

JESUS AND HOMOSEXUAL PRACTICES

PETER ENSOR

With the passage of the Gay Marriage bill through parliament and the recent decision of the Church of Scotland to open the door to the possibility of practising homosexuals being appointed church ministers, it is no surprise to find that the issue of homosexual practices is back on the agenda of the Methodist Conference.

Evangelicals who remain true to the teaching of Scripture will not be inclined to succumb to the attitudes of an increasingly secular society in this area, since the testimony of Scripture is consistently clear and categorical on this issue (Lev. 18.22, 20.13, Rom. 1.24-27, 1 Cor. 6.9, 1 Tim. 1.10). The argument that the kind of homosexual practices condemned in these texts are exclusively those of a casual, demeaning or exploitative kind, rather than also those which express a committed and caring relationship, is an assumption which cannot be proved. There is no hint of such a distinction in the texts themselves and our knowledge of the qualities of homosexual relationships in the ancient world is far too meagre to allow us to draw such a sweeping conclusion. The issue facing the Church today is simply whether it will decide to follow Scripture at this point, or the fashions of the world.

The focus of this article, however, is not on the teaching of Scripture as a whole, nor on the complex issues surrounding its application to the Church and society today, but specifically on the attitude of Jesus himself.

Sometimes it is asserted that Jesus' teaching contains no reference to homosexual practices, and from this observation it is suggested that Christians are free to tolerate them today, since his teaching takes precedence over the rest of Scripture. This suggestion carries no weight with those who regard the teaching of Scripture as a whole as being equally God-given, but it is still worth addressing the premise on which it is built. It is true that Jesus' recorded teaching does not make any specific pronouncement on homosexual practices as such, but are there any indications of what his point of view would have been? Here are four considerations to take into account as we seek to discern the mind of the historical Jesus himself on this issue:

Firstly, it is antecedently likely that Jesus would have disapproved of homosexual practices because of the explicit condemnation of them in that part of the Old Testament which all Jews of his time regarded as canonical, that is the Torah or the Pentateuch (the first five books of the Bible). It is true that Jesus' teaching set in motion ideas that eventually led to the obsolescence of certain Pentateuchal regulations in the ceremonial and judicial sphere, as the Church evolved from being a Jewish national community, defined by descent from Abraham, into being an international fellowship, defined by faith in Jesus himself, but there is no evidence that he undermined what may (in the light of the New Testament) be defined as the Pentateuch's moral teaching. The 'antitheses' of Mt. 5 are sometimes interpreted as if this is what Jesus was doing, but this passage is better understood to be laying bare the underlying principles of the Pentateuch's moral teaching, and to be counteracting the Pharisaic misuse of the texts handled rather than the texts themselves.

Secondly, Jesus' recorded teaching on sexual matters shows him to be in sympathy with the stricter strands of Jewish interpretation current in his time. The prohibition of divorce 'except on the ground of unchastity' found in the Matthean account of Jesus teaching on this subject (Mt. 5.32, 19.9) presents him as being in agreement with the stricter Pharisaic school of Shammai rather than the more lenient school of Hillel, which allowed for divorce on much more slender grounds (even if the wife was a poor cook! – the debate revolved around the meaning of 'something objectionable about her' in Deut. 24.1). The versions of Mark and Luke, which omit this exceptive clause (Mk. 10.11f., Lk. 16.18), would appear to make him stricter still. He also commends celibacy for the sake of God's kingdom (Mt. 19.10-12), which is remarkable against the background of the normative command to 'be fruitful and multiply' (Gen. 1.28), and puts him (at this point) among the Essenes, a Jewish sect which was renowned for being even stricter than the Pharisees. It is highly unlikely that one who was more severe than the vast mass of his Jewish contemporaries in the areas of marriage, divorce and celibacy would have been more liberal than them in the area of homosexual practices.

Thirdly, it is unlikely that Paul, the author of Romans, 1 Corinthians and, possibly, 1 Timothy also, would have been so critical of homosexual practices if it was known in the early church that Jesus had been tolerant towards them. In Paul's discussion of sexual ethics in 1 Cor. 7, he is careful to quote Jesus' own teaching as authoritative (1 Cor. 7.10), and to indicate the points at which his

own teaching elaborated, or went beyond, what he had learnt of Jesus' teaching. In the light of this attitude, it is difficult to believe that he would have condemned homosexual practices as strongly as he does in his letters if Jesus had been remembered in the early church as having adopted a permissive stance towards them.

Fourthly, there is more direct evidence for Jesus' rejection of homosexual practices in the fact that two of the Gospel writers attribute to him a condemnation of the sin of 'unchastity' or 'sexual immorality' (implicitly in Mt. 5.32, 19.9, explicitly in Mt. 15.19 par. Mk. 7.21). The Greek word lying behind these English translations is the word *porneia*, which has a virtually synonymous counterpart in Aramaic (commonly considered the regular medium of Jesus' teaching), and which was used in the Jewish literature written in Greek during the intertestamental period not only for heterosexual misbehaviour outside of marriage but also for homosexual practices in general. Critical scholars may question the authenticity of these sayings as spoken by Jesus himself, but at least we may say that there are grounds for believing that there were members of the early church who remembered Jesus as condemning a type of behaviour which his contemporaries would have taken to include homosexual practices.

On the basis of these four considerations, taken cumulatively, we may justifiably conclude that it is very probable that the historical Jesus would have disapproved of homosexual practices, and therefore of gay marriage, and that the onus of proof lies with those who would wish to argue for the opposite conclusion. It follows also that those who call Jesus their Lord and Teacher, whatever may be their view of Scripture as a whole, can scarcely make this confession and simultaneously regard homosexual practices as acceptable in the sight of God.

Peter Ensor was a lecturer in New Testament, the biblical languages and early church history at Cliff College from 2008 to 2013, and is now a senior lecturer at the Kenya Methodist University.