An equal music

A career as an internationally renowned pianist has helped one gay man ameliorate the ‘terrible light’ of the Church’s teaching on homosexuality – teaching that must change with changing times.

The first message of explicit negativity I heard towards being gay came from my religious beliefs as I entered my teenage years in an evangelical Church. The teaching was that something growing within me (which was me) was disgusting and must be kept quiet, cured, squashed, punished … anything will do. Reading my Bible I would fear opening the scorching pages of Romans 1 or 1 Corinthians 6. These brief passages shine with a terrible light for a gay person, until we look at what they aim to illumine rather than at the light itself.

Just as we can now see clearly the inadequacy of St Paul’s teaching on women or slavery, and excuse his historical limitations, so we need not blame him for his lack of understanding of the concept of same-sex love. He was looking through a window at first-century Rome and Corinth with first-century Jewish eyes from a perspective of religious and cultural separation that had lasted for centuries. It is highly unlikely that he saw gay couples in faithful, committed partnerships; and it is certain that he saw all kinds of orgiastic, abusive behaviour which would often have been linked to pagan rites and beliefs. What else could he have written in his situation?

I became a Catholic at the age of 19 and the teaching on homosexuality remained the same, although being unmarried now became a respectable, even glamorous option. Priests, nuns and monks were all able to live safely without the enquiries: “Why aren’t you married?” “Have you got a girlfriend?” I even considered the priesthood myself, partly to avoid having to answer such terrifying questions. Yet I remained a musician, accepting the Church’s prohibition, buried under my work, avoiding “occasions of sin”, destroying certain friendships before there was any chance of them developing into anything intimate – in many ways a happy yet somehow shrunken life.

It was when reading Pope John Paul II’s famous book Love and Responsibility, published in 1980 when he was an auxiliary bishop in Krakow, that I first began to think again about this issue. You cannot offer such a radiant and dazzling vision of love and human relationships to your readers, and then exclude those who happen to have “green eyes”. Once you have affirmed, as he did controversially and courageously for a Catholic bishop of his time, the sacredness of the human body and its self-gift in the sexual act, you have opened a floodgate of recognition for all who have both bodies to reverence and “selves” to give.

“It is not good that the man should be alone,” said God in the opening chapters of the Bible and of human history – the one blemish in an otherwise unblemished world, where everything was “very good”. Such an affirmation of companionship at the beginning of time is fresh and inspiring still; and, combined with new discoveries about sexual orientation in the natural world, it opens up a radical challenge to previously confident assumptions of sin, destroying certain friendships and a totally free donation, it has the whiff of something slightly perverse about it – literally “contrary to nature”.

We are subject to natural law as part of creation, but we are also able to contemplate it and relish it. It is the great epiphany of reality: what is actually there, not what we would like to be there, or what our forebears have told us is there. It can be full of surprises, and it has no favourites. The one who claims natural law as an ally in arguing for the sanctity of life might end up finding it an annoying foe in a discussion on homosexuality.

When the world in which we live tells a different story from what we were taught, we eventually have to break free. It isn’t so much that law changes, but that the Church (from St Paul onwards) simply has not had the vocabulary to discuss an issue it neither named nor understood. (The idea that a person could actually be homosexual, rather than a badly behaved heterosexual, has been accepted by the Church only in the past 30 years or so.)

Law is living and flexible: always growing, adapting, changing shape; never abandoning its roots but never rigid either. Christ not only boiled theology down to the simple statement, “God is love”, he also distilled the complex religious laws of his time to love of that same God and of neighbour as oneself. The spiritual liberty and simplicity that resulted from this new, unified vision led, in theory at least, to the breaking down of the divisive barriers between men and women, slave and free, Jew and Gentile. It is tragic that it took
Christians at least 1,900 years even to begin to explore or live this freedom in practice. The prison gates were open but we remained inside, either cowering in the corner or standing with arms outstretched, blocking the exit. Both responses came from fear, and both were betrayals of the Christian message.

Ultimately the only real argument against homosexual equality is a belief that God has told us it is wrong. All the other reasons given (destruction of the family, seduction of the young, unnatural behaviour, a genetic disorder like alcoholism) are attempts to find a common, secular currency to barter for what is an a priori, religious judgement. But the coins are fake and are being rendered obsolete by common sense and daily experience.

Actually I believe that the religious arguments are wrong too, and that, as with slavery, the Churches will have to re-evaluate their teaching on this issue – but that’s for another chapter, indeed another book. That re-evaluation will probably take decades, but in the meantime the Churches cannot expect gay non-Christians in a secular world to abstain from sexual relationships from their teenage years up to the end of their lives; and thus they cannot exclude those same people from either marriage or a legal commitment and then complain that such relationships are unstable. Straight couples are no strangers to marital collapse, even with the cement of children and society’s affirmation to encourage them to hold firm, so why should we expect even higher standards from gays?

To use “musical” as a euphemism for homosexual is rather flattering when you think about it. It suggests a sensitivity, a creativity, an ability to attune to sound and beauty. Of course it was originally an ironic, snide use of the term: a real man might whistle at work, or bawl a song in the pub after work, but to be touched or moved by music below the surface seemed weak, lacking in moral fibre of that tough, fearless type which was the male ideal.

It is not an accident that music and the arts were always a tolerant environment for gay men. It was a world where an appreciation of the “feminine” was not seen as weakness, and where strength did not have to manifest itself in violence and coarseness. (It also became a safe place for gay people to flourish among like-minded friends in the years – not that long ago – when blackmail and prison were an ever-possible threat.)

All of this is not to suggest that gay people are inherently more sensitive or artistic than straights but everyone draws on a central emotional core in the act of creativity, and when the normal outlet of intimacy is blocked, the heart will find alternative ways to express itself, sometimes with enormous intensity. At best, art can become a fountain quenching an inner, passionate thirst; at worst, it is a form of sheer survival – galoshes against the puddles.

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