

**2018 MCI WPHS Symposium on
Biblical Interpretation & Human Sexuality
Rev Donald Ker – Creation & New Creation**

May I thank you for the invitation to join with you in today's conversation. It's really good to be with you. At the same time I come very cautiously, partly because Katherine, Paul and Vaughan have already given you a feast of thinking, and partly because I'm really quite conflicted about some of the questions which we have to face, and sense that what I see are but puzzling reflections in a distorting mirror. So in this contribution my spirit is speaking very softly.

"Creation and New Creation and trying to draw out any understandings for human sexuality." Gosh! Well, let me start by trying to sketch what I understand to be the fundamental story on which traditionally we have then sought to construct our understandings of everything, including sexuality.

The story starts with Creation. However the universe has come about (and we keep open minds on the details of the process over millions, or is it billions, of years) we believe that behind and through it all is God. The very nature of God is love. God has created, and continues to create, with loving purpose. Furthermore our humanity isn't just something that happened as an undirected process. In, through and all around it God is at work. We, male and female together, uniquely bear what Genesis calls "the image of God". Being created in God's image carries many implications but among them we stress the ability, and call, to have a unique relationship with God (Humanity's chief end is to glorify God and enjoy him forever), to have a quality of relationship with one another which is marked by a loving desire for the best for the other, and to care for God's creation, not least because it is good.

The story continues with Fall. We, the whole of humanity, are out of kilter with God. Where God created us for loving, responsive, obedient relationship with him we have "followed the devices and desires of our own hearts" – imagining that our own way would lead to our emancipation, and discovering instead that it has led to our alienation from God and from one another, and thus to our destruction. But because of our unique place as God's image bearers in creation our fall means that not only are we out of kilter with God – the whole creation is out of kilter as well.

And what of God, as we've messed up? God takes loving initiatives to bring us back, first through a people, Israel, called to make God's ways known, and then through Jesus the Christ, God with us. For us Jesus Christ came into the world. For us he lived and showed God's love. For us he suffered death on the Cross. For us he triumphed over death, rising to newness of life. You may recognize words taken from our service of baptism. I use them not just because they quickly summarise the birth, life, death and resurrection of Jesus. Their context in baptism makes the point that, just as we, created beings, are involved in the fallen-ness of humanity so we can be involved in the new life of Christ.

The climax of our story? Not simply the saved going to heaven, but a whole new creation – new heaven, new earth, new state of affairs and new relationships in which God is graciously, unquestioningly present – the Kingdom of God. This newness is inaugurated by the Resurrection of Jesus –

we're given some clues as to what it's like by the ministry of Jesus, and those who by faith share the Resurrection life of Jesus now (that's us) are to live in this present world by the light of that future hope, and in the power of God which is very different from human power as we see it exercised.

This is a very brief sketch – many points would need much fuller elucidation, but I trust that the overall direction of it is a fair Biblical reflection. May I make four further comments, one about Fall and three about Kingdom:

At heart the Fall is all about our failure as humanity to acknowledge the Creator, and the result is what one author has described as “Cosmic Shambles”. This shambles affects everything, not least our thinking about what is good and what is not. Paul in Romans 1 writes of this failure among the nations to recognize the creator, and indeed sees same sex relationships as a symptom of this, but, as Jesus points out, selfish heterosexual relationships are equally sinful. Indeed the symptom of our failure to acknowledge the Creator which takes up far more space in the Bible, and which the prophets of Israel denounce most clearly, is the way we, who have resources, treat the poor and the vulnerable, and, we might reasonably add, those who sense themselves to be excluded for whatever reason.

About Kingdom: What our Society thinks of as progress is not necessarily a sign of God's Kingdom becoming more evident. It may be (and so where I see men and women being equally valued, equally affirmed, equally rewarded, equally given opportunity for growth and fulfillment in Society, that seems to chime well with Kingdom values). It may not be (as in the reality that many seem to live more isolated lives than was the case a couple of generations ago). So “Society has moved on” doesn't of itself settle any issue. Deeper theological analysis is needed.

Second: The breaking in of God's Kingdom is not without pain. Romans 8 is a very evocative and enlightening chapter. It's all about living in God's Spirit, but just because creation remains out of kilter and the new has not yet arrived the tensions are high. Birth pangs, to which Paul rather daringly (for a man) refers, may be signs of new life but they're agonizing (and Paul did know in other ways about the agony of being a Christian). Romans 8 is also very honest about us not even knowing how we ought to pray. The Spirit intercedes for us, but this doesn't necessarily eliminate the substantial spiritual confusion which we experience. So Christians struggling with an issue is not necessarily a sign of faithlessness.

Third: As we're called to live in the present in the light of the future our living is to be marked by holiness – “in life and thought entirely clean”. Methodist people are still called to ask, as a fundamental question, “What does holiness look like in my life, what does it look like in the church, what does it look like in the way I relate to others who view things differently, what does it look like in Society?”

Which leads us on to issues of human sexuality (although, as I've already suggested, they shouldn't be allowed to become the biggest agenda item in our quest for holiness).

The Creation narratives in Genesis 1 and 2 seem to affirm certain things – first that men and women are both created and both bear the image of God, second

that they are created for each other, and third, that the creation of a new family unit being formed when a man and a woman each leave their parental home and come together is affirmed. "Becoming one flesh" may well be about more than simply sexual intercourse, but surely includes it, and thus is also affirmed in the context of this new family. In the context of a discussion on divorce as recorded in Mark 10 Jesus acknowledges that Torah permits divorce "because of your hardness of heart" but repeats that "at the beginning of creation God made them male and female" and goes on to affirm what Genesis 2 also affirms.

I'm attracted to Tom Wright's thinking when he says "...at the start of ...the book of Genesis we have this rich symbolic account of God's good creation in which, at its very heart, the coming together of male plus female is itself a signpost pointing to that great complementarity of God's whole creation, of heaven and earth belonging together."

The relationship between sexual intercourse and child-bearing is also affirmed. Immediately after male and female are confirmed as being in the image of God they are encouraged to be fruitful and multiply, and to undertake the stewardship of creation. (In passing we might note Paul's insistence, in 1 Cor 11, that the two sexes are absolutely dependent on each other, in the context that everything comes from God). But the relationship is about more than breeding. Thus, for instance, we find what seems to be a close companionship between Abraham and Sarah even though they are childless through the normal years of fertility.

So a faithful heterosexual relationship can be affirmed as compatible with a desire for a holy life. But the consequences of the Fall affect all of us. Thus we mess up, and are less than loving in our marriages. We may be unfaithful to the point of the marriage breaking down. God's redemptive grace allows the opportunity for repentance, a renewed commitment to holy living and even, perhaps, a new relationship. All of us need God's grace, even in what seem to be the most secure and fulfilling marriages.

Genesis, and indeed any of the other creation poetry in the Hebrew Scriptures, say in Job, or Proverbs, is silent on the question of where sexual intercourse between two people of the same sex might fit into the creation picture. What are we to make of this silence?

Can I first make a plea – that we do not over-sexualise the close friendships which may occur between two men, or two women. Holy living and close companionship are surely not inimical to each other.

Having said that in the very few places in the Bible where overtly sexual contact between two persons of the same sex is mentioned, it is mentioned negatively, whether seen as taboo and damaging to the community of Israel (as in Leviticus) or, as I mentioned earlier, a symptom of all creation being out of kilter because humanity has not recognized the creator (Romans 1).

I've been making reference to Holy living, the sort of living to which we are called in the present in light of the coming Kingdom, the new creation of new heaven and new earth. Is there any insight as to how our sexuality might work out in God's new creation? In short, all we can say is it's going to be different. Thus Jesus, being offered a marriage conundrum by Sadducees who

wanted to undermine any thought of Resurrection, responds that when the dead rise they will neither marry nor be given in marriage. Paul, unusually for a Jew, seems in 1 Corinthians 7 to be hesitant about marriage and all it implies, because, he says, "the world in its present form is passing away". In the New Creation relationships will be different, fuller, better. Furthermore in this New Creation there is the promise for each of us of a Resurrection Body. What will that be like? You may recall that in 1 Corinthians 15 an objector to the whole concept of Resurrection asks that question. Paul, a bit unhelpfully, says in effect "silly question", but then goes on to use the imagery of the seed and the fully grown plant. There's a continuity, but at the same time a big difference. So we're left trying to use some imagination, but probably shouldn't push it. I'm not sure that I can go further than the image created by CS Lewis in "The Great Divorce" who writes of those whose bodies were stronger, more real, more substantial than our present ones.

Let's come back to where we are now. Our vocation, individually and together, is by the power of the Spirit to live the new life of the coming Kingdom now. We therefore long for the fuller, better relationships which the Kingdom promises, but we also seek to model those and live them out now, insofar as we are able. Those loving relationships will seek the best for all people, whatever their gender, their ethnicity, their social status, their sexual orientation, their faith. In modeling those relationships we will come back time and again to looking very carefully at the relationships that Jesus had with all the variety of people whom he encountered. It's important not to be simplistic about this because Jesus' relationships were often very nuanced. He both welcomed and challenged. It's also important to be realistic that this new life of the Kingdom, this wholeness for which we long, is a hope not yet fully realized.

Where does this leave us? I'm afraid it leaves us in a place of substantial and uncomfortable tension which we need to acknowledge and wrestle with.

On the one hand, our Constitution as a Church affirms "The doctrines of the evangelical faith, which Methodism has held from the beginning, and still holds, are based upon the divine revelation recorded in the Holy Scriptures. The Methodist Church acknowledges this revelation as the supreme rule of faith and practice." Although, as we've seen, those Scriptures say comparatively little about same sex relationships, what they do say does not, in my view, encourage the Methodist Church to reconstruct its current understanding of human sexuality without much more hermeneutical illumination of the Scriptures. A Church should never deny that such illumination is possible, indeed it should seek it, but it takes much time and careful scrutiny.

On the other hand holy living in the light of the coming Kingdom asks all of us to reach out rather than shrink back, to acknowledge and repent of actions and attitudes which have blocked the grace of Christ, to listen with grace and humility to those whose life experience is different and to affirm that we belong together in the body of Christ.

"For now we see only a reflection as in a mirror, then we shall see face to face. Now I know only in part, then I shall know fully even as I am fully known. And now these three remain: faith, hope and love. But the greatest of these is love."