

Driven Forward by Love.**[2 Corinthians 5 v.11 to 6 v.2]**

You might have noticed a huge pile of detritus outside "The Manse" as you came to church this morning. What a load of rubbish. Ugly stuff indeed. Yet just five days ago we were waking up in a room carpeted with some of that mess, taking our shower in a bath now lying ignominiously on top of that pile. All this has happened in the twinkling of an eye, in the immediate aftermath of our house move. After 21 years of living on site, we've taken the first step towards our retirement. We're now living in Croydon; I've driven in this morning from our new home there. We've done well in the last four days – our pictures are on the walls, the fridge works, we have no curtains yet but we do now have, for the first time in decades, a lawnmower.

I was driving home yesterday with the lawnmower in the passenger seat and listening to the news. Two items struck me – two events speaking utterly different languages. Firstly, I heard that the Church of England has set up a group to study what to do about same-sex marriages – a study likely to take three years. Critics spoke of sending the matter into the long grass. My lawnmower nodded in agreement. And then there were the reports from the Gay Pride march through the centre of London. A buoyant, Moslem, mayor gave it an enthusiastic send-off; the band of the Welsh Guards played marching music at the head of the procession; gay and lesbian members of the emergency services were particularly present. The fiftieth anniversary of the decriminalisation of homosexual people was being celebrated in style. No long grass here. My lawnmower remained silently sad.

I begin my sermon with these matters NOT because I want to discuss the question of human sexuality. Not this morning at any rate. Next week perhaps. Rather because, once again, it brings into the public arena the question of how we interpret the Bible. People on the conservative side of the argument allege that some of us "liberals" are playing fast and loose with the Bible, with biblical teaching, that we're guilty of watering down its strictures and its clear position on these and other matters. And I want to call some of that criticism into question this morning.

A key verse of Scripture referred to again and again in the discussion of these matters is in Leviticus: "If a man should lie with another man as he might with

a woman, both of them have committed an abomination.” There! What could be clearer? Well, leaving aside the question of a literal use of the Bible (giving every verse an equivalent value with every other one), let’s look at the matter fairly and squarely. The words are clear. But so too are the words that follow, words that complete the self-same verse. Let me quote them too. “They shall surely be put to death; their blood shall be upon them.” Now nobody believes that this should happen. Of course they don’t. That was what might have happened 3,000 years ago, in a radically different culture; we’ve changed now, things are different.

When people argue like this, make sure you understand what’s happening. Self-styled “Bible-centred” people who stick fiercely to the first half of a scriptural verse can somehow dismiss the second half of the same verse on the grounds that those words are part of a culture that no longer exists. Odd?

If you travel just a few verses further on in Leviticus, it gets odder still. A whole passage (21: 16-24) tells us why no one with a deformity or a blemish should be allowed near the altar where God was worshipped. No one, that is, who is blind or lame or has a flat nose or “anything superfluous”, or a broken foot or hand, or a hunchback or a dwarf etc...etc... - none of these can officiate in the liturgical life of the nation. Nobody, nowadays, no liberal or conservative, no catholic or protestant, no traditionalist or progressive, would uphold any of those strictures in our contemporary world. It’s all so culturally conditioned.

If you insist on the letter of the law then, my friends, it seems to me that you should take the rough with the smooth and stick to the letter of the whole law and nothing but the whole law. You cannot use the parts that suit you to buttress your own arguments. I personally believe that the whole of Leviticus is to be interpreted through the lens of culture and I have no problem in dealing with the injunction about a man lying with another man in precisely this way.

Something similar has happened in the passage we’re looking at this morning. It’s a passage that’s been central to my understanding of the core message of the Christian faith I entered into in my youth. Saint Paul announces his conviction that God was in Christ reconciling the world to himself, that he has chosen not to hold our misdeeds against us, and that he has called us to join him in this ministry of reconciliation. It couldn’t be clearer. God, in his infinite goodness and out of his unfathomable love for his wayward creatures, has opened up a way to bridge the gap between our own hot-headed and selfish

ways of living our lives and his own sustaining self. A glorious offer. Abundant grace! Whoopee!

That's not how a bunch of theologians of the 16th century saw it. As the Church of England was being brought into existence after the break with Rome at the time of the Reformation, a party devoted to ensuring that this emerging church didn't stray from what they described as "biblical" truth, formulated a document known as The Thirty-Nine Articles – a document to which Anglican priests were asked to swear fealty until quite recently. The second of these thirty-nine articles demanded belief in "one Christ, very God and very Man, who truly suffered, was crucified, dead and buried, *to reconcile his Father to us* and to be a sacrifice not only for original guilt but also for all actual sins of men." [my italics].

You can see what's happened. It's so patent. These theologians seek to portray an angry God who's sulking in his corner, fed up with humanity, throwing a tantrum. Only a perfect sacrifice will tempt him to come out of his stomp. And Christ alone is the one who can hope to pull this off. By his very perfection he, and only he, can satisfy the "wrath of God." That's the argument. But to make that point these Bible-focused scholars were prepared to turn scripture on its head. Saint Paul is so clear: it's God who is the subject of the verb, the initiator of the rescue bid, the reconciler par excellence. It is he who finds a way "through Christ" to show us the way of love. There is no idea in Paul's head about an angry God waiting to be wooed by a sacrifice that, in its sheer enormity, balances the weight of all human sin (committed and inherited). This inversion of scripture, turned back to front by people acting in the name of "Biblical truth," is unworthy and its name should be called.

So we can be clear about the "mechanism," the great project, that emanates from a loving God. We can be equally clear that all those who appropriate the benefits of this deal for themselves must, in their turn, become reconcilers too, ambassadors for the God who has made this offer, this amazing grace, to every human being regardless of their condition or personal history.

And the fuel that fills our tank is, quite simply, love. Yes, that slippery word, that cure-all, again. "It's the love of Christ that constrains us," declares the apostle. Not a self-indulgent, self-gratifying love. Not the mere satisfying of our libido. But a love which finds its consummation, its very *raison d'être*, in giving satisfaction to, and seeking out the best interests of, the beloved. Now that's

the most radical understanding of love there is – the more of it you give away, the more and deeper treasure you get from practicing it.

It was in Haiti that I discovered this love in action. The poorest people on the face of the planet, people who had nothing, “the wretched of the earth,” had something deeply planted in their very souls which gave them an ability to withstand anything – earthquakes, hurricanes, floods, revolution, dictatorship – that life could throw at them. They could, and they did, love me – a total stranger, blessed with this world’s goods, infinitely better off than they were. It was a life-changing experience for me.

And it made me aware that I should be looking for, and expecting to find, this capacity to love in people well beyond my own cultural circle. Indeed, I should expect to find it in people well beyond the community of belief. For God was in Christ reconciling the world (not the church) to himself. So this is a drama being played out on the widest possible stage, a picture being painted on the broadest possible canvas.

Let me end with a story.

I’d left the Methodist Conference, the annual jamboree of our church, in a hurry. I drove like Jehu, hell bent on getting back to London to attend a concert in Hyde Park. I didn’t dare be late since our number one son had got us tickets. Our Tim is best pal to the son of the late John Entwistle, bass guitarist for *The Who* and he wanted me to enjoy the concert they were giving that day. It was earsplittingly awesome. They presented a kind of rock musical drama called *Quadrophenia*. This is the story of a kid who gets really messed up. Gangs bully him, drugs don’t deal with his self-hatred, his pals abandon him. He’s all over the shop. “I’ve had enough of dying, living, sleeping, crying, childhood, pain,” he cries before adding, “all I really want is to belong.” The piece ends with what has been called a “spiritual epiphany” with more than a hint of redemption. That’s what I thought when I heard Pete Townsend sing “Let love reign (spelt r-e-i-g-n) down” with the hope, ever so tender, every so slender, that love can work its miracle and help a lad who’s lost the will to live. An extraordinary performance.

The very last song I’d sung at the Methodist Conference ends, the last item before the Conference concludes, was written by our songwriter extraordinaire Charles Wesley. The words were still ringing in my ears as I hurtled down the motorway towards Hyde Park - “By thine unerring Spirit led, we shall not in the

desert stray.” That’s what we sang before ramping things up to a mighty crescendo as we declared our conviction that we were “as far from danger as from fear while love, almighty love, is near.” There it was. Love again - the fuel we need for our daily lives. So here’s my conclusion:

- 1) We need to know that we are loved by a God who reaches out to us in Christ.
- 2) We need to accept that we are loved by a God who recognizes and affirms our worth.
- 3) We need to sign up for the life of love – bringing hope and light and life in the place of despair, darkness and death.
- 4) And we should do it now. Let today be the day of our salvation. For we have received the grace of God. We must not let it go for nothing.

God help us.

Amen.