have read the more 'obvious' texts ... If this makes deriving guidance for the real world from the biblical text more complex than it might at first have seemed, so be it. Let us hope that by embracing the wider range of biblical evidence we are enabled to be more responsible in offering biblical guidance for the issues of our generation.<sup>vii</sup>

The fact is that we all view the scriptures through a particular lens. As Walter Brueggemann puts it:

All interpretation filters the text through life experience of the interpreter. The matter is inescapable and cannot be avoided ... we read the text according to our *vested interests*. Sometimes we are aware of our vested interests, sometimes we are not. It is not difficult to see this process at work concerning gender issues in the Bible.<sup>viii</sup>

This process enables some of us who would think of ourselves as 'Bible believing Christians' to question the teaching of what others would describe as 'the plain meaning of scripture'. For example, what St Paul says about women not praying with their heads uncovered (1 Corinthians 11.1-13) and not speaking in Church (1 Corinthians 4.34-35). It is very difficult to reconcile these passages with women taking an equal part in church worship, let alone being ordained. Taken at face value it would mean all Christians who are female wearing head coverings in church or in prayer. It is necessary to point to other texts and produce arguments to suggest that these should carry more weight. In fact, looking at these passages together with what Paul says elsewhere about there being neither male nor female in Christ, it becomes more difficult for Christians to use the texts to bolster patriarchy or even to subjugate women.

The same is true of the remarriage of divorcees, which Jesus specifically prohibits in St Mark's gospel (Mark 10. 1-12, especially verses 11-12), thereby contradicting Moses. There is what is referred to as 'the Matthean exception' (Matthew 5.31-32) which further complicates the picture. Which teaching of Jesus do we follow?

Some would say that whereas the scriptures are ambivalent about divorce and the role of women in the leadership of the Church, they are unequivocal in their condemnation of homosexuality. I do not think that is true. I do not think that the oft quoted passages in Leviticus and Paul refer to anything comparable to the faithful, monogamous same-sex relationships which some of us are suggesting the Church should celebrate. Among others, I have found the pastoral theologian David Runcorn particularly helpful in summarising how these texts can be interpreted<sup>ix</sup> and I use some of his insights below.

It must be admitted that wherever instances of same-sex sexual activity are found in the Bible they are unequivocally condemned but what I believe the Bible condemns is something that every gay person in the Church today would also condemn - abusive, oppressive, exploitative relationships. The Bible never explains why same-sex sexual activity is condemned: it may well be the exploitative nature of the activity described. Leviticus 18 is a case in point and 1Cor 6.9 is another. Both texts are difficult to translate with any certainty but one clue of how to do so may be the other vices on Paul's list. They are all examples of abusive, domineering, self-seeking, exploitative and even criminal behaviour, which are rightly condemned. Paul clearly has Leviticus in mind.

When Paul wrote his letter to the Romans, he pinned nearly all that was wrong with Roman polytheism on the empire's sexual morality. Kyle Harper<sup>x</sup> has shown that he had good reason to do so. The world into which Christianity was born was a slave economy. In particular, you could call yourself free if you could do what you wanted sexually with your body and with other people's bodies.

Paul had discovered a different kind of freedom. It was based not on bodies but on wills. Freedom in Christ was about the transformation of the mind. The condemnation of homosexuality and, in fact, all sexual acts save those that were necessary to procreate, followed because to indulge in them was gratuitously to exercise your freedom as if you were rejecting the new freedom of mind and will to be found in Christ. This is what Paul focused on.

Nowadays, the slave economy has gone, at least as an official policy. In a liberal society, no one has the right to anyone else's body. Similarly, the Church no longer teaches that the best sex is no sex, as it did for much of its first 1500 years. Those who adhere literally to Paul's injunctions have, therefore, lost sight of the spirit of the gospel. Christian freedom, based upon will, is now commonly expressed in the notion of consent. Love is the basis for sexual relationships, not ownership. Celebrating sexual love is now to witness to the freedom to be found in Christ.

Equally, Paul is not talking about what we would term sexual orientation, a very modern concept. *Arsenokoites* and *malakos* describe *roles* being adopted in same-sex sexual acts. To be a man in the ancient world was to be assertive and dominant; to be a woman was to be passive and receptive. Men who were *malakos* in the relationship were a scandal, 'effeminate' and mocked. When Leviticus 18 specifically condemns lying with a man 'as with a woman' there seems to be a similar concern with roles. God willing, we don't nowadays understand love-making and sexual intimacy in terms of active and passive roles, with men as active and dominant and women as passive. Surely a Christian understanding of love and relating is about mutuality and partnership? I would suggest that gospel teaching about love redefines ancient assumptions about hierarchy and role, both socially and theologically.

I believe Walter Brueggemann is right when he writes that the reason the Bible seems to some to speak 'in one voice' concerning matters that pertain to LGBTQ persons is that 'the loud voices most often cite only one set of texts, to the determined disregard of the texts which challenge vested interest. Serious reading does not allow such a disregard, so that we must have all of the texts in our purview.'<sup>xi</sup>

Jesus made no mention of homosexuality, though the fact that he refers to a man leaving his father and mother and cleaving to his wife in the same passage as he prohibits divorce (Mark 10. 7-10), with a reference back to Genesis, leads some to suggest that the marriage of one man to one woman is a creation ordinance. But Jesus is here answering a specific question about divorce. The trouble is that there is no such thing as a fixed 'biblical' view of marriage. We know that the Bible countenances men having quite a few wives – Solomon, we are told, had 700<sup>xii</sup> – so the witness is mixed, to say the least. The number of marriages in the Bible which can be held up as examples of what we would understand to be a 'good' marriage is surprisingly few.

Sophisticated arguments concerning which parts of scriptures must be taken literally are made to deny affirming monogamous homosexual relationships. So, for example, the prohibition in Leviticus on 'a man lying with another man'<sup>xiii</sup> is said to form part of the moral law whilst other prohibitions in Leviticus can be disregarded – tattooing, for example! <sup>xiv</sup>. Such an approach involves intellectual gymnastics to produce an interpretation which avoids the 'plain meaning' of scripture and explain why some injunctions can be ignored, which is exactly what some suggest I am doing concerning same-sex relations.

It is also suggested that Genesis 2.24-26 concerning a man leaving his father and mother and being united to his wife is a 'creation ordinance'. That is to say, it is one of the principles that God gave to humanity at the beginning of creation before the fall. I have come to think that we tend to overplay the significance of gender in God's scheme of things. In Genesis we read 'male and female he created them, in the image of God he created them.' It is not gender which is essential in reflecting the image of God, though. God has no gender and both men and women are equally made in the image of God. This was recognised by the Church Fathers. Gregory of Nyssa went further, arguing that physical bodies would have been radically different before the fall, that male and female coexisted with the image of God, and that sexual differentiation came about only as the representation in the flesh of the fall from grace.<sup>xv</sup>

Thomas Laqueur has made clear how modern are our assumptions about the differences between the sexes.

For thousands of years, it had been a commonplace that women had the same genitals as men except that, as Nemesius, bishop of Ernesa in the fourth century, put it: "theirs are inside the body and not outside it." Galen, who in the second century A.D. developed the most powerful and resilient model of the structural, though not spatial, identity of the male and female reproductive organs, demonstrated at length that women were essentially men in whom a lack of vital heat – of perfection – had resulted in the retention, inside, of structures that in the male are visible without ...

But then, in or about the late eighteenth, to use Virginia Woolf's device, human sexual nature changed. On this point, at least, scholars as theoretically distant from one another as Michel Foucault, Ivan Illich, and Lawrence Stone agree. By around 1800, writers of all sorts were determined to base what they insisted were fundamental differences between the male and female sexes, and thus between man and woman, on discoverable biological distinctions and to express these in a radically different rhetoric.<sup>xvi</sup>

Equally, neither sex nor gender have eternal significance. Jesus tells his hearers that 'at the resurrection they will neither marry nor be given in marriage, they will be like the angels in heaven.' (Matt 22.30) This correlates with what Paul writes to the Galatians, that 'in Christ there is no Jew nor Greek, no slave nor free, no male nor female'. (Gal 3.28) St Paul gave his life's ministry to enable Gentiles to be fully accepted as Christians. It was not until the Nineteenth Century that – as now seems obvious to us – the fact that slavery is an abomination became clear to Christians. I feel the Spirit is now convicting us of the truth of the third proposition.

Avid readers of the Church Times will know that I have changed my view on same-sex marriage. In 2017, as an article on 4 November 2022 pointed out, I wrote:

Though I rejoice when gay people find love and commit themselves to it, I have difficulty with equal marriage. Bishop Rowan Williams once described it as a category error and that's where I am. It's a technical philosophical term, of course, but it causes me difficulty which I cannot, at present, surmount. I just think gay relationships are different. It is, after all, not that long since gay rights campaigners were condemning marriage as an irredeemably patriarchal institution. I'm afraid I haven't moved as fast as some of them.<sup>xvii</sup>

Since then, I have come to see that all the traditional 'goods of marriage' except procreation can be enjoyed by those in a same-sex marriage. The latter, in any event, is bracketed out in the Common Worship rite and, as we all know, not all heterosexual marriages produce children. The other two 'goods of marriage' which, after Augustine, are mutual love and support and sexual intimacy, are available in a gay relationship.<sup>xviii</sup> If the Church were to accept equal marriage it could hold to its teaching that sexual activity properly belongs within marriage and it could give all the support it gives to heterosexual couples to homosexual ones.

The word 'homosexual' was first used in the Revised Standard Version of 1946 to translate biblical words and phrases referring to various forms of same-sex sexual activity (specifically 1Cor 6.9). Other translations soon followed suit. It's worth remembering that homosexuality was treated as a mental illness or simply a criminal offence at that time. It's sad that, in the absence of any examples of faithful, loving, gay relationships in the Bible, gay Christian desire and relating have become indelibly associated with all that is judged as most godless and abominable in the Bible. We need to recognise that gay Christians today, seeking to live consecrated, faithful lives in the way of Christ, simply do not find themselves described in these texts. They do not advocate or practise those exploitative sins of which Paul speaks. Indeed, the suggestion is deeply offensive. This must be taken with full seriousness. What they want is something different, very different: for the Church to bless their monogamous, committed, loving, faithful relationships. Withholding such blessing is experienced as punitive, and understandably so:

In refusing to bless our relationships, it says there is nothing good in them – that we are unable to reflect the love of God in the same way that heterosexuals are. It says that we are somehow, innately, disordered. We are ‘less than’. Our love and its human expression is something that needs to be ‘excused’, something we should be slightly embarrassed about.’<sup>xix</sup>

Those who articulate a conservative approach to sexuality need to understand that, though they may not intend to be homophobic, they are often heard to be so. It’s analogous, for me, to the way in which women not being allowed to be ordained can come across to some of them as branding them second-class citizens, whatever sophisticated biblical and theological reasons are given.

That said, I have a great respect for those who hold to a traditional view of marriage and am convicted that, whatever else happens, this view should continue to be honoured in the Church. With that in mind, I commend the gracious response to the Bishop of Oxford’s booklet by Vaughan Roberts, who describes himself as ‘same sex attracted’ and who lives a celibate life in obedience to what he understands his faith requires of him. It is well worth reading as an accessible account of a traditional view.<sup>xx</sup>

I have particular respect for all who, such as him, make great sacrifices for their faith. It is certainly not the case that sexual expression is essential to a fulfilled life and the vocation to celibacy should be taken very seriously in the Church. I just do not believe that it should apply to all homosexual people any more than it should be applied to all heterosexual people. For the majority of both, the life in all its fulness which Jesus offers involves the freedom to form a monogamous, faithful relationship with one other person in which their sexuality may be expressed physically.

I was very struck by what the Archbishop of Canterbury said in a magisterial address at the Lambeth Conference prior to our consideration of the ‘Call on Human Dignity’. It received a standing ovation from pretty much everyone present, liberal and conservative:

For the large majority of the Anglican Communion the traditional understanding of marriage is something that is understood, accepted and without question, not only by Bishops but their entire Church, and the societies in which they live. For them, to question this teaching is unthinkable, and in many countries would make the Church a victim of derision, contempt and even attack. For many churches to change traditional teaching challenges their very existence.

For a minority, we can say almost the same. They have not arrived lightly at their ideas that traditional teaching needs to change. They are not careless about scripture. They do not reject Christ. But they have come to a different view on sexuality after long prayer, deep study and reflection on understandings of human nature. For them, to question this different teaching is unthinkable, and in many countries is making the Church a victim of derision, contempt and even attack. For these churches not to change traditional teaching challenges their very existence.

So let us not treat each other lightly or carelessly. We are deeply divided. That will not end soon. We are called by Christ himself both to truth and unity.

I believe that the Church of England is now in the latter category and that not to change our teaching would be a missional error of grave proportions. But I take that last paragraph very seriously indeed. I do not want to treat anyone who holds a traditional view lightly or carelessly. I reiterate they must continue to have an honoured place within the Church of England, as do those who are in conscience opposed to the ordination of women as priests and bishops. I hope and pray with all my heart that whatever our views on this issue we shall be able to disagree in love and continue to walk together.

+John Wigorn:

Epiphany 2023

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<sup>i</sup> [www.oxford.anglican.org/news/same-sex-marriage-in-cofe.php](http://www.oxford.anglican.org/news/same-sex-marriage-in-cofe.php)

<sup>ii</sup> Quoted in G.L. Prestige, *The Life of Charles Gore* (London: Heinemann, 1935), p116

<sup>iii</sup> See C. Cunningham, *Darwin's Pious Idea* ( Darwin himself wrote that he thought it absurd to suggest that creationism and theism were irreconcilable.

<sup>iv</sup> *Living in Love and Faith* (London: Church House Publishing, 2020) p118

<sup>v</sup> Jeffery John, *Permanent, Faithful, Stable* (London: Darton, Longman and Todd, 1993)

<sup>vi</sup> [https:// outreach.faith/2022/09/walter-brueggemann-how-to-read-the-bible-on-homosexuality/](https://outreach.faith/2022/09/walter-brueggemann-how-to-read-the-bible-on-homosexuality/)

<sup>vii</sup> R.T. France, *A Slippery Slope - the ordination of women and homosexual practice - a case study in Biblical interpretation*. (Grove Biblical Studies No16) , p23-4). RT France was conservative on this issue but his comments here are instructive.

<sup>viii</sup> W. Brueggemann, op cit

<sup>ix</sup> D. Runcorn, *Love Means Love. Same Sex Relations and the Bible* (London: SPCL, 2020) p53 ff

<sup>x</sup> K. Harper, *From Shame to Sin. The Christian Transformation of Sexual Morality in Late Antiquity* (Cambridge, Massachusetts: Harvard University Press, 2013)

<sup>xi</sup> W. Brueggemann, op cit

<sup>xii</sup> 1Kings 11.3

<sup>xiii</sup> Leviticus 18.22 and 20.13

<sup>xiv</sup> Leviticus 19.29

<sup>xv</sup> P. Brown, *The Body and Society: Men, Women, and Sexual Renunciation in Early Christianity* (New York: Columbia University Press, 1988), pp. 167-168, 294- 295.

<sup>xvi</sup> T. Laqueur *Making Sex. Body and Gender from the Greeks to Freud* (Cambridge, Massachusetts: Harvard University Press, 1990), 5

<sup>xvii</sup> Quoted in *The Church Times*, 5 November 2022

<sup>xviii</sup> See the preface to the marriage rite in *Common Worship*

<sup>xix</sup> [Unity and the Myth of Neutrality - ViaMedia.News](https://www.viamedia.news/unity-and-the-myth-of-neutrality)

<sup>xx</sup> V. Roberts, *Together in Love & Faith? Should the Church bless same-sex partnerships? A response to the Bishop of Oxford* [https://2713aced-d665-4866-bcd0-8f7d81f2f5fe.usrfiles.com/ugd/2713ac\\_4f9a3958db324778b807e9507fb7c1b3.pdf](https://2713aced-d665-4866-bcd0-8f7d81f2f5fe.usrfiles.com/ugd/2713ac_4f9a3958db324778b807e9507fb7c1b3.pdf).