

**Two Gaping Chasms and an Invitation to Wholeness:
a Queer Anglican Response to
Marriage, Same-Sex Marriage and the Anglican Church of Australia
by the Revd Dr Josephine Inkpin**

Introduction and Overview

In reading *Marriage, Same-Sex Marriage and the Anglican Church of Australia* as a queer¹ person of faith, the parable of the Rich Man and Lazarus comes to mind. For many queer people can identify with Lazarus, seeing, in much Church life, the Rich Man's lack of loving recognition and mercy. There are aspects which connect in these essays. More worryingly however, for Christian mission and unity, there is a major lack of genuine encounter with LGBTIQ+ Anglicans themselves. This is not to say that some contributors do not converse with some LGBTIQ+ people, or have no awareness of the vibrantly growing work of queer theology. There are some helpful features. Yet, from a queer Anglican perspective, it often seems that, in Jesus' words, "between you and us a great chasm has been fixed, so that those who might want to pass from here to you cannot do so, and no one can cross from there to us."² The omission of openly queer voices,³ drawing on their own experience of sexuality and marriage, is profoundly distancing.

a partial contribution

A chasm is also revealed between the contributors themselves, reflecting the painful developments across the Anglican Communion in its inability to come to terms with the gifts and needs of all its members. The book witnesses to some undoubtedly hard-won dialogue. Yet, whilst Mark Thompson strangely affirms that communication is straightforward,⁴ the essays attest to a very different reality. Partly this reflects the lack of openly LGBTIQ+ Anglican contributors. For, in many places, a clear and good scholarly snapshot is offered of part of the

¹ The word 'queer' has a painful history and is disliked by some, typically older, members of the LGBTIQ+ community who have suffered from the violence of its use. It is used here however as an otherwise commonly regarded collective term for the LGBTIQ+ community and to honour the significant contributions made through 'queer theology' and other LGBTIQ+ developments in recent times. An alternative word might be 'rainbow'.

² Luke 16. 24, New Revised Standard Version Bible

³ This is not gainsayed by one contributor coming out as gay subsequent to publication, as no openly queer status, experience, or connection with the mainstream Anglican LGBTIQ+ community was made visible.

⁴ M.Thompson, 'Attentively Reading Scripture', in *Marriage, Same-Sex Marriage and the Anglican Church of Australia*, Broughton Publishing 2019, p.73

fractured past and present dysmorphia of the Australian Anglican Church. Yet it fails to recognise those who have been ignored, whose lived faith experience and theological expertise might offer fresh insights and, conceivably, circuit breakers. For queer Anglicans, properly understood, represent an invitation to wholeness for the whole Body in its groanings. This response therefore, from out of the hard-pressed queer Anglican community, seeks both to highlight the issues and divisions embodied in *Marriage, Same-Sex Marriage, and the Anglican Church of Australia*, and also to point towards what queer Anglicans might add. After all, for those open to it, the Christian chasms are never be regarded as unbridgeable, in the light of the Resurrection. That is the ultimate point of Christ's parable. Narrow pathways however lead nowhere but to destruction.

Key themes

In offering a queer Anglican response, three important themes arise from the essays: that of the image of God in creation; the use of the Bible and historical development; and theologies of 'absence', in relation to the Book of Common Prayer and other elements of tradition. Moving with, and beyond, them, there are then three vital queer theological emphases to be considered: namely, the healing praxis of Christ; liberation and justice trajectories of Scripture and history; and theologies of God's 'real presence' in the lived experience of LGBTIQ+ people. Before outlining these, it is important however to highlight the essayists' constraints and context. This also includes questioning the false narrative of 'tearing communion' which is presented as central.

Constraints

limitations of the dialogue

The first thing to note is the highly constrained framework of *Marriage, Same-Sex Marriage, and the Anglican Church of Australia*. Bishop Jonathan Holland, in his eirenic Foreword, is helpfully clear, stating: "We have framed the book in accordance with the motion from General Synod. What is here therefore is a partial contribution to a much wider conversation."⁵ For the Commission decided it "was not asked to look at the pastoral or liturgical response of the church, nor important related matters such as intersex or transgender or covenantal relationships, nor to

⁵ Jonathan Holland, 'Foreword', *Marriage, Same-Sex Marriage and the Anglican Church of Australia*, Broughton Publishing, Mulgrave Vic, 2019, p.3

highlight the ‘lived experience’ of same-sex couples.”⁶ In other words, the rules and participants were specifically ordered in ways which omitted the very people whose lives, bodies, and, crucially, faith understandings are at stake. This includes the extraordinary lack of recognition of inter-sex and transgender people, some of whom have lived in Christian marriages for decades, whilst others are prevented from doing so. It also seems curious to draw such a tight remit when Anglican strength is typically in its pastoral and liturgical life. In reality, essayists spill beyond these limits, notably Rhys Bezzant, who provides a mixed bag of ideas entitled ‘Pursuing pastoral care for those with same-sex desires’.⁷ Yet there are no openly queer voices, or references quoted at any length, despite offers to contribute by Equal Voices Anglican, the national network of LGBTIQA+ Anglicans.

‘Nothing About Us Without Us’ in the One Body?

In contrast, the principle of ‘Nothing About Us Without Us’ is widely understood by disadvantaged people to be crucial in both empowerment and reconciliation.⁸ This relates to the theological principle of the ‘consensus fidelium’ and the divine gifts and wisdom of the whole people of God, particularly those of the weaker members of the Body. For, as 1 Corinthians 12 outlines, whilst there may be different spiritual gifts and members with different callings, all are to be honoured as activated by the same Spirit. As St Paul affirms: “The eye cannot say to the hand, ‘I have no need of you,’ nor again the head to the feet, ‘I have no need of you.’ On the contrary, the members of the body that seem to be weaker are indispensable, and those members of the body that we think less honourable we clothe with greater honour.”⁹ “If one member suffers”, wrote St Paul, “all suffer together with it; if one member is honoured, all rejoice together with it.”¹⁰ What then of LGBTIQA+ suffering and honour?

the centrality of ‘lived experience’ dishonoured

Honouring such a crucial scriptural principle is reflected in two of the best essays. Matthew Anstey offers his own critique of the restricted game plan, in more than once drawing

⁶ Jonathan Holland, ‘Foreword’, p.3

⁷ Rhys Bezzant, in “To What End? The Blessing of Same-Sex Marriage”, pp.235-238

⁸ Arising from Central Europe, as embodied in the *Nihil novi nisi commune consensu* (“Nothing new without the common consent”) 1505 act of the Polish Sejm (parliament), and partly analogous to some Western ideas of ‘no taxation without representation’, it was popularised in English via disability activism, not least through James Charlton’s book *Nothing About Us Without Us: Disability, Oppression and Empowerment*, University of California, 2000

⁹ 1 Corinthians 12.21-23, New Revised Standard Version translation

¹⁰ 1 Corinthians 12.25, New Revised Standard Version translation

attention to the ‘paramount’¹¹ importance of the ‘lived experience’ of those the publication is discussing.¹² ‘Encounter’, he affirms, is crucial to determining truth, giving a glimpse of his own personal growth in understanding through the impact of gay friends in loving relationship.¹³ Dorothy Lee, in her insightful essay ‘Marriage, Headship and the New Testament’, similarly draws vital attention to the “integral” role of both experience and reason in Scriptural interpretation.¹⁴ Thereby, she affirms, they enable the “gospel principles of the New Testament” to “present a model of marriage and partnership that dismantles male-dominated structures, valuing instead mutuality, fidelity, respect, and love, without domination or subjugation.”¹⁵ All this is good, and powerful, but hard to demonstrate without the involvement of those who can best speak of it. Such a dialogue needs to be pluralist and multivocal, reflecting Anglican community diversity and honouring its queer members.

Context

bound by bygone binaries

Whilst *Marriage, Same-Sex Marriage and the Anglican Church of Australia* gives considerable understandable attention to contested Australian Anglican formularies, and to some developments in parts of the Anglican Communion elsewhere, scant attention is otherwise given to today’s context. Indeed, it is odd how little is said about wider cultural change, and, above all, the continuing struggles of LGBTIQ+ people for full health, regard and participation. At times it can seem as if such Australian Anglican debate is taking place in a bubble, marooned in a former age. For a notable feature of the essays is the conscious, or unconscious, use of binary assumptions of sex and gender which neither reflect historical realities nor contemporary understandings of the diversity of human personhood. Dynamic terms such as male and female, heterosexual and homosexual, are thus sometimes used as if their meaning is plain, fixed, and distinct from one another. Treating sexuality and gender as binaries, rather than as spectrums, is

¹¹ M.Anstey ‘Scripture and Moral Reasoning’, in *Marriage, Same-Sex Marriage and the Anglican Church of Australia*, Broughton Publishing, Mulgrave Vic, 2019, p.71

¹² See especially the section ‘On the necessity of lived experience’ pp.64-66 in M.Anstey ‘Scripture and Moral Reasoning’, in *Marriage, Same-Sex Marriage and the Anglican Church of Australia*, Broughton Publishing, Mulgrave Vic, 2019, pp.57-

¹³ M.Anstey ‘The Case for Same-Sex Marriage’, in *Marriage, Same-Sex Marriage and the Anglican Church of Australia*, pp.270-271

¹⁴ D.A.Lee ‘Marriage, Headship and the New Testament’, in *Marriage, Same-Sex Marriage and the Anglican Church of Australia*, Broughton Publishing, Mulgrave Vic, 2019, p.136

¹⁵ D.A.Lee ‘Marriage, Headship and the New Testament’, p.138

archaic to informed psychology, philosophy and health expertise. The complex contemporary range of understandings of the human person deserves much greater attention if deeper truth is to emerge.

need to recognise much broader human diversity – ‘Love is a many gendered thing’

The exclusion of marriages of Anglican gender diverse people highlights part of the loss incurred. Nothing is said about the questions posed by transgender people, who, on transition, may find their marriages challenged,¹⁶ or suddenly possible, depending on their now affirmed authentic gender. Even more substantially, the richness of insight into handling relational change which a couple involving one or more gender diverse person can bring to others’ understanding of marriage is passed over. Love, after all, is in reality “a many gendered thing” and deserves revealing.¹⁷ Such are the limitations of truth and understanding when rules and participants are so constrained.¹⁸ Bisexuality is all but hidden too. Asexual, and aromantic, people are also rendered invisible, despite the valuable insights they offer to subjects such as friendship which are given attention.¹⁹ Whilst wider cultural discourse has also often used ‘same sex marriage’ terminology, that language itself has been found to be limited and problematic. Contemporary wisdom understands marriage equality as a much broader concept, honouring all mature adult desires and relationships, and the many genders and identities forming them.

beyond acknowledgement of ‘common ground’

It is of course right and proper to acknowledge that Doctrine Commission members together specifically identified some important issues and ‘common ground’: including ‘that same-sex attraction is not a sin or a mental illness or a psychological disorder’; and ‘not a voluntary choice’; that ‘reparative therapy’ is ineffective; that ‘some of the church’s past teaching about same-sex attraction has been unhelpful and untrue to the Scriptures’; and that ‘the church needs to

¹⁶ As, for example, by leading Anglican conservative figures such as David Ould: <https://davidould.net/transgender-and-the-doctrine-of-marriage-in-brisbane/>

¹⁷ Christina Beardsley ‘Love is a Many Gendered Thing: Gender Roles, Relationships and Trans People’ in *Modern Believing*, Vol 55 Issue 2, 2014, <https://online.liverpooluniversitypress.co.uk/doi/10.3828/mb.2014.18>

¹⁸ see further J.M.Inkpin & P.H.Jones, ‘Revealing the rainbow nature of marriage: reflecting on our ‘trans wedded’ marriage’ at <https://www.transspirit.org/blog/revealing-the-rainbow-nature-of-marriage-reflecting-on-our-trans-wedded-life-together>

¹⁹ A theme explored in two essays but within wholly hetero-cis-normative frameworks

find a better way to welcome and include'.²⁰ This offers some encouragement. Yet these themes are undeveloped and insufficient in recognising the depth of challenges faced by queer people. These have been powerfully articulated by Anthony Venn Brown, for example, in his report 'Killing Us, Driving Us Crazy'.²¹ As other informed researchers and support practitioners have also identified, mental health levels are significantly lower among LGBTI+ people of faith than among the wider LGBTI+ community. All this is deeply relevant to any discussion about marriage, and the spiritual, as well as social and cultural, support it can offer.

deepening alienation

This context is made more difficult by recent controversies. Thus the destructive effect of the 2017 marriage equality postal survey on LGBTIQ+ mental health remains much under-appreciated. Nothing is said about this in any of the essays, which is particularly strange considering the impact on queer people of the Diocese of Sydney's donation of \$1 million to the 'No' campaign'. There has been little let-up since, as 'religious freedom' debates have impacted greatly. Again, some powerful Anglican actions have been taken bringing great pain to queer Anglicans. Yet none of that also features in the Doctrine Commission essays, whilst the absence of openly LGBTIQ+ Anglican voices compounds the damaging silence. The Commission affirms there is a challenge in relating to those who 'already feel marginalised or excluded'²² Unfortunately, whilst the depth of this context is not realised, even its work risks deepening alienation.

towards a truer narrative than 'tearing communion'

In assessing the whole, one of the most disappointing aspects of *Marriage, Same-Sex Marriage and the Anglican Church of Australia* is also how the frequently asserted narrative of 'tearing communion' is unquestioned. As indicated below, this assertion partly reflects the a-historical approaches of some, coupled with astonishing amnesia about other continuing

²⁰ J.Holland, 'Foreword', p.6

²¹ Common themes include: mental health issues from several factors; serious attempts to change through personal secret struggles, spiritual counselling, and formal conversion therapy organisations, often over an extended periods; heterosexual marriage either because of conformity or as the perceived answer to their 'problem'; self destructive behaviours, for example substance abuse and unsafe sex; obsessive behaviours, not least sexually related; struggles to find their place in the wider LGBTI community; additional cultural layers for some to deal with; the experience of intense cognitive dissonance; even after coming out, the belief of some that they are still going to hell; the long term impact of internalised homophobia; serious thoughts of suicide; and high levels of suicide. See further <https://www.abbi.org.au/2018/04/lgbti-people-from-faith-backgrounds/>

²² J.Holland, 'Foreword', p.1

differences, not least related to women's ordination or episcopal consecrations in the provinces of others. More obviously, it serves propaganda purposes which need counteracting. For it is historically impossible to identify when there were not 'tears' in the Anglican Communion. Since the 16th century break with Rome, the Anglican tradition has been a continually contested communion. The first Lambeth Conference was driven by vigorous differences of biblical interpretation and provincial authority, and such international means of unity have always reflected deep theological and cultural tensions.

seeking 'differentiated consensus is not 'tearing'

At stake is therefore honesty about realities, not promotion of an idealised unity which never was. The self-serving use of this false narrative of unity is revealed in highly selective choice of causes of disunity. This is strongly exemplified by the opening essay 'The Debates over the Doctrine of Marriage in the Anglican Communion',²³ where a partial loaded picture is provided of recent Anglican Communion developments. Considerable attention is thus given to The Episcopal Church in the USA, and to some Anglican features in Canada and Aotearoa New Zealand. Yet little is said about the length and depth of those engagements with the issues and their close adherence to canons and constitutions. In contrast, there is significant neglect of the highly divisive drive of conservatives, particularly with the emergence of GAFCON. Whereas TEC and others have maintained the procedural integrity of their constituted bodies, GAFCON tears the bonds of agreed order, imposing itself on others.²⁴ In doing so, it honours neither Anglican plurality nor the typically painful but communal dialogue which others seek. As Paul Avis puts it, 'the invoking of autonomy' is 'hardly the language of Zion'. Yet 'to practice the grace of walking together without coercive constraints is the special vocation of Anglicanism in our pluralistic world.'²⁵ Seeking 'differentiated consensus' is hardly tearing. Standing in judgement of others, creating parallel and competing structures, and ignoring the gifts and bodies of others, is another matter.

freeing the Body

²³ M.Stead, pp.9-30.

²⁴ developments only briefly alluded by M.Stead, pp.20-21.

²⁵ concluding words in P.Avis *The Vocation of Anglicanism*, T & T.Clark, London, 2016, p.187.

If there is any sound of tearing coming from ‘progressive’ Anglican spaces it is rather the sound of bondage slowly being removed by, and from, LGBTIQ+ people: of gags removed from mouths, eyes and ears unblocked, foot bindings unravelled to allow movement, chest bindings torn away to enable lungs to breathe and hearts to love more fully. For like any human body, the Body of Christ on earth is not a finished product. Throughout history it constantly transitions, adapts and grows. If it does not, it becomes dysfunctional. The bodily strains within the Anglican Communion are therefore not only nothing new, but, viewed positively, are signs of hope and life. For queer Anglicans, as Steff Fenton expressed it in response to the Anglican Archbishop of Sydney’s divisive ‘please leave’ comments in October 2019: “It is not the movement of people responding with grace and love who are breaking this church, it is the people responding with divisive rhetoric and exclusion. I am (also) the future of Anglicanism.”²⁶

The first chasm: ‘integrity’ versus ‘inclusion’?

The foregoing critique is not at all intended to dismiss the good work in *Marriage, Same-Sex Marriage and the Anglican Church of Australia*. Within its significant constraints and narrow context, it amply illuminates the first chasm between different straight and straight acting Australian Anglicans. For, after its explanatory Foreword, the essays fall into distinct groups. On the one hand, arguing mainstream Sydney Anglican theological positions, there is what might be termed the ‘integrity’²⁷ group, including Michael Stead, Mark Thompson, Katherine Smith, Claire Smith, and Rhys Bezzant. On the other hand, there is what might be termed the ‘inclusion’²⁸ group, including Matthew Anstey, Meg Warner, Dorothy Lee, Muriel Porter, and Stephen Pickard. The former is clear, sometimes strongly, about its understanding of the incompatibility of ‘same sex marriage’ with Anglican doctrine and order, especially regarding particular views of the Bible, the Book of Common Prayer and the Anglican Church of Australia’s Constitution. Michael Stead provides its most articulate expression, particularly in ‘The case against same-sex marriage’.²⁹ The second group offers a wider range of more open outlooks, highlighting the need to wrestle with scriptural complexity and relevant changing features in tradition, reason and culture.

²⁶ Steff Fenton, interview on ABC Radio National, 15 October 2019.

²⁷ A term used by Mark Yarhouse and others in relation, for example, to conservative perspectives on transgender identities, on the basis of shared scriptural and anthropological assumptions. For, Michael Stead rightly observes, even in reluctantly using them, the commonly used terms ‘progressive’ and ‘conservative’ overly simplify the theological outlooks and backgrounds of those who affirm differing approaches.

²⁸ Again, an arguably better term to be used than ‘progressive’, and also differentiating from the fuller ‘affirming’, ‘celebrating’, and ‘flourishing’ approaches which queer Christians now advocate.

²⁹ *Marriage, Same-Sex Marriage and the Anglican Church of Australia*, pp.285-312

Inevitably the essays are uneven in quality and focus. Yet, taken together, they highlight some key features. As indicated above, three appear most significant: the image of God in Creation, use of the Bible and historical development, and theologies of ‘absence’ related to particular identified aspects of Bible and tradition.

The Image of God in Creation

The first striking aspect of *Marriage, Same-Sex Marriage and the Anglican Church of Australia* is how human beings are considered creations of God. For, as mentioned above, in outlining ‘common ground’, Jonathan Holland affirms that all contributors agreed ‘that all people are made in the image of God, are loved by God and are welcome in the community of God’s people’. Yet there are significant differences in understanding. How much is this an ideal rather than a reflection of embodied reality? What qualifications are there for some? What are the implications?

Particularity

A key issue is the *particularity* of God’s image in our human diversity. Whilst this is less explicit than queer people might wish in the ‘inclusion’ essays, these nonetheless display a strong awareness of human difference, including across time and space. In contrast, the ‘integrity’ contributors tend towards a flattened, one or two-dimensional, anthropology. This is most apparent in Claire Smith’s essay, where the assertion is made that “there is a consistent understanding of marriage throughout the Bible”, resting on “the union of two people of opposing biological sex”, with “essential not incidental” “sexed complementarity”.³⁰ Katherine Smith similarly traces a simplistic golden thread through the extraordinary variety of biblical materials.³¹ Meg Warner’s finely nuanced reflection stands in stark contrast.³² In words applicable to the whole Bible, “The Old Testament”, she rightly begins, “can be terrifically annoying.”³³ It does not provide us with clearly defined laws of direct guidance for living. There are “extraordinary illustrations of what marriage might look like. Nowhere, however, do we find a definition of marriage.”³⁴ Aware that ‘integrity’ perspectives rely heavily on definitions drawn from individual

³⁰ C.Smith, p.142.

³¹ K.Smith, ‘Belonging to God in Relational Wholeness: A Covenantal Perspective’, pp.105-121,

³² M.Warner, ‘How does the Old Testament help us think about marriage and same-sex marriage?’ pp.87-103.

³³ M.Warner, p.87

³⁴ M.Warner, p.87.

verses such as Genesis 2.24, she highlights the wide range of alternative Old Testament models.³⁵ Trying to use such passages as Genesis 2.4b-25 as God's introduction of gender into creation is also highly problematic, eisegetically overlooking the narrative's character and purpose and unnecessarily turning what is a description of what is into what *must* be.³⁶ Rather, such passages, "when read carefully...point not to an exclusive or prescriptive model of marriage, but to God's will that.. creatures might experience companionship in a shared vocation to serve (God's) creation."³⁷ In other words, whereas 'integrity' thinkers tendentiously assert a universality based only on their own particularity, at best obscuring "fallen" aberrations, it is the other way around. The universality of God's love is open and demonstrable from the myriad of particularities of God's image in creation. Companionship blessed by God, not loneliness, is a divine gift to all.

Power

A second issue related to God's image in humanity is that of *power*. Again, 'inclusion' perspectives show awareness of its importance in both Scripture and tradition. Risking being trapped by the logic of her near biblicist hermeneutic, Katherine Smith however comes disturbingly close to endorsing the death penalty, authorised, in Deuteronomy 22.28-29, for a young woman's sexual activity outside of marriage.³⁸ In contrast, Meg Warner delicately teases out several other complex, and often culturally problematic, marriage issues of bride price, incest, intermarriage and polygamy, which arise from the Old Testament but which are passed over by 'integrity' outlooks. Such texts are not necessarily 'texts of terror' but clearly reflect power interests in societies very different from ours. We thus need to "mind the gap" between the worlds of the Bible and our own, exercising care about how we claim scriptural authority for marriage views.³⁹ Matthew Anstey develops this further. "*Scripture*", he argues, "*shows us how the people of God come to make moral and theological judgements, rather than providing the substantive content of those judgements*" (his italics).⁴⁰ He memorably quotes Rabbi Burton Visotsky, who, due to the power factors at play, has characterised Genesis as "an ugly little soap opera about a dysfunctional family."⁴¹ Like Visotsky, 'inclusion' advocates do not believe that this means the

³⁵ M.Warner, p.101.

³⁶ M.Warner, pp.101-102.

³⁷ M.Warner, p.103.

³⁸ K.Smith, pp.113-115

³⁹ M.Warner, pp.95-96.

⁴⁰ M.Anstey, p.66.

⁴¹ B.Visotsky, *The Genesis of Ethics: How the Tormented Family of Genesis Leads us to Moral Development*, New Rivers Press, New York, 1996, quoted in M.Anstey, p.67.

Bible cannot assist in our moral reasoning. We cannot however do so innocently and directly. For ‘many stories are morally ambiguous and deeply confronting’⁴² and the power interests within them need to be recognised. Similarly, we may then acknowledge the power dynamics of contemporary moral struggles.

Reflexivity

A core element appears to be a lack of reflexivity by ‘integrity’ advocates. This may be prompted, as Mark Thompson articulates, by perceived fears of reductionism and replacing a ‘non-theological’ for a ‘theological’ reading of Scripture.⁴³ There might be a risk of “a hypertrophy of hermeneutical theory”⁴⁴ obscuring what is not opaque, whilst “our own personal and cultural preferences” can, of course, “swamp a reading”.⁴⁵ Michael Stead thus pleads for “a hermeneutic of humility” instead of “a hermeneutic of resistance”.⁴⁶ However such protests tend to underplay the unconscious biases already within the text and the need for those coming to it to recognise these in themselves. Assertions such as ‘Either God’s word is in need of clarification by our techniques... or he chose not to communicate clearly’⁴⁷ surely represent a false dichotomy designed to shore up not God’s authority, but that of those who have the current power and privilege to interpret and determine the lives of others. The frequent calls for ‘humility’ towards received theological opinions can thus become a device for suppression. From a womanist queer theological perspective, Pamela Lightsey puts this well: “The current crisis of the Church surrounding sexuality will continue because our conversations are not guided by faith but by the will to control... Mostly”, she says, what Christians do is “to apply scripture not in order to *find out* but in order to *tell why*. This is oppression clothed in religiosity. Guided by fear of sexuality, the ultimate human existential unknown condition, we dig deep into our positions and refuse simply to say “I don’t know”. Admitting what we don’t know will free us to work with what we do know.”⁴⁸

⁴² M.Anstey, p.66.

⁴³ in M.Thompson, ‘Attentively Reading Scripture’, pp.73-85.

⁴⁴ M.Thompson, p.79.

⁴⁵ M.Thompson, p.78.

⁴⁶ M.Stead, ‘The Case Against Same-Sex Marriage’, p.311.

⁴⁷ M.Thompson, p.81.

⁴⁸ P.Lightsey, *Our Lives Matter: A Womanist Queer Theology*, Pickwick Publications, 2015, pp.49-50, quoted in A.Webster *Found Out*, p.4.

Dividing the Queer Self

A third issue is the *wholeness* of God's image in creation. 'Integrity' viewpoints assert that the 'blueprint' of humanity is clearly fixed. Little room is left for development and human beings' main responsibility is 'humbly' to follow God's will as predetermined by self-identified guardians of scripture and authority. This crucially entails a separation for certain people of their identity and desire from their expression. Others, who meet heteronormative interpretative expectations, are allowed to find unity, avoiding the negative consequences of this body-spirit divide. Attention has already been drawn to how this fails to recognise the diversity of the human sexuality and gender spectrums recognised today, in addition to those which have prevailed in other-then Western cultures and times. It also fits uneasily with St Paul's recognition that it is better to marry than to burn. As Matthew Anstey suggests, beyond *a priori* biblicist assertion, the grounds for this division of the queer self are very unclear. "The precise nature of the specific sin" is not articulated, as it is for genuine sins such as incest and paedophilia, where harm is self-evident. Rather "for homosexuality...its wrongness is simply assumed."⁴⁹

honouring desire

The Doctrine Commission's work is not without any fresh possibilities. Thus Gregory Seach's essay 'Steps towards a theological understanding of desire'⁵⁰ is one of the most interesting, as it moves towards exploring embodied faith experience and how wholeness may be sought. It draws helpfully on elements of Christian tradition, such as centuries of significant work related to the Song of Songs,⁵¹ and the contributions of figures such as Gregory of Nyssa.⁵² Sadly however, whilst it opens the door to the rich reflections about the body and desire within queer theology and literature, this is not made present.

allowing the queer images of God to speak

Without belabouring such points, the question queer people seek to ask is: what kind of an image of God is it by which some human beings are bound, and often beaten up, by others? Like

⁴⁹ M.Anstey, 'The Case for Same-Sex Marriage', p.281

⁵⁰ G.Seach, 'He Knew He Did Not Belong to Himself': Steps Towards a Theological Understanding of Desire', pp.207-226.

⁵¹ G.Seach, pp.215-217.

⁵² G.Seach, pp.217-218.

the biblical image of false gods, if queer people are given so little agency, including space to share their own theological understandings, are they not made by others into idols who ‘have mouths, but do not speak... feet but do not walk. They make no sound in their throats’?⁵³ If they are welcome, and full members by baptism, in God’s community, why are they not seen and heard, particularly in matters which are about their own bodies and lives? This is not merely failing to honour ‘weaker members’ of the Body of Christ. It is also, vitally, about leaving out crucial aspects of God’s image.

Use of the Bible and historical development

The second striking theological theme in *Marriage, Same-Sex Marriage and the Anglican Church of Australia* is the use of the Bible in relation to the Church’s historical development. This is a central repeated ground of resistance by ‘integrity’ contributors to including queer people in marriage. The divide created by such differing hermeneutical approaches has been highlighted. Such a chasm also rests on problematic views of the relationship of the Bible and the Book of Common Prayer to history.

wrestling with a-historicity

Approaches to history certainly shape ‘integrity’ and ‘inclusion’ writers. Among the former there appears to be an unwillingness to recognize complexity and diversity in doctrinal development, and narrow selectivity towards the past. This includes amnesia over Anglican conflicts over women, as claims are made that today’s issues are fissiparous in a wholly novel manner. The result is a strong tendency towards a-historicism. Muriel Porter in her ‘concise history’ of Christian marriage⁵⁴ thus patiently points out how marriage ideas have evolved in relation to Anglican prayer books. She also illustrates how the sixteenth century reformers were radical in their marriage teaching, developing ‘a new theology of marriage’ and ‘quietly introducing’ major innovations such as allowing clergy to marry *after* ordination.⁵⁵ Yet, as highlighted by Michael Stead in particular, ‘integrity’ perspectives persist in closed and static assumptions about the Anglican past, not least regarding the English Reformers. The Book of Common Prayer is hence treated as almost an unquestionable appendix to sacred writ, as if the

⁵³ Psalm 115.5-7, NRSV

⁵⁴ M.Porter, ‘Christian Marriage: A Concise History’, pp.155-166.

⁵⁵ M.Porter, pp.164-165.

Reformers were the fully authoritative interpreters of revelation without appreciating their different context and work on the run.

Deformation not Reformation

The use of Anglican Reformed heritage by marriage equality opponents is thus deeply disturbing both historically and doctrinally. It fails to honour the dynamics of the Reformers themselves, particularly their openness to the ‘new learning’ of their day, their willingness to question and alter received wisdom, and their recognition of the claims of love and reason in human relationships. Rather than upholding Reformation truth therefore, resistance to marriage equality risks turning it into Deformation. LGBTIQA+ Anglicans instead offer questions and insights which offer pathways to fuller development.

queer marriage enlarges and does not deface liturgical tradition

A striking example of deformation is Michael Stead’s extraordinary crossing out of words in the BCP marriage service preface in his ‘The Case Against Same-Sex Marriage’.⁵⁶ Designed to arrest attention, it exposes the blinkered negativity of ‘integrity’ arguments. Queer Christians, with their allies, may indeed seek a more contemporary liturgical expression of marriage. They may long to enrich Anglican doctrine further with the rich depth of queer relationships. Yet, other than the words ‘man and woman’, there is nothing already there that is not part of ‘many gendered’ reflections. In their marriages queer people also seek to provide for their children, to temper sinful inclinations and to be honourable members of Christ’s body. The symbolism of ‘the mystical union that is betwixt Christ and his Church’ is also precious. After all, this is surely not to be read literally, as if Christ were only male and the Church only female. Again, the lack of queer Anglican voices is hugely limiting. Married queer Anglicans now exist in Australia and their contributions are vital to combat deformation and aid healthy transformation. Instead of nostalgically going back to a non-existent perfect revelation, they call us to go beyond in faithfulness to God’s continuing work.

Theologies of ‘absence’

⁵⁶ M.Stead, p.308.

The third significant theme for LGBTIQA+ Anglicans in *Marriage, Same-Sex Marriage and the Anglican Church of Australia* is that of theological assumptions of queer people's absence in scripture and tradition. As noted earlier, Anstey and Lee draw attention to the vital need for 'lived experience'. However, due to the lack of it, both 'integrity' and 'inclusion' essays tend towards arguments from silence. In assessing Scripture, different conclusions about familiar texts therefore arise from this same standpoint. As queer people and perspectives are regarded as absent, they can therefore either be regarded, de facto, as not included (the 'integrity' argument) or (from the 'inclusion' perspective) as not excluded.

inconclusive and limited interpretations of isolated texts

Consideration of key words among the usual 'clobber texts' are similarly treated. As scholarship cannot authoritatively determine the meanings (in 1 Corinthians 6.9) of the words *malakoi* and *arsenokoitai*, both 'integrity' and 'inclusion' interpretations are affirmed. This argument from silence is a core element in Michael Stead's arguments,⁵⁷ where indeed he also attacks alternative interpretations, notably those of William Loader, as 'extraordinary manoeuvres', omitting to observe this about some of his own arguments.⁵⁸ In contrast, Matthew Anstey points out that the idea that Jesus' endorsed heterosexual marriage only, rests simply on there being no mention of homosexuality in Jesus' citation of Genesis 2 in Matthew 19.⁵⁹ He then rightly raises Christological and eschatological problems with such 'baffling' arguments, particularly in the light of the ultimate irrelevance of gender, marital and single, distinctions and the need for Christ as the full *imago dei* to reflect human difference.⁶⁰

Arguments from silence are not unhelpful, but are famously weak. That is perhaps the major reason why queer Anglicans remain typically frustrated by both 'integrity' and 'inclusion' approaches. On the one hand, specious conclusions are drawn from highly constrained evidence. On the other hand, no substance is given to fresh vistas, and, with no new vision the people perish, or at least stagnate. This suits the status quo. To move forward, God's image in queer people must be made visible, bible and history treated as dynamic and not fixed, and real presence affirmed.

⁵⁷ see particularly M.Stead, pp.294-302.

⁵⁸ M.Stead, pp.302-303.

⁵⁹ M.Anstey 'The Case for Same-Sex Marriage', p.279.

⁶⁰ M.Anstey, pp.279-280.

The second chasm and the ‘flourishing’ invitation to wholeness

Building effective bridges over either the integrity-inclusion chasm, or the second chasm of queer exclusion, is not easy. It is certainly impossible without the distinct experience and theological perspectives of queer people themselves. Much of this is untold or slowly unfolding. Yet there are clear journey markers. As indicated above, these include: the healing praxis of Christ; theological trajectories of liberation and justice; and the ‘real presence’ of God in LGBTIQ+ people. Together they reflect a ‘flourishing’ approach to marriage, sexuality and gender. This transcends ‘integrity’ and ‘inclusion’ perspectives, offering an invitation to greater wholeness for all.

The healing praxis of Christ

beginning with the life of Jesus and the crucified-resurrected Christ

The first affirming theme of a ‘flourishing’ approach is the centrality of Christ’s healing praxis. For like theologians of disability, queer theologians have pointed out the problems of beginning to examine the *imago dei* from the Hebrew Scriptures, or from isolated passages in the New Testament outside the Gospels. This starts from the wrong point, risking imposition of *a priori* ideals. For the *imago dei* is most truly found in the life and death of the crucified-resurrected One, who both bears in their body their woundedness and offers salvation to all, inclusive of their God-given characteristics. This is the inspiration for many queer Anglicans in following Christ. It stands in contradistinction to ‘integrity’ perspectives and gives ‘inclusion’ perspectives greater substance.

Christ’s healing praxis is not oblivious to Doctrine Commission essayists. Indeed, in his case against, Michael Stead is aware that this opens up some of the strongest marriage equality arguments: whether ‘The Analogy with Slavery’,⁶¹ ‘the analogy with the inclusion of the Gentiles’,⁶² the ‘Argument from the ‘fact’ of same-sex desires’,⁶³ the ‘Argument from the ‘fruit’ of LGBT relationships’,⁶⁴ or the ‘Argument from the ‘frustration’ of being alone’.⁶⁵ To his credit, as

⁶¹ M.Stead, pp.290-291.

⁶² M.Stead, p.293.

⁶³ M.Stead, p.303.

⁶⁴ M.Stead, pp.304-305.

⁶⁵ M.Stead, pp.305-306.

in some footnotes, he grasps that there are other (queer) faith stories to be told and a larger series of perspectives to be shared. However his responses are peremptory and summarily dismissive. They certainly include little direct reference to the broad teaching and praxis of Jesus. This ‘Gospel heart’, not isolated proof texts from elsewhere, is core to queer faith experience and understanding. Three Gospel-centred features of this ‘flourishing’ approach are particularly worth highlighting.

‘by their fruits you shall know them’

Firstly, ‘flourishing’ perspectives place Christ-like emphasis on the fruits of God’s grace in human lives. As Jesus put it in Matthew 7.15-23, not only is bearing good fruit a key test of genuine faith, but religious people are to be wary of self-deception, lest, even in saying and doing the Lord’s work, they become wolves dressed in sheep’s clothing. The former element is amply demonstrated in LGBTI+ Christian lives and faith. How much more research do we need to support the evidence of our experience that the enforced separating sexuality from other parts of our selves is destructive, whereas wholeness brings flourishing? The lack of self-reflexivity by opponents of queer equality becomes increasingly astonishing. Instead of flinching at accusations of homo-bi-trans-phobia, what is required is a more truthful appreciation of queer faith experience, whilst an examination of ‘heavy shepherding’ might lead to recognition of wolfish aspects within.

The refusal to recognise the validity of arguments from the fruit of queer relationships contrasts with Jesus. Indeed Michael Stead’s justification rests on an ever-narrowing definition of what is both Christian and attributable to God’s grace. Bound by exclusivist views, he similarly struggles to accept spiritual authenticity in the lives of people of other faith, or other ‘non-Christians’ who display fruits of the Spirit.⁶⁶ This is a far cry from the Christ who heals the outcast and the marginalised, without necessarily demanding ‘Christian’ repentance or orthodoxy of belief or practice. The story of the healing of the centurion’s ‘boy’ is a powerful example of this. There is no indication that the centurion, or his ‘boy’, became a Jesus-follower, or departed from their religious and cultural traditions, but Jesus affirms that ‘in no one in Israel have I found such great faith.’⁶⁷ Not for nothing have queer Christians thus treasured this story, particularly

⁶⁶ M.Stead, pp.304-305.

⁶⁷ Matthew 8.10, NRSV translation.

when a same-sex relationship between the centurion and his ‘boy’ is pondered.⁶⁸ As observed earlier, rather than claiming ‘too much’ for experience,⁶⁹ the fruitfulness of ‘lived experience’ is massively obscured.

straining out gnats and swallowing camels

Secondly, ‘flourishing’ perspectives expose the disproportionate emphasis frequently placed upon a tiny number of contested Christian texts and doctrinal themes at the expense of actual persons. At times, ‘integrity’ essays indeed lean not only towards a restrictive ‘scripture only’ theological method but also to a form of bibliolatry which obscures the dynamism of Jesus Christ as the living Word of God. In doing so, divine relationality risks being excluded.

At the heart of this debate is therefore a choice between a God obsessed with forcing created realities of human life and love into a Procrustean bed, and a God who seeks human flourishing in the diverse forms of the *imago dei*. Christ’s healing praxis is again central. In the Gospels, Jesus heals and empowers those who are typically beyond the purity codes of prevailing religion, even if this runs against received scriptural understandings. Love of people, not texts, is the ultimate criterion. As Jesus put it, ‘The sabbath was made for humankind, and not humankind for the sabbath.’⁷⁰ Resistance to this leads to Pharisaism.

In contrast, it is remarkable how little is said, in Church and society, about the problematic nature of heterosexual relationships. Considering the associated levels of child abuse, domestic violence, subjection of women, and other negative features, there is a strong case for Church review. Hypocrisy and double standards abound, too often unchallenged., whilst unnecessary attention is directed to queer people.

A major element of a queer ‘flourishing’ approach is thus encouragement not to strain out gnats or swallow camels.⁷¹ Justice, mercy and faith are ‘the weightier matters’⁷² and these qualities queer Christians show in abundance when they are free to be fully themselves.

⁶⁸ See for example E.Vilà ‘The Centurion’s S’ervant in Jesus’ Gospels: A queer love story?’, in *Queer Ways of Theology*, conference transcript 2015, found at https://www.academia.edu/26071695/The_Centurions_Servant_in_Jesus_Gospels_a_Queer_Love_Story

⁶⁹ M.Stead, p.305.

⁷⁰ Mark 2.23, NRSV.

⁷¹ Matthew 23.34.

⁷² Matthew 23.23.

loving God with all that you are and your neighbour as yourself

Thirdly, ‘flourishing’ perspectives enable a deeper spirituality. Not for nothing is Jesus’ Great Commandment in Matthew 22.37-40 a cornerstone of queer Christian life and spirituality. The first part encourages a whole self-commitment. Everything is to be offered, including a person’s sexuality or gender identity. Note well, it is ‘your’ (own/particular) heart, mind, and soul that is to be offered, not the ideal self of others. This can be such a costly lesson for LGBT+ people to learn. For God does not want loving desire and attachment to be withheld. Marriage equality allows this to be fully, and sacramentally, embodied. The second part of the Great Commandment is equally difficult for many queer people, particularly where their very self is undermined or unacknowledged by others. Marriage is one way in which that love of self can be truly wedded with another.

Christian trajectories of Liberation and Justice

Queer Christians thus strongly refute the implicit, and sometimes explicit, suggestion, that they are not scriptural in outlook. In fact, due to misplaced opposition, queer Christians typically spend more time wrestling with the Bible than many others. Anything said about scriptural objections has been heard too often before. What is not so appreciated are the fresh theological insights of queer Christians themselves. For whilst both ‘integrity and ‘inclusion’ perspectives are still stuck circling the same arguments, ‘flourishing’ perspectives seek to enlarge and enliven. In doing so they invite the rest of the Body of Christ to wholeness, renewing too easily neglected biblical trajectories of justice and liberation. As Joel Hollier, author of a recent Australian book on this subject,⁷³ puts it: ‘we queer Christians are not Christian despite the Bible, but because of it.’

beyond apologetics

Continued fights over old received theologies, and particularly the ‘clobber texts’, are hence as depressing to queer Christians as they are unconstructive for others. Most LGBTIQA+ Anglicans are moving on, together with queer theology as a whole. Instead of justifying their existence, and seeking permission for marriage and other aspects of equal love, queer perspectives offer fresh light to illuminate gospel, life and mission. Three elements may be briefly highlighted.

⁷³ J.Hollier *A Place at His Table: A Biblical Exploration of Faith, Sexuality and the Kingdom of God*, Cascade Books 2019.

new covenantal living - beyond 'brokenness'

Firstly, queer biblical scholarship seeks to affirm the work of the Holy Spirit in life as it is, rather than over-obsession with metaphysical conjecture. As Matthew Anstey also expresses it: 'recognition of God through the Spirit in our lived experience has throughout history always been the impetus for the re-evaluation of our doctrine.'⁷⁴ Contrary to Michael Stead's objections, the biblical paradigm of the reception of Gentiles into the early Church is thus indeed a vibrant analogy. The gay Jesuit priest John J. McNeill, back in 1995, is but one to have expressed this powerfully. Reflecting on the Letter to the Galatians, he drew attention to the way in which Paul stood up forthrightly for those (the Gentiles) who had discovered the freedom and joy of the Gospel despite their non-traditional 'lifestyle'. This was part of Paul's awareness of the work of the Holy Spirit in history transcending existing divisions separating us from one another. The overcoming of male and female division, and becoming 'one with the feminine or the masculine in ourselves' is part of this.⁷⁵ "Overcoming those divisions is a very slow historical process that has been going on for centuries", wrote McNeill, "But today, I believe, the gay spiritual movement has emerged out of the very heart of the world to play a decisive role in overcoming this final division." Queer Christians thus become, by grace a new 'cornerstone' of Christ, enabling the fullness of life for all.

covenantal cleaving

Such new covenantal understanding rejects the claims of 'brokenness' made about queer bodies and identities and reclaims powerful scriptural elements in new liberating ways. This is partly why Ruth's words to Naomi in Ruth 1.16-17 are so precious to queer people. It is not that anachronistic claims are being made for their significance. Queer theology rather seeks playfully to avoid dogmatic surety in the interest of breaking open Scripture afresh in nourishing creative ways. What it points to above all however are Scripture's larger theological themes, lost in compulsive obsessions with isolated words in marginal texts. This includes the rich notions of covenant which lie at the heart of biblical marriage and which are manifestly proclaimed, in their highest human expression, by Ruth to Naomi. Such language is also deeply physical. As commentators affirm, the

⁷⁴ Anstey, p.64.

⁷⁵ J.J. McNeill *Freedom, Glorious Freedom: the Spiritual Journey to the Fullness of Life for Gays, Lesbians and Everybody Else*, Beacon Press Boston 1995, p.192.

same words used for Adam 'cleaving' to Eve in Genesis 2 are found here in relation to Ruth and Naomi, and found in the equally queer evocative story of David and Jonathan.⁷⁶

beyond secular and human notions of marriage

Sadly, too much Anglican debate of marriage and sexuality mirrors the secular world. In 2017 for example, the Australian Marriage Equality campaign jettisoned much of the wider queer community's richer experience in its narrow postal survey campaign, focusing on bourgeois individualist models of gay and lesbian happy couples. Passages such as Isaiah 62.1-5 however show us a much bigger picture of sacral marriage. Here, marriage is not so much about an individual's bourgeois expression of identity and legal and moral relationship to another individual. Nor is it ultimately really much about sex or gender, though those human aspects are caught up in biblical conceptions in different ways. Rather, marriage is a profound symbol of *divine* relationship, involving the transformation of everything. For, as Isaiah 62 verses 1-5 makes startlingly clear, divine marriage is about bringing healing and the restoration of justice and peace. Indeed, marriage as a vehicle of transformation is not only about whole communities rather than individual persons alone, but it is also about much more than human beings alone. It is about the marrying of land, and creation as a whole: the fullness of the 'new creation' prophesied in Isaiah and fulfilled in Christ. In this, it is so much more radical than any conventional conception of marriage. As elsewhere in faith, when we get too tied up with sexed or gendered expressions of our God, we can too easily lose the vitally central biblical plot: which is liberation and the fullness of life. God both encompasses and profoundly transcends all our human differences, and seeks to enable even the most 'forsaken' to know themselves, and live, as God's 'delight'. That, not safeguarding passing human norms, is the purpose of marriage.

'queer virtue' for renewing the Body in the new creation

Secondly, queer Christian scholarship helps address the crying contemporary challenge of developing meaningful sexual ethics and spirituality for all. The resort to law and ambiguous formularies does not take us far. Instead, queer Anglicans, like the Episcopalian priest Elizabeth Edman, offer pathways of ethical renewal and fresh illumination of the sacred. Their experience of sexuality and marriage posit 'queer virtue': insights into life and love which, if enabled and

⁷⁶ See discussion in A.L.Laffey and M.Leonard-Flackman *Ruth*, Wisdom Commentary series, Liturgical Press Minnesota, 2017, pp.38-43.

heard, can assist Christianity's revitalisation. Edman's work thus points out 'the inherent queerness of Christianity' and the powerful costly contributions which queer people can make to deepening our understanding of key contemporary challenges of discipleship such as coming out to our true identity, handling risk, touch, and scandal, and living with loving authenticity and hospitality.⁷⁷

Such insights are lost when 'integrity' and 'inclusion' voices are the only approaches. For queer 'flourishing' perspectives offer a richer panoply, grounded in lived experience. This involves a deep ethical seriousness, wrestling, as Patrick Cheng has done, with foundational concepts of sin and grace.⁷⁸ It also however embraces the whole experience of the Body of Christ, not seeking to keep some elements at bay. For too often the Body of Christ in its Anglican guise resembles a dysmorphic body in denial of the wholeness of its being, seeking to reject, or at best ignore, aspects of itself which are uncomfortable.

seeking and embodying justice

Thirdly, as with other disadvantaged groups, where sexually and gender diverse people are able to participate fully, they recall church and world to the Gospel of justice and to powerful contextual challenges today. For failing to affirm human diversity not only avoids healing possibilities for the Body, it also frustrates mission, restricting human participation in the wholeness of God's covenant. Episcopalian priest-theologian Carter Heyward years ago expressed the latent queer Anglican calling to renew the wider Body of church and world. As she put it, in response to the Windsor Report and the divisive actions of others: "It becomes our chief vocation as gay and lesbian Anglicans in this historical moment to be chief weavers of this ('brilliant theological, anthropological and sociological') Anglican tapestry'. Across their differences, queer Anglicans, she perceived, offer a oneness in the Spirit which can 'radiate an integrity and credibility that is probably unimaginable' to many in Anglican leadership. Queer Anglicans are hardly the only marginalised people, but they "must never stop trying to help one another and other Anglicans make connections – moral and political links – between oppressive structures and the Church."⁷⁹

⁷⁷ E.Edman *Queer Virtue: What LGBTQ People Know About Life and Love and How It Can Revitalize Christianity*, Beacon Press, Boston, 2016.

⁷⁸ P.Cheng *From Sin to Amazing Grace: Discovering the Queer Christ*, Seabury, New York, 2012.

⁷⁹ C.Heyward *Keep Your Courage: A Radical Christian Feminist Speaks*, chapter 6 'Make Us Prophets and Preachers! An Open Letter to Gay and Lesbian Leaders in the Anglican Communion', Church Publishing, USA, 2011, originally published in A.Linzey & R.Kirker, *Gays and the Future of Anglicanism: Responses to the Windsor Report*, 2003).

Theologies of God's 'real presence' in LGBTIQ+ people

Finally, and most importantly, *Marriage, Same-Sex Marriage and the Anglican Church of Australia* lacks the vital presence of LGBTIQ+ people and theology. Despite 'the necessity of lived experience'⁸⁰, it is alarming to find continuing obsessions with arguments from silence at a time when queer voices, bodies and relationships are increasingly evident. This stands starkly against the often ignored 'commitment to listen to the experience of homosexual persons' in the often-quoted 1996 Lambeth Conference Resolution 1.10. For, as has been indicated above, queer theology is hardly new. As David Blamires wrote in *Towards a Theology of Gay Liberation*,⁸¹ itself published in 1977, the beginnings of the Anglican Church's attempts to come to terms with the facts of contemporary homosexual experience is marked by the publication, back in 1955, of Derrick Sherwin Bailey's *Homosexuality and the Western Tradition*. Yet, over six decades on, queer scholarship remain obscured, together with the wider queer faith experience now embodied in an increasing number of legal marriages, civil partnerships and other covenantal relationships.

tending the fire of sexuality

The consequence of repression is loss, shame and negative results for the whole Body. In contrast, Jim Cotter is but one who has bequeathed a sensitive and subtle understanding of healthy sexuality which can apply to all. A notable Anglican priest and writer, Cotter was the first honorary secretary of the Lesbian and Gay Christian Movement in the UK. His publications, including *The Service of My Love*,⁸² a pioneering guide to Christian celebration and blessing of civil partnerships, are among the rich vein of LGBTIQ+ Anglican resources now available. Cotter notably drew particular attention to Pierre Teilhard de Chardin's prophetic understanding, decades earlier, that the day would come when 'spiritual fruitfulness' would outstrip 'physical fertility' as the main reason for sexual union. Teilhard de Chardin further likened received teaching about sex to discovery of a fire in the basement, where quick action was to be taken to douse it, even to the extent of flooding the house. Instead, he looked forward to the day when the fire would be kept alight, and channelled through boiler and pipes to keep the whole building warm.⁸³ That is part of the queer Christian gift to the wider Body.

⁸⁰ Anstey, *ibid.*

⁸¹ D.Blamires 'Recent Christian Perspectives on Homosexuality – the Context for the debate', in *Towards a Theology of Gay Liberation*, ed. M.Macourt, SCM London 1977, pp.9-35.

⁸² J.Cotter *The Service of His Love*, Cairns Publications, Sheffield, 2014.

⁸³ Pierre Teilhard de Chardin, 'The Evolution of Chastity', in *Towards the Future*, Collins 1974, pp.60-87, quoted in J.Cotter, *Quiverful*, Cairns Publications, Sheffield, 1999, p.99.

Cotter's work was highly expressive of this invitation to a richer sexual ethics and spirituality for all. Only one queer Anglican example of offering beautiful insights and metaphors for this journey, he nonetheless reflected on common themes: including welcome and pleasure in, rather than hatred for, or distancing from, the flesh; recovering tenderness; listening to woman-sexuality; learning the language of touch; being transfigured; and becoming pain-bearers in this work of reconciliation⁸⁴ This call to honour all life-giving human sexualities as ways to know God remains a missing element in too much Anglican conversation. In words queer Anglicans echo today, Cotter encouraged others to find new hope in receiving the lived experience of queer sexual joys: "Go back to the place of being ill at ease, of desire for the Companion, of putting sexuality in its place of mystery. It goes wrong when unfriendly. When you have befriended your sexuality, you will know from within the moments of its expression that will be appropriate and full of delight."⁸⁵

marriage equality among Anglicans - no longer hypothetical

Happily it is not necessary for Australian Anglicans to go only to gifted pioneers of queer faith for such enrichment. Today growing numbers of its queer members can speak out of their own experience of marriage, many from positions of considerable theological and other expertise. In some cases they have been in common law relationships for decades, maintaining flourishing relationships without the benefit of clergy or social approval. How sad then that the Church can pass over such grace and wisdom in its official doctrinal reflections. As Elizabeth Stuart wrote two decades ago of lesbian and gay people: "we are tired of other Christian people kicking around the ball of our lives. We are tired of being treated as a 'problem'". Queer Anglicans are "the latest in a now long line of people claiming the right to do theology for themselves by themselves."⁸⁶

beyond 'vanilla heterosexuality'

Alison Webster, in *Found Out: Transgressive Faith and Sexuality*,⁸⁷ recently traced some of today's rich Christian sexual and gender tapestry, providing, out of the British context, 'an incisive and readable commentary on the changes in the wider culture and within the church over

⁸⁴ See J.Cotter *Pleasure, Pain & Passion*, Cairns Publications, Sheffield, 2nd edition 1999.

⁸⁵ J.Cotter *Pleasure, Pain & Passion*, p.90.

⁸⁶ E.Stuart *Just Good Friends* p.2

⁸⁷ A.Webster *Found Out: Transgressive Faith and Sexuality*, Darton Longman & Todd, London, 2017

the past 30 years.’⁸⁸ Similar studies would be immensely valuable in Australia. Taking seriously today’s context and lived experience, Webster’s work involved in-depth conversations with a wide variety of lay and ordained and lay Christian women, from across the sexuality spectrum. Tellingly, she quotes one English female priest offering her frank appraisal of her pastoral experience, in words so many other honest ministers of religion will echo. “My conclusion”, she said, “is that the church loves vanilla heterosexuality but those who seem to perform it have never actually performed it. People disclose extraordinary things to me as their parish priest and I can tell you that appearances are deceptive... The narrow vanilla understanding of human beings covers layers of silence. Trans, gay, all hidden for the sake of the institution... It is psychologically pernicious.”⁸⁹ To build Anglican pathways of genuine expansive freedom for everyone, and to avoid further “soul violence”, such realities must be addressed.

Conclusion

Beyond ‘the Bridge of Death’

In the film *Monty Python and the Holy Grail* there is a scene entitled ‘The Bridge of Death’ which offers an analogy to current Australian Anglican developments. This episode relates to a rickety bridge across a gaping chasm. To cross over, the traveller has correctly to answer three questions from a gatekeeper, or fall into ‘the Gorge of Eternal Peril’. The questions, from very simple to extraordinarily difficult, vary depending on the nature of those who approach. There is no genuine two-way conversation or openness on the gatekeeper’s part and the consequent lack of mutuality and seeming capriciousness means many fall to their death. Then King Arthur steps up. He is asked two simple questions and then the stinger: ‘what is the air-speed velocity of an unladen swallow?’ Arthur does not blink but responds with a question of his own: ‘what do you mean? An African or European swallow?’ The gatekeeper is thrown, declares that *he* does not know, and thus plunges himself into ‘the Gorge of Eternal Peril’. Arthur is then asked by others: ‘how do you know so much about swallows?’ His reply is instructive: ‘Well, you have to know these kinds of things if you are a king, you know.’

No parable has a simple meaning, but it often seems as if Anglicans construct their own version of Monty Python’s ‘Bridge of Death’. Questions and answers concerning marriage and

⁸⁸ The informed assessment of Anthony Reddie, leading black public theologian, Extraordinary Professor of Theological Ethics at the University of South Africa and Fellow of Wesley House Cambridge, *Found Out*, p.x

⁸⁹ A.Webster, *Found Out*, pp.45-46

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diverse forms of sexuality tend either to be too simplistic or deliberately opaque. Narrow gatekeeping rather than true encounter is central. The Doctrine Commission's work ultimately reflects this. Too many face death dealing, or, increasingly, do not even bother attempting the crossing. Yet when those with lived experience are involved there can be fruitful game change. Different questions can be posed, opening up the rich diversity and complexity of God's creation and work of redemption. For, like Monty Python's King Arthur, if you are a queer Anglican 'you have to know these kinds of things.' Queer Anglicans warmly invite those who guard or struggle with chasms to reframe their relationships and discourse. Their exclusion serves no one's lasting good interest. No one need risk death. The invitation is to construct bridges of life, over which all may safely travel, into a more flourishing future for all.

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