



## God Bless Adam and Steve?

Rev John L Bell  
The Iona Community

This is adapted from a seminar delivered by John Bell at the Greenbelt Festival, 25-28 August 2006.

*Now Adam,  
will you take Steve's right hand in yours  
and will you say after me:*

*In the presence of God  
and before this congregation  
I Adam declare that you Steve  
are a lovely girl.  
I just wish you would call yourself Stephanie  
to stop people thinking that we're gay!*

...I don't suppose that's what you expected to read.

But equally I hope you don't expect to read a diatribe either for or against gay marriages: partly because diatribes only serve to further alienate people who disagree and partly because we're not talking about gay marriages in Britain.

### The Effect of Civil Partnerships

What has happened - and has flung the churches into further turmoil over same-sex relationships - is that the government has approved of the registering of civil partnerships between people of the same sex. This has one direct and one indirect effect on the citadels of religion.

The direct effect is that where a civil partnership has been registered, pension benefits previously awarded only to the spouse of a deceased employee may now go to the registered partner of a deceased employee. So, if churches - irrespective of their stand on homosexual relationships - employ as a missionary or secretary someone who enters into such a partnership, the church will be required to financially condone the relationship.

The indirect effect is that people of faith who have registered their civil partnership may come seeking a blessing on their relationship from a minister of religion. There is no requirement for such a ceremony to be presided over by a minister or priest. It does not have matrimonial or sacramental status. It could be done with equal ease by a lay person.

But those who seek it are partly asking for their full inclusion in the Christian community of which a religious blessing would be a sign. And some, to ensure that the sign had its fullest impact, would like such a ceremony to be presided over by a minister of religion.

This causes no small turmoil for the clergy. Quite apart from whether they agree with same sex relationships, there is church polity to consider as well as the effect such events may have in congregations who do not share a common mind about what constitutes a "gay" occasion.

And the impact on ministers is not simply theological. For some - as for all of us - it may be an intellectual problem, for some emotional and for some visceral.

## General Assembly Debate

The evening before the issue was being debated in the General Assembly of the Church of Scotland this year, I was having dinner with a ministerial colleague of whom I'm very fond and who I hadn't seen for a long time.

He began to fulminate - I think that would be the best term - against the prospect of blessing a same-sex couple's relationship.

He said things like:

We can't have the church door covered in rainbow flags and a crowd of pansies wearing pink triangles giggling away like adolescents. There's no dignity. It would be a total disgrace.

At this point another minister at the table pointed out that a blessing was not a marriage and that if the couple in question wanted to wave flags, blow bubbles or recruit people for the George Michael fan club, they could do that in the registry office. The blessing would be totally at the discretion of the minister who would have the last word.

I was amazed the next day to see this firebrand of sexual conservatism stand up and say something of this order:

There's a lot of things go on in my parish which I don't agree with. But for the good of the Church and for the benefit of God's people I sometimes go along with these and have often found myself enlightened and have discovered in people a new openness to the things of the faith. So I don't think we should make a fuss about blessing people who love each other.

### *A Complex Range of Issues*

I give this illustration simply because it is indicative of how what seems like a simple issue is actually a complex issue. It has to do with more than our personal opinions about gay people. It may have to do with our professional status, our capacities for empathy, our informed or opinionated intelligence on the issue, our reading of scripture, and even our own personal histories.

And both those on the side of approval and those on the side of disapproval often fail to recognise why different bells of enthusiasm or reservation ring when the issue is raised.

So I am not going to make a case for the blessing of civil relationships. Rather I am going to try to untangle some of the issues involved and to ask questions which we all should address.

### **Adam and (St)eve**

But before I do this, it might be salutary to note that the couple mentioned in the title of this talk are not my invention. It was, I think, either Pat Robinson or another American ecclesiastical luminary who pointed out that

God made Adam and Eve  
not Adam and Steve.

There is in that the implicit suggestion that paradisaal bliss only occurs when a man and a woman get it together as in Eden.

But there was discovered recently in a chamber pot buried in the Sinai Heights an ancient Hebrew manuscript which should add ten verses of scripture between the end of Genesis chapter 2 at verse 25 and the beginning of Chapter 3.

*And the man saith unto the Lord God,  
"What will you that I do with she who is woman?"*

*And the Lord God answered,  
"Take her by the hand and wander through the garden."  
And verily they did, naming as they saw them animals,  
trees and flowers as the Lord God had bidden them.*

*Then saith the man unto the Lord God,  
"What more shall I do with or unto her who is woman."*

*And the Lord God answered,  
"Take her head in your hands, and bring your head  
towards her and kiss the one who is your wife."  
And verily the man did so for a considerable time.*

*Then a third time he addressed his maker and saith  
"Is there yet more that we should yet do together?"*

*"Yes," saith the Lord God,  
"you should make love because for love you were made."  
And the Lord God instructed the man  
regarding the making of love in an elemental fashion.*

*And behold, in the twinkling of an eye,  
the man returned from his wife to speak again with his Maker and saith,  
"Lord God, what is a headache?"*

I want to look at a number of issues which are underlying not just the discord within churches on the issue of blessing same-sex unions, but also on the way in which we generally deal with homosexuality in the church.

## **Biblical Scholarship**

And I want to begin with the Bible which I take to be the supreme authority for life and faith. I do that because for many people the issue of the role of sacred scripture and its ability to inform our living is seen as under threat by a number of changes in social understanding in the last (20th century) of which attitudes to homosexuality is only one.

I don't want to begin with the authority of the Bible, however, I want to begin with Biblical scholarship... something of which I am not a specialist. But I rely on the work of those who are. The Bible - whatever else it is - is a book written in languages and in cultures vastly different from ours and to read it with intelligence is to be open to the fruit of forensic linguistic and cultural scholarship.

That's why one of my favourite books is called: *A Social Science Commentary on the Synoptic Gospels* by Malina and Rohrbaugh, two American theologians who are also sociologists. By using the most up-to-date archaeological as well as sociological discoveries, they throw new light on familiar stories. We discover for example that the birth of Jesus was a risky business - 1 in 3 babies and 1 in 4 women died on the birthing table. We discover that people in 1st century Palestine were not undernourished - as we often suspect - but that archaeology reveals the average calorie intake was up to present day UN advisory standards.

Such information has affected for good the way I read scripture and the way I preach.

But linguistic research is also important. William Barclay, the late New Testament

professor in Glasgow did a series of lectures on TV in the 70's where he held his vast audiences spellbound as he examined the meaning of Greek words.

"Why do we think Luke was a doctor?" Barclay would ask, and then reply to his own question: "Because when he talks about a camel going through the eye of a needle, the Greek word he uses is that of a medical needle, not a domestic one."

C.S. Lewis, equally popular, opened up a world of understanding to people in his book *The Four Loves*, where he examines the meaning and implications of four Greek words for love used in New Testament.

Just last week, my understanding of the phrase in the Lord's Prayer: "Give us this day our daily bread" was opened up in a different way because of the scholarship of a Latin American theologian. He noted how the word associated with the words "this day" and "daily" is *epiousios*. He described its linguistic aetiology and commented on how it has three possible meanings:

- our bread for today,
- our bread for the morrow,
- our bread necessary for existence.

And then on Thursday I received a letter from a woman who had been at a conference where I'd been working in Canada where she felt her whole self-image and faith had been re-formed because I alluded to how when Jesus said to adults, "You have to become like this child." The child in question could have been a boy or a girl, the Greek word allows for both.

But here is the rub. As long as biblical scholarship either underwrites our suppositions or opens up for us pleasant possibilities, we applaud the scholars. If it reveals what we don't want to take on board, we abhor it.

I don't have the time to do be expansive on this issue, but let me just mention briefly four discoveries of biblical scholarship which might make some people want to cheer and others want to shout rubbish, apostasy or accuse the scholars of being disingenuous:

1. When the O.T. appears to condemn homosexuality, its reference is almost exclusively to males, not females.
2. The Hebrew and Greek scriptures use a range of words for same-sex sexual relations, some of which refer to prostitution and abuse. None refer to consensual (i.e., consenting) loving relationships.
3. It is hard to find in the New Testament a definitive comment on consensual relationships because there is no word in Greek for either homosexual or heterosexual.

4. When the Bible refers to Jesus healing the centurion's servant, the word used could equally apply to a younger same-sex partner.

Some people on hearing that the sin of Onan was not self-abuse but *coitus-interruptus* have felt free to masturbate guiltlessly, so overturning a centuries' old taboo based on flawed scholarship. But not all who have been liberated by this relatively contemporary insight would allow the fruit of recent biblical scholarship to enable them to look again at certain other biblical passages relating to human sexuality.

Why is this? Why are we only open to biblical scholarship which endorses our prejudice?

## Biblical Authority

But I also want to look at Biblical Authority... that is to say the way in which scripture informs our understanding of faith and attitudes to issues of moral and social importance.

I said earlier that I hold to the Bible as the supreme authority in matters of faith and life. But that does not mean that I have to naively treat the whole of scripture as a rule book. Indeed to do so is to sell short the magnificence of the Bible.

### *Minutiae*

When I read in the Song of Songs:

*We have a little sister who has no breasts,  
what shall we do with our sister  
when she is asked to be wed?*

... I don't feel that I need to contact either a child psychologist or marital counsellor to respond to the query. I respect that the question in the quotation is rhetorical and the quote comes from a poem.

Nor do I feel that I must immediately read this book which never mentions the name of God as some kind allegory of the relationship between Jesus and the Church... and so dismissing any fleshly thoughts, take the text as a reference to the Salvation Army or the Quakers who having neither baptism or eucharist may fit the bill as the little sister with no breasts.

Nor, should I read some of the detailed legislation contained in Leviticus, do I feel called to engage in the kind of correspondence an American had with Dr Laura Schlessinger who hosts a radio show in the states. She proclaimed herself an orthodox Jew and then received a letter from a listener asking for advice such as:

Leviticus 25, 44 states that I may indeed possess slaves both male and female, provided they are purchased from neighbouring nations.

A friend of mine claims this applies to Mexicans but not to Canadians.  
Can you clarify? Why can't I own Canadians.

Now, of course, such examples may be seen as spiritual trivia. And people who fretted over the minutiae of Old Testament legislation could easily work themselves into a state of terminal neurosis in trying to fulfil every mandate of the law. Indeed, most of us here would not pass the holiness test on the basis of two different fabrics appearing in one garment.

As regards the authority of the bible to endorse or proscribe same-sex relations, most people would want to raise the five most frequently cited passages as being of a more significant value than legislation governing clothing or sabbath observance.

And I too would want to claim we are dealing with something of a different order.

### *Same Context*

So we might, for example, look at condemnatory legislation in close proximity to passages which proscribe same-sex relations. Take, for example, Leviticus 18 verse 22:

You must not lie with a man as with a woman

and associate it with verse 19 of the same chapter, which in most Bible begins the same paragraph:

You must not approach a woman to have intercourse with her during her menstrual period.

Why, I might ask, is the first taboo the object of universal discussion and the other a non-starter in any debate?

But I feel that this is still trivialising the issue. There is, as is commonly agreed, a number of scriptural references which condemn same-sex relations, so if we make any comparison it must be with an issue of similar moral standing and similarly alluded to throughout the Bible.

### *Divorce*

So let's look at divorce... which Jesus says can lead to adultery in situations where it is initiated for reasons other than infidelity. And adultery, as we all know, is one of the sins proscribed in the 10 Commandments.

Given time (which I don't have) I would be happy to cite five portions of portions of scripture which see divorce as a no-go area for people of God.

Yet in charismatic fellowships, in right-wing, bible-believing evangelical churches, in Roman Catholic congregations and in gatherings of Anglican

bishops, you will find divorced and remarried persons... many in breach of a dominical (i.e. Jesus') teaching.

### *Women*

Or take the majority population in Great Britain... women (I think it's because they keep having children!)

At this festival we have a fair number sitting bareheaded at religious worship. What's worse (according to how you read Paul) some are to be found leading worship and preaching.

We could spend an age culling the innumerable verses in the Old and New Testaments which overall speak of women as inferior and subservient.

But which tradition of the Christian church (the ordination debate aside) is forcing women to be as subservient as the overall witness of scripture requires.

### *Gossip*

Or what about malicious gossip? Now here's an interesting Genesis-to-Revelation issue.

One of the ten commandments prohibits bearing false witness against a neighbour, almost a quarter of the psalms make some mention of the scourge of slander, Jesus and Paul proscribe it, and in Revelation liars are flung into the lake of burning sulphur.

Although I haven't done the maths, I am prepared to say that malicious gossip is probably the most proscribed sin in the Bible. But when did any church ever published a document or study paper or report on this issue? It would probably be leaked before it got printed!

Stand back from the heat of the debate on same-sex relations and look at how the churches have dealt with issues of:

- divorce
- women
- slavery
- money-lending
- racial discrimination
- and malicious gossip.

All of these affect in major ways the wellbeing of millions of people and all of these have many more than five allusions in scripture. Yet on all these issues the majority of Christians either ignore or argue against biblical teaching. Schisms have been caused in the church particularly over issues of race and slavery. And it is interesting to note that in the Southern States of the USA the upholders of slavery often had recourse to selected biblical texts which seem to endorse it, with the same enthusiasm that some opponents of same-sex relations go back

again and again to five disconnected texts which provide allegedly clear and definitive teaching.

## Clear Teaching?

Let me make two other comments in this regard:

The first is that I am always suspicious when people talk about clear and unambiguous biblical teaching. I tested this earlier in the year with Christian Family values.

I asked people at a conference to go into four groups and look at what the bible says about families:

- One looked at Jesus' historical role models from Abraham onwards.
- A second looked at the relationship of Jesus to his own family.
- A third looked at what Jesus said about families.
- A fourth at what the NT letter writers wrote.

When we put all the evidence together, we agreed that there was no such thing as clear biblical teaching on Christian family values. Quite apart from a paucity of scriptural witness, the ancient Jews never knew what the nuclear family was which so many Christians claim is under threat.

### *The Holy Spirit and Change*

But secondly I want to suggest that the Holy Spirit was never given by God to keep the keys to the wisdom of previous generations that it might remain unchanged. Rather the Spirit was given, according to Jesus, to lead us into all truth, which in his experience implied re-contexting or re-visiting the favourite texts of his antagonists.

So he upsets the Pharisees with his take on what the Bible says about the sabbath, as he upsets his home congregation by reminding them that the scriptures illustrate how God does not always favour the chosen people.

And this process of revaluating scripture and in the process being guided into deeper understanding of the will of God prevails into the New Testament Church where Peter is forced in a vision to stop discriminating between Jews and Gentiles... though he supposed he was hitherto doing the will of God and following scriptural precedent.

And what about circumcision?

Why are all the men in this gathering not circumcised. It's mandatory in the Bible for all male believers and Jesus never refuted that. Jesus did NOT say "circumcision is nothing and uncircumcision is nothing". Indeed he participated in that ritual on the 8<sup>th</sup> day of his life.

It was the New Testament Church which did not so much defy the scriptures as see them in the bigger light of the inclusive compassion of Jesus.

So why do we readily amend or reinterpret the authority of scripture on some issues of moral import, and yet be so unwilling to do so on an issue which takes up much less biblical space?

## Medical Science

Now I've spent a long time on the Bible, but I do so because I love scripture and I see our engagement, our wrestling with it as important in the life of faith.

But I want briefly to touch on other areas of contention of which the first is Medical Expertise.

### *and the Bible*

The work of medical science has always had a dialogical relationship with the Christian churches, because healing was so central to our Lord's ministry, and because people look to people and places of faith in their distress.

So Christians have both viewed medicine as a vocation and have by and large allowed many discoveries of medical research to inform, among other things, how we read the Bible.

Psychosomatic research has enabled us to understand how in some of Christ's miracles, words which to us seem jarring about forgiveness of sin might have been the very thing needed if someone believed that their physical infirmity was the result of moral pollution.

Similarly the need for the community to affirm wellbeing as a pre-requisite for full health sheds light on why Jesus told the lepers to show themselves to the priest who would endorse their recovery and rid them of their degraded status in the community.

### *and Pastoral Care*

Light has not just been shed on the Bible, it has been shed on our pastoral care, particularly in the areas of psychological and social medicine.

At one time people who suffered from depression were commonly considered to be living under the burden of unconfessed sin. But when psychiatry began to research how a cause of some depression is a chemical imbalance in the brain for which medication can be as successful as it can be with a physiological illness, then both pastoral care and attitudes to people suffering from depression changed.

When the distinctions between psychological disturbance, long-term mental-illness and wilful idiocy were clarified, among other things we stopped calling

certain children born with genetic aberrations Mongols. We then called them "Down's Syndrome" and then Jean Vanier and the L'arche communities encouraged us to see them as whole and fulfilled people and we now call them Jane and Colin.

When, after a long and almost unforgivable delay, medics said definitively that left-handedness was not a sign of inherent moral depravity, children, and this happened as late as the 1960's, stopped being physically punished for writing in school with their left hand.

The prejudice against homosexuals and the discouragement of them to enter into covenanted relationships was for long predicated on the belief that homosexuality was both a chosen and depraved expression of humanness.

### *Freud*

Both Freud and Jung signalled a change of academic opinion based on research and personal engagement with people of homosexual disposition. Most famously, Freud in the 1920's wrote to a mother worried about her son:

Homosexuality is assuredly no advantage, but it is nothing to be ashamed of... no vice, no degradation, it cannot be classified as an illness; we consider it to be a variant of the sexual function...

It is a great injustice to persecute homosexuality as a crime, and cruelty too.

Now Freud at that time was still of the opinion that homosexuality was caused by an arrest in sexual development, but as in all medical and psychological research time and further study either endorses or amends the received wisdom.

So it is that in a survey of the American Psychoanalytic Association in 1994, 97.6% of respondents asserted that they did not believe that "homosexual patients can or ought to change their sexual orientation to heterosexual."<sup>1</sup>

Now, of course in medicine as in theology, there are always contradictory research and data.

One veteran divine in Scotland recently cited an Australian journal which reported on a sampling of 1,000 pairs of identical twins. Of the pairs in which homosexuality existed, only 20% of the males and 24% of the females had both twins gay.

The conclusion reached was that if being gay was genetic, then wherever homosexuality appeared in identical twins both should be gay rather than only 20 or 24%. Therefore homosexual orientation must be a matter of choice.

---

<sup>1</sup> Men in Love, p. 13

If that is the case, then why, one might ask, don't all identical twins contract appendicitis at the same time, die on the same day, exhibit the same allergies, or want to marry the same or very similar spouses.

### *Multifactoral Causation*

I phoned one of my friends who is a doctor not to discuss this issue, but to talk about medical research and popular belief. I asked her what she regarded as a significant medical discovery which affects the way we look on physical and mental health.

And she said something which I have since found endorsed elsewhere, namely that medics are increasingly of the belief that all illness, aberration or difference cannot be put down to genetic causality alone.

External factors such as pre-natal history of the mother, an experience in the womb or at birth, a major life event, all indicate that illness, abnormality and difference are multifactored.

The question is: Why are we willing to accept medical and psychological research when it amends or illuminates our understanding of certain aspects of the human body or psyche but are unwilling to accept scientific authority and opinion on, say, homosexuality?

There's Biblical Authority, Medical Authority and also Ecclesiastical Authority.

### **Ecclesiastical Authority**

This is always a fear in some quarters that if the Church in whatever guise says this that or the other on a matter of public interest, it may alienate some people and diminish its authority to speak on other issues.

### *Vox populi, vox Dei*

That is why, I presume, Archbishop George Carey spoke out against the disinvestment of the Church of England with regard to one particular company which had links with Israel. In previous eras vicars were told not to speak about Free Masonry as the Church knew nothing about it and it might lose credibility in some quarters if it did.

So, by extension, if the Church begins to speak favourably about same-sex unions, it might diminish its authority to speak on other issues.

One has to ask is the Church the tail and public opinion the dog that wags it? Does the church only speak of justice and liberation when the contexts are uncontroversial? Or more pertinently, as regards our present pursuit, have the churches not by their silence or antagonism on the issue of homosexuality not already alienated a substantial number of people... not just gays but

heterosexual parents and friends of people who are gay?

Almost singularly in this whole debate, the voice of the Church in South Africa is the most affirmative. Desmond Tutu is not its sole spokesperson, but he does articulate what many believe, namely that justice is indivisible.

You cannot plead, protest and suffer for justice when people are discriminated against because of the colour which they cannot change, yet condone discrimination when it comes to sexual orientation which is similarly a given rather than an option. And, having visited South Africa twice recently, I have not noticed or heard of a waning of credibility in the churches because they speak of the body of Christ affirming and accepting people of homosexual orientation. Indeed I tend to think that it is the churches which have not known discrimination and sacrifice who are keenest to pontificate, and to do that from the position of unmerited privilege.

### *Blessings*

But there is another issue as regards ecclesiastical authority. It is the issue which the Church of Scotland is grappling with at the moment.

As it stands, ministers can exercise pastoral sensitivity and discretion in offering a blessing to same-sex couples. It is neither mandatory or even encouraged to officiate at such ceremonies, it is entirely a matter of conscience - as I believe it should be.

But now there is a proposal to remove this prerogative and to make it mandatory on ministers to decline to participate in any such activity of blessing.

Strangely, no one has ever been forbidden to bless nuclear submarines or fighter planes... although both have the propensity and are built with the intention of doing much more damage to God's creation and God's people than two committed lesbians might do.

No one has forbidden blessing animals on the feast of St Francis or the houses of superstitious non-believers. No one has forbidden blessing the marriage of divorcees. No one has forbidden blessing the body of an unbaptised still-born child.

I don't have a deeply suspicious mind, but I cannot help thinking that this might be the thin edge of a bigger wedge... and its importance would go far beyond Scotland. Namely, that if a faction discovers it can pull a fast one over an issue on which the church is clearly divided, there may be a raft of other issues to do with freedom of conscience in clergy which become reserved business.

## *Love One Another*

Jesus never started the perfectly unanimous church because Jesus never had a unanimous and unquestioning group of disciples. Indeed his command to "love one another" was not given to a Saturday afternoon crowd in general, it was given to the 12 in particular, because Jesus knew that the day would come when disagreement on matters of faith would lead to dissension and potential schism would threaten to tear the fledgling church apart. And on that day they had to be addressed by a word which would compel them not to find watertight theology, but rather to engage with each other and maybe even co-exist with divergence of opinion.

The only thing for which I would go down on my knees to people who are my polar opposites in matters of Christian belief or biblical understanding is that they do not make a schism in the Church.

I say this because I do not have a monopoly of the truth nor do I believe others do, and the truth only becomes clear when there is engagement and argument around scripture and the issues, in the midst of which people try to love even those they disagree with. If I ever found myself in a church where everybody agreed with me, I would leave for it would not be part of the Church of Jesus Christ, whose hallmark has always been diversity.

## *Power and Vulnerability in Men*

There is, however, another contingent issue which has to be raised along with the authority of the Church and that is the arrogance of men which masks their hidden vulnerability.

I just do not believe that the issues of homosexuality or same-sex unions would generate so much heat and so little light, if the issue had been raised and debated more by women than by men.

It is not because I believe that women are inherently more sympathetic to gays than men are (though some might argue that). It is because men particularly in the church feel that by dint of them speaking they should be listened to and believed, even in absence of any evidence, biblical or otherwise to support their case.

I love reading church history and finding how morally superior the good old days really were. A couple of years ago I found this extract from a speech made at a General Assembly in Edinburgh where the male cleric exhibited a rarely surpassed twinning of arrogance and of ignorance.

He, the Revd Dr Norman Mclean, offered a magnificent potpourri of bigotry, xenophobia and demography. Speaking towards the end of the first World War, and noting the ever present blights of:

venereal disease, landlords and a loss of the sense of the sacredness of life

he went on to prescribe his panacea for populations where the number of males had been reduced by deaths due to war. He maintained that the nations of the British empire had to be repopulated because

If Australia and New Zealand are not occupied by the British, then the yellow man cannot be shut out.

He went on to propose a ban on the manufacture and sale of contraceptives and tax relief for large families, urging his own denomination to give more definitive teaching against contraception

Otherwise the future of the race must lie within the Roman Catholic Church.

I just can't see a woman saying that, just as I can't see many women spewing out the invective against same-sex relations which many male church figures have done.

And if you ask me why this is so, I think there are many reasons, but here are three:

1. Men are less able to be articulate about their own bodies, never mind their own sexuality than women. The monthly event of menstruation is not a private thing a woman keeps to herself, she shares it with others, and with them she discovers what is good and bad for her body. Men do not have the same regular and, for some, distressing experience of bodily change. Men even have difficulty in admitting to each other that they have haemorrhoids - and it's not just because the word is difficult to spell!
2. Some men are haunted by the memory of attraction to and maybe even sexual contact with their peers in their adolescent years when bodies and emotions were in flux. And particularly if they were sexually precocious with their own sex then, they may be trying to atone for that by vituperative condemnation of such activity in others.
3. Men have a greater difficulty in both acknowledging and dealing with vulnerability than women. It does not go with the macho image they fantasise should be theirs.

### *Erik's letter*

Let me illustrate this by recourse to a letter written to a clerical journal by a friend of mine, now in his 60's, who visibly shows the effects of childhood polio in his right leg and left arm.

I was speaking at a business leader's dinner in Edinburgh. In introducing me, the chairman said, "I despise disability, therefore I admire the way in which the Rev Erik Cramb has overcome this to

such an extent that we know him, not as a disabled person, but as a person of great abilities, even if he does support Partick Thistle" ...blah de blah de blah

I was faintly disturbed by the introduction though afterwards I realised it was how I once looked on my disability. Now I see my so-called disability is not an impairment of an otherwise able person, but an integral part of the gift (of God) which is me.

The man who was chair at the dinner, who presumably was in control of all his faculties felt awkward not just in the presence of a sufferer from polio, but in the presence of someone so vulnerable who was regarded his vulnerability or differentness as part of his gift.

It may well be, that because of the ease with which homosexual men seem to be able to articulate the issue with regard to sexuality, heterosexual men who have hitherto only allude to their sexuality via dirty jokes, feel at a disadvantage and therefore vulnerable.

## Whose Issue?

I'm always reminded of a comment someone made when I was working in London in the 70's in a community wracked with what seemed to be problems caused by second generation Afro-Caribbean teenagers. The shorthand parlance was "the black issue."

But one day my colleague pointed out that the black issue is actually a white issue. Black people are fine, it's just that white people can't cope with them because they are different.

The women's issue is actually a man's issue. Women know what their role in society should be, it's just that men can't deal with it.

So might it be that the "gay issue" might actually be a "straight" issue, and that much of the angst and the anger is a form of displacement activity?

## Adam & Steve

The title of this seminar was "God bless Adam and Steve".

I have not dealt with the issue of blessing nor do I intend to begin to analyse it now.

But I just want to allude to Marilynne Robinson's book *Gilead*, which among other things is about blessing. Towards the beginning the old pastor who narrates the book remembers how the first creature he blessed was a kitten. He did that as a boy and was perfectly serious. The memory of it stayed with him and his understanding of blessing he articulates in these words:

*There is a reality in blessing.  
It doesn't enhance sacredness,  
but it acknowledges it  
and there is a power and that.*

Some of us may believe Adam and Steve should live in a covenanted relationship and have as fulfilling a sexual life as their heterosexual win brothers or sisters might have...

Some of us may believe that Adam and Steve were made to love and be loved, but because of their orientation they can only be encouraged to feel passion, not share it.

Some of us may believe that Adam and Steve somehow got stuck in their adolescent development, and the affection they have for each other just cannot be condoned.

Whatever our opinion, I hope that we could still agree that both Adam and Steve are made in God's image which is always wholesome, and that where there is real love, God is present.

And if we can acknowledge that inherent sacredness in people and in love, we might all - though in different ways - be able to say:

God bless Adam and Steve.