**St Andrew’s on the Terrace Lent 2 Pride 2 Sunday 17 March 2019**

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| ***Since the Gathering for today was originally planned, a gunman shot and killed 49 Muslim worshippers in a Christchurch mosque injuring 39 others on Friday 15 March. The original reflection written on individual biblical passages often used to dismiss gay people, is at the end of this document. The reflection delivered on Sunday 17 March precedes it.******Readings for the Gathering*** ***Hebrew Bible 1 Samuel 20:12-42******12****Then Jonathan said to David, “I swear by the God of Israel, that I will surely sound out my father! If he is favourably disposed toward you, will I not send you word and let you know?****13****But if my father intends to harm you, may God deal with Jonathan, be it ever so severely, if I do not let you know and send you away in peace. May God be with you as he has been with my father.****14****But show me unfailing kindness like the Lord’s kindness as long as I live, so I not be killed,****15****and do not ever cut off your kindness from my family—not even when God has cut off every one of David’s enemies from the face of the earth.”* ***16****So Jonathan made a covenant with the house of David, saying, “May God call David’s enemies to account.”****17****And Jonathan had David reaffirm his oath out of love for him, because he loved him as he loved himself.* ***18****Then Jonathan said to David, “Tomorrow is the New Moon feast. You will be missed...****19****The day after tomorrow, toward evening, go to the place where you hid when this trouble began, and wait by the stone Ezel.****20****I will shoot three arrows to the side of it, as though shooting at a target.****21*** *I will send a boy and say, ‘Go, find the arrows.’ If I say, ‘Look, the arrows are on this side of you; bring them here,’ then come, because, as surely as the Lord lives, you are safe…****22****But if I say to the boy, ‘Look, the arrows are beyond you,’ then you must go, because God has sent you away.****23****About the matter you and I discussed—remember, God is witness between you and me forever.”* ***24****So David hid in the field, and when the New Moon feast came, the king sat down to eat.****25****He sat in his customary place by the wall… but David’s place was empty.****26****Saul said nothing that day…* ***27****But the next day, the second day of the month, David’s place was empty again. Then Saul said to ..Jonathan, “Why hasn’t the son of Jesse come to the meal, either yesterday or today?”* ***28****Jonathan answered, “David earnestly asked me for permission to go to Bethlehem.****29****He said, ‘Let me go, because our family is observing a sacrifice in the town… If I have found favour in your eyes, let me get away to see my brothers.’ That is why he has not come to the king’s table.”* ***30****Saul’s anger flared up .. and he said to Jonathon, “You son of a perverse and rebellious woman! Don’t I know you have sided with the son of Jesse to your own shame and to the shame of the mother who bore you?****31****As long as the son of Jesse lives on this earth, neither you nor your kingdom will be established. Now send someone to bring him to me, for he must die!”* ***32****“Why should he be put to death? What has he done?” Jonathan asked.****33****But Saul hurled his spear at him to kill him. Then Jonathan knew his father intended to kill David.* ***34****Jonathan got up … in fierce anger; on that second day of the feast he did not eat, … grieved at his father’s shameful treatment of David.* ***35****In the morning Jonathan went out to the field for his meeting with David. He had a small boy with him,****36****and he said, “Run and find the arrows I shoot.” As the boy ran, he shot an arrow beyond him.****37****When the boy came to where Jonathan’s arrow had fallen, Jonathan called out after him, “Isn’t the arrow beyond you?”****38****Then he shouted, “Hurry! Go quickly! Don’t stop!” The boy picked up the arrow and returned.****39****(The boy knew nothing about all this; only Jonathan and David knew.)****40****Then Jonathan gave his weapons to the boy and said, “Go, carry them back to town.”* ***41****After the boy had gone, David got up from the south side of the stone and bowed down before Jonathan three times, with his face to the ground. Then they kissed each other and wept together—but David wept the most.* ***42****Jonathan said to David, “Go in peace, for we have sworn friendship with each other in the name of the Lord, saying, ‘God is witness between you and me, and between your descendants and my descendants forever.’” Then David left, and Jonathan went back to the town*

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| ***Gospel Jesus Heals a Crippled Woman on the Sabbath Luke 13:10-17******10****On a Sabbath Jesus was teaching in one of the synagogues,****11****and a woman was there who had been crippled by a spirit for eighteen years. She was bent over and could not straighten up.****12****When Jesus saw her, he called her and said,  “Woman, you are set free from your infirmity.”****13****Then he put his hands on her, and immediately she straightened up.* ***14****Indignant because Jesus had healed on the Sabbath, the synagogue leader said to the people, “There are six days for work. So come and be healed on those days, not the Sabbath.”* ***15*** *Jesus answered him, “You hypocrites! Doesn’t each of you on the Sabbath untie your ox or donkey and lead it out to water?****16****Then should not this woman, a daughter of Abraham, kept bound for eighteen long years, be set free on the Sabbath day?”* ***17****When he said this, his opponents were humiliated, but the people were delighted with all the wonderful things he was doing.* |

***Contemporary reading David Gushee (2014) cited byWei Zhu*** *in ‘David Gushee shifts on homosexuality’https://tif.ssrc.org/2014/11/07/david-gushee-shifts-on-homosexuality****/****I do join your crusade tonight. I will henceforth oppose any form of discrimination against you. I will seek to stand in solidarity with you who have suffered the lash of countless Christian rejections. I will be your ally in every way I know how to be... Traditionalist Christian teaching produces despair in just about every gay or lesbian person who must endure it...It took me two decades of service as a married, straight evangelical Christian minister and ethicist to finally get here. I am truly sorry that it took me so long to come into full solidarity with the Church’s own most oppressed group.**.*  |

**Reflection for the Gathering, delivered on Sunday 17 March**

Where do you start? Where to begin to unravel the events of Christchurch 15 March 2019? At first, I thought changing the reflection today left out the very group whose Festival is right now, the rainbow community – with its variety of sexual orientations and gender identities. Then I thought again. What happened in Christchurch is just another facet of the difficulty we all have as human beings relating to and embracing those who are ‘other’ from us.

It is significant that three closures I heard of requested by police in the past 2-3 days affect groups which suffer the same circumstance, in some way they are different from the majority, or the perceived ‘norm’. Obviously, mosques were requested to suspend their services – the Muslim community though not inconsiderable in numbers is a minority in this country. On Saturday so too was the Jewish synagogue, another religious minority. And also, the Pride Parade and fair ‘Out in the Park’ were cancelled. The Muslim, Jewish and rainbow communities are all minorities within Western society and that difference, that minority status, makes the rest of that society edgy. It is tragically obvious that it makes a group of white supremicists and this weekend one man in particular so edgy that they see the need to resort to deadly force. It is a sad irony that we might feel more comfortable worshipping here today because the perpetrator on Friday was as much as we might hate to say it, ‘one of us.’

Even though our Prime Minister has been at pains to point out that this is ‘not New Zealand, ’ in fact we all have our shadow side. We all have fears and anxieties which we have pushed down and back and away. We have to do that to survive through some circumstances of our lives. These fears lie deep down and keep us from being as open and free as we might be. We do not perhaps pick up a machine gun – in fact I should hope not! But whenever someone is around who is different from us, it tests all our inner fortitude to be open, welcoming and friendly in the same way we are open and welcoming and friendly to those like ourselves. This applies in all groups. Heterosexuals might be surprised to know that around them in some situation gays feel awkward and uneasy. We know now for sure that walking around NZ society for Muslims will not be as easy, if it was easy before. Unfortunately the Jewish community frequently is reminded that the Gentiles around them are not always friendly.

I spent a year in the US in the late 1970s. It was a revelation how ordinary Americans could be! Up until then I had only known Americans as a group foreign to myself. I was there during the Iranian hostage crisis and it was very revealing to find myself in a creative dramatics class with American students as well as some Iranian engineering students who were unable to go home for the December break because President Jimmy Carter has frozen their family’s assets! You could have cut the air with a knife when the Iranian students identified themselves on the first day. I also discovered on that trip that there were several Americas with the USA. East coasters I met in Philadelphia didn’t understand the Kansas people I knew in the midwest and the midwest didn’t particularly care whether either west coasters or east coaters understood them! I can see now that is part of the deep divisions we are seeing in the US at the moment.

What we all do is take all that fearful anxiety we have tucked away and project it on to those whom we do not know or understand or have not yet met. We feel an uneasiness about them which is like the uneasiness we feel about our own fears and anxieties tucked away in our own shadow side. So we put the two together and the ‘other’ wears it for us. It’s so much more comfortable if someone else is to blame. We notice this in war time because it is so extreme. Hitler became the repository of all the evil we could imagine. He certainly perpetrated evil acts. Often, however, the person we credit with malign motives is just different – a different colour, a different sex, gender, race, culture, religion or theology, orientation or identity. The less we know personally about someone else, the easier it is to pile upon them all we want to get rid of in ourselves.

So when Jacinda tells us ‘this is not NZ” the unfortunate truth is that it is really. We are not a pure white or pure, green nation completely different from everyone else. We are fallible too, we can mistake someone different for someone frightening or bad. While this perpetrator deserves the punishment set down in the law, let us not make him the scapegoat for all the discomfort we feel when faces around us are increasingly different from ours, or when the varieties of gender identity within the rainbow community proliferate beyond heterosexual understanding. We all need to manage our anxieties, become aware of that which we are projecting on to others that is really our own stuff. There is a never-ending path of transformation and maturation which we all need to be walking.

We heard in the story of David and Jonathon earlier; how two men, because of their love for each other, helped each other despite having been cast on opposite sides of a tribal conflict. They both risked their lives – Jonathon in warning David in this event, David later in life when he befriends and helps Jonathon’s maimed son Mephibosheth, keeping the oath he swears here. They love each other as they love themselves – something Jesus and all the major religions urge us to do; to love first ourselves and then to similarly, love our neighbour. And we know from the story of the Good Samaritan that our neighbour is not only someone of our own race, they could even be our long term enemy.

In our Gospel reading today, Jesus shows on the Sabbath in the synagogue that he is one who defies current understandings. He extends care for the human person beyond the current rules. He upsets the establishment by going beyond what is expected or allowed for. May we do the same as we move around our world – always putting people before what is expected or before what we have traditionally demanded. And let us learn from David Gushee who now regrets the two decades he spent in denial and rejection of the gay community within the church. Now he and Matthew Vine have given us different ways to interpret the very Scriptures which have been claimed to exclude gays from Christianity. You’ll find reference to both in the other reflection written for today.

What has happened with the Bible is that from medieval times contemporary fears and prejudices have been read back into Scripture, altering the original meaning of passages and missing the fact that the behaviours which are condemned are not only homosexual behaviours but are simply bad ways to conduct relationships of any type. All of us need help in the personal self-control and self-management which helps us be good relationship partners, irrespective of our orientation or gender identity. For our psychological and emotional health, all relationships need to be loving, non-violent, mutual, faithful and as long lasting as we can manage. “Love your neighbour as you love yourself” – the Golden Rule, common to Christianity and Islam and Judaism as well as being significant in most major world religions. We all know we need to do this – but because of that shadow side which we all have, it takes effort and persistence and patience. So let us exercise that persistence and patience and so welcome with open arms those who may differ from us. Today we welcome the rainbow community with joy and delight, appreciating their creativity and stamina, their courage and risk taking, their persistence in the face of prejudice. And today we especially include in that welcome the Muslim community; many migrants to this country relieved to be away from war zones and discrimination and yet now afraid in this country for a new reason. Sisters and brothers, let us love another, for love is of God.

**Reflection for the Gathering prepared but not delivered on Sunday 17 March. This reflection has not been finally polished and contains several quotes (not always well defined) from the word of Matthew Vine found in this transcript of a talk which you can watch on** [**http://www.matthewvines.com/transcript/**](http://www.matthewvines.com/transcript/)**. My appreciation and apologies to Matthew!**

Years ago I was asked to bless a heterosexual couple’s civil union. When I asked Michael what they had in mind for such a blessing, he wrote back a careful list of items he wanted covered. One of them was to reference biblical couples. I snorted a little and wrote back –“You mean couples like Abraham and Sarah… and Hagar? Or do you mean Jacob and Rachel *and* Leah *and* their two maidservants?” – a *menage a cinq*? Or perhaps he meant Joseph and Mary, the engaged couple already expecting the saviour of the world? I was hard put to find, especially amongst the famous matriarchs and patriarchs, a nuclear relationship of the type we expect today.

So my first point is that somehow, somewhere, Medieval and Victorian morality has blinded us to the variety of relationships in Scripture; the story of David and Jonathon being one of them. ‘David and Jonathon’ is a phrase which has passed into western English as a decided coupling like ‘love and marriage’ and ‘horse and carriage’. This story shows their love transcends Jonathon’s filial and civic duty to his regal father, (which also means his duty to God since Saul is the anointed king of Israel.) In turn, David promises he would preserve and protect Jonathon’s family even though in time, they both know they will be ranged on two sides as enemies. [There is a lovely story later in 2 Samuel where David keeps this promise and shelters Jonathon’s son Mephibosheth, who as a young lad had been maimed in a hurried war time evacuation. (2 Samuel 4:4)]. The narrative of the Bible is about how God and humanity deal together and we find that God and humanity can deal together quite well through and within a variety of human relationships.

My second point is that, in the rush to score biblical brownie points, we have ignored some overarching principles which should always stand as the test against which other passages are evaluated. For example: “Love God with all you heart, mind, soul and strength and love your neighbour as you love yourself.” We see this with David and Jonathon – they love each other as they loved themselves - the point is made more than once in this story. It is not expected in these two great commandments that hating yourself is compatible with either loving God or loving other people. Every living human being is expected to love themselves and in the same way to love others. This suggests we are all loveable simply by virtue of being human. We need to believe that about ourselves and about other people.

My third point is that we are often blind to the inconsistency of the rules we apply to interpreting Scripture. For some reason, most western Christians have no trouble with women not always having their heads covered, or in eating pork or in wearing clothing with mixed fibres; all actions prohibited in Scripture, but to which we have easily applied the context rule and decided this does not apply in our time and place. Sometimes that debate has been loud and long – for example the debate about women being allowed to speak in church or the debate about slavery being wrong. Other times it has been taken for granted as we began to change the condition and style of fabric we wore, for example, that not mixing our fibres was not an important prohibition any more. We decided uncovered hair no longer indicated a woman was a prostitute as she might have been in Paul’s day. Why have the 6 lonely verses which seem to prohibit same sex relationships not been given the same treatment? The reasons for that inconsistency belong in the third reflection of this series which will be given next week – “Being Christian, Rainbow and Human” - so come along and see! Let’s now look at contextual readings of the apparently prohibitive verses.[[1]](#footnote-1)

The Hebrew Bible contains three passages: the destruction of Sodom and Gomorrah in Genesis 19 as two in Leviticus 18 and 20. In the First Testament, Paul makes comment in the first chapter of Romans 1, and there are two problematic Greek terms in 1 Corinthians 6 and 1 Timothy 1.

In Genesis 19, Lot invites two angels in the form of men into his home. Men of the city of Sodom demand these men be made available for what sounds like gang rape. Lot reveals his weakness by offering his daughters in the place of the visitors. Sodom and Gomorrah had plenty of reasons other than homosexuality as to why they were destroyed. It was in the Middle Ages that the destruction of the city of Sodom was associated with homosexuality. This doesn’t mean the Bible teaches homosexuality was reason for Sodom’s demise. This is a threatened gang rape. Matthew Vine notes.

there is a world of difference between violent and coercive practices like gang rape and consensual, monogamous, and loving relationships. No one in the church or anywhere else is arguing for the acceptance of gang rape; that is vastly different from what we’re talking about. … And indeed, Sodom and Gomorrah are referred to 20 times throughout the subsequent books of the Bible, sometimes with detailed commentary on what their sins were, but homosexuality is never mentioned or connected to them. It’s now widely conceded by scholars on both sides of this debate that Sodom and Gomorrah do not offer biblical evidence to support the belief that homosexuality is a sin.

Matthew Vine comments on the Leviticus passages too.

The verse in Leviticus – “Do not lie with a man as one does with a woman; it is an abomination” – continues however to be commonly cited to uphold the belief that homosexuality is a sin. Leviticus uses the word “abomination” in the Hebrew Bible context, ““abomination” is applied to a very broad range of things in the Old Law – eating shellfish in Leviticus 11, eating rabbit or pork in Deuteronomy 14; these are all called abominations. … sex during a woman’s menstrual period is also called an abomination.”

The key contextual understanding here which Matthew Vine points out is that

***The term “abomination” is primarily used in the Old Testament to distinguish practices that are common to foreign nations from those that are distinctly Israelite..***.[my italics]. The nature of the term “abomination” in the Old Testament is intentionally culturally specific; it defines religious and cultural boundaries between Israel and other nations. But it’s not a statement about what is intrinsically good or bad, right or wrong, and that’s why numerous things that it’s applied to …have long been accepted parts of Christian life and practice.

It is important to read the Scriptures in their own context ***and*** not to rip passages out of their literary context. Just as Ron Marks protests that two sentences from one speech uttered widely apart give a different impression which quoted together, (1) isolated texts taken out of their setting and read in a different time period may not have the same significance.

In the First Testament, the scriptures of the Christian era, the most significant passage appears in Romans 1:26-27. This passage is significant for three reasons. As a passage in the First testament it is more relevant to Christianity. It also speaks of both men and women. And, notes Matthew Vine, “even though it’s not very long, at two consecutive verses, it’s still the longest discussion of any form of same-sex behaviour anywhere in Scripture.” These verses lie within a wider passage about idolatry. Paul begins Romans by describing the need of all humanity for a saviour. He says about non-Jews that they knew “the truth of God, but they rejected it; they exchanged the truth for a lie, …He gave them over, it says, to a wide array of vices and passions. Included among these passions were some forms of lustful same-sex behaviour.” In verses 26 and 27, we read the exchanging of so- called natural acts for unnatural ones. Matthew Vine argues that

“…How we understand this passage hinges in large part on how we understand the meaning of the terms “natural” and “unnatural.” … Both the men and the women started with heterosexuality—they were naturally disposed to it …—but they rejected their original, natural inclinations for those that were unnatural: for them, same-sex behaviour. Paul’s argument about idolatry requires that there be an exchange; the reason, he says, that the idolaters are at fault is because they first knew God but then turned away from him, exchanged Him for idols. Paul’s reference to same-sex behaviour is intended to illustrate this larger sin of idolatry. But in order for this analogy to have any force, in order for it to make sense within this argument, the people he is describing must naturally begin with heterosexual relations and then abandon them. And that is exactly how he describes it.”

Matthew continues with his argument:

But that is not what we are talking about. Gay people have a natural, permanent orientation toward those of the same sex; it’s not something that they choose, and it’s not something that they can change. They aren’t abandoning or rejecting heterosexuality—that’s never an option for them to begin with. And if applied to gay people, Paul’s argument here should actually work in the other direction: If the point of this passage is to rebuke those who have spurned their true nature, be it religious when it comes to idolatry or sexual, then just as those who are naturally heterosexual should not be with those of the same sex, so, too, those who have a natural orientation toward the same sex should not be with those of the opposite sex. For them, that would be exchanging “the natural for the unnatural” in just the same way. We have different natures when it comes to sexual orientation.

While the condition has been known for many years, the way we talk about sexual orientation and gender identity and conceptualise it is very different from biblical times. It has been said that if there is not a word in the language for something, it does not exist. Behaviours and actions named in the Bible which now called homosexuality may not have been what we mean by the term now. Matthew Vine claims “the concept of sexual orientation is very recent; it was only developed within the past century, and has only come to be widely understood within the past few decades. So how we can we take our modern categories and understandings and use them to interpret a text that is so far removed from them?”

He argues that a different sexual orientation in ancient times was associated with an excess of lust and passion leading to uncontrolled behaviour which damaged all parties. This is not how we see things today. “..the only reason that a reference to same-sex behaviour helps Paul illustrate general sexual chaos is because the people he is describing first began with opposite-sex relations and then, in a burst of lust, abandoned them, exchanged them for something else. And surely it is significant that Paul here speaks only of lustful, casual behaviour. He says nothing about the people in question falling in love, making a lifelong commitment to one another, starting a family together.”

Vine makes an important point:

***We would never dream of reading a passage in Scripture about heterosexual lust and promiscuity and then, from that, condemning all of the marriage relationships of straight Christians.”[my italics]*** There is an enormous difference between lust and love when it comes to our sexuality, between casual and committed relationships, between promiscuity and monogamy. That difference has always been held to be central to Christian teaching on sexual ethics for straight Christians. Why should that difference not be held to be as central for gay Christians? How can we take a passage about same-sex lust and promiscuity and then condemn any loving relationships that gay people might come to form? That is a very different standard than the one that we apply to straight people.

Paul calls some acts ‘natural’ and some ‘unnatural’. In patriarchal society, where women were considered inferior sexual relationships were categorised by active and passive roles. Greeks and Roman men were customarily active and women, passive. Any inversion of this was thought of as ‘unnatural’ - this would therefore always be true of any same sex union. Corinthians 11.

More comment from Matthew:

***So if we’re going to be consistent as well as historically accurate in our biblical interpretation, then we need to acknowledge for Romans 1 what we already do for 1 Corinthians 11: the term “nature” here refers to social custom, not to the biological order, and it is a culturally specific term. [my italics]***

The other debated word in this passage, translated as “effeminate” in the King James, is “malakos” in the Greek. This was a very common word in ancient Greek, and it literally means “soft.” It was used as an insult in a wide array of contexts – to refer to those who were considered weak-willed, cowardly, or lazy. And all of those failings were particularly associated with women in ancient times; hence, the rendering “effeminate.” In a specifically sexual context, the word was used to describe general licentiousness and debauchery, but this wasn’t limited to any particular kind of relationship. Men who took the passive role in sexual relations were sometimes labelled this term, which is the basis on which some modern translators connect it to homosexuality[[2]](#footnote-2)

In the final passage, 1 Timothy 1:10, the first word – “abusers of themselves with mankind” – reappears in a list of people Paul says the law was written against. Here, the translation is “them that defile themselves with mankind.” The translation issues and debates here are the same as those from 1 Corinthians. Again, the strongest inference that can be drawn from other uses of this term is that it referred to economic exploitation through sexual coercion—possibly involving same-sex activity, but a very different kind than what we are discussing.

Often older men, in heterosexual marriage would take young male lovers – the difference in age and power status within society immediately made this an unequal, exploitative and abusive relationship let alone the fact that it was adulterous in relation to the man’s wife. On neither count would this be a recommended Christian course of action whether or not the affair was heterosexual or homosexual.

Jesus gets into trouble in the synagogue for re-interpreting the law with a broader more humane view. If it is good enough for Jesus it is good enough for us. The point is not so much who is in the relationship, or who is passive or active. The point is whether any relationship is loving, mutual and respectful – whether it is as faithful as we can humanly be and whether it adds to the happiness of both parties enabling them to flourish as fulfilled human beings. The challenge to have those kinds of relationships is there for heterosexuals, for the rainbow community and for all our platonic relationships too. If we love ourselves, we love others and all of that is made possible because of the love of God which is our role model – the trinity of the divine, sometimes called two men and a bird, shows us a true community of love, each member supporting and engaging with the other. So may our interpersonal communities be, whether its two men, two women, or a man and a woman.

Discrimination and hatred, neglect and abuse may be described in Scripture but they are not taught or advocated in Scripture. If it seems to you that they are, then sharpen your interpretive skills and look again. Don’t let anyone tell you that you are not worthy of being loved - by yourself, by others or by the divine heart of the Universe.

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1. I am indebted to Matthew Vine for some of this information and I would highly recommend *Changing our Minds* by David Gushee who is the academic featured in the contemporary reading, coming out as a gay supporter in 2014. Both are good resources on this topic of biblical interpretation. There are several youtube clips featuring either man. [↑](#footnote-ref-1)
2. This explains the common feeling by scholars that homophobia is actually misogyny disguised. The denigration of the feminine due to its stereotypical association with passivity is a thread in the denigration of gay men who may be the ‘passive’ or ‘feminine’ partner in intercourse. [↑](#footnote-ref-2)