

Love is the great Endeavour.

A paper given at a Church of Ireland Conference, March 29, 2014.

Good morning friends.

It is a good, and an important thing to be here.

I'd like to speak with you today about love. Loving the Gospel. Loving Repentance. Loving Words and courage and Loving my partner.

Loving the gospel.

I grew up in Cork, in a family of six children, a family of strong Catholic practice. I made my communion, confession and confirmation. I learnt to speak English and Irish at the same time. I learnt French, I learnt some sign language, and all throughout it, I was fascinated by the gospel.

The question on our school playground was whether you were homosexual or homosapien. I learnt early that you had to remember the answer that wasn't going to get you beaten up.

My degrees are in theology - with a particular focus on gospel scholarship - and my other professional training is in conflict mediation. I love words. Not harsh words, but simple, clear, true, unmanipulative words. *I know a lot of fancy words / I tear them from my heart and my tongue / Then I pray.* Mary Oliver said.¹ I'm not interested in fancy words. I'm interested in good words.

¹ Mary Oliver, 'Six Recognitions of the Lord'. Thirst. Bloodaxe, 2006.

I worked as a chaplain for a while a few years ago, and once, somebody said to me - Why are you a Christian?

- I could answer that I'm a Christian because I grew up loving my faith, and praying.
- I could answer that I'm a Christian because when I began hearing that gay people were going to hell, it was to God I turned.
- I could answer that I'm a Christian because Bishop Harold Miller, when he was in Cork, was a kind and supportive presence to a Catholic and never, ever tried to convert me to Anglicanism.
- I could say that I'm a Christian because at Summer Madness one year, one of the worship leaders interrupted a song and said 'You can lie when you sing. Make sure you mean the words.'

In the event, I told the person who asked me why I'm a Christian that I'm a Christian because I love Jesus. I have been excluded from Christian organisations, intimidated from streets where I lived, un-invited from friendship and professional circles and made to feel ignorable because as a gay man, my words were deemed to be automatically dismissible. But, I have never felt that the Gospel treated me that way.

In the gospel, I hear the voices of all kinds of people trying to figure out what it means to be human. For some, it's associated with power. Towards them, Jesus is the most harsh. I have sometimes been in positions of power, and I love that the gospels have words to challenge me.

Loving repentance.

I love the word repentance because it comes from the Greek word *metanoia* and because *metanoia* means to change your mind or direction.

As a Catholic, I became used to being asked by Christians from other denominations whether I'd repented. I repent every day. I need to. I know you know this.

I love that the Christian church has repented over years.

Up until the 1960s, indigenous people in Australia were part of the flora and fauna act - considered wildlife, not human. It isn't good enough that Christian denominations who propagated this have now said "Oh we've given you human recognition *now*". Christian denominations say "We sinned mightily by thinking we ever had the right to question your humanity".

I love that the Church has recognised that previous versions of marriage were fearful.

- Mixed Race couples were not able to marry in many churches.
- Couples from different Christian denominations were judged and hunted in Northern Ireland, and the church watched and the fact that we can count some interventions means that there are countless times the church didn't.
- Couples who separate and divorce are given sacramental recognition in new marriages in your denomination.
- The church has repented from the viewpoint, present since early days, that it was only free people, slave-owning people, who could marry. The church has repented.

Thank God for repentance. It is the sign of the spirit.

In Luke 7, a woman makes her way into a place where Jesus is having a meal with Simon the Pharisee. She touches Jesus and she weeps. Simon the Pharisee doesn't judge the woman then. She's been judged a long time already. He judges Jesus. No prophet would allow this, he says. Jesus speaks a parable, and then, turns his head from his host, looks at the woman, and speaks to his host.

Do you see this woman? he asks.

The truthful answer is that no, Simon does not. Simon sees what he thinks about the woman. He sees his own judgments. He doesn't see the woman, he sees the imagined, fictional construct his frightened ideology needs in order to protect himself from fundamental questions.

Both the woman and Simon are called to live a repentant life.

Snoopy, my favourite dog, was sitting on his kennel. Charlie Brown came and said "I hear you're writing a book of theology. I hope you have a good title." Snoopy looks up and says "I have the perfect title". The title was "Have you ever considered that you might be wrong?"

I lived a life not only considering this, but being told there was no other option.

It was at the hands of my fellow Christians that I underwent my first, second and third public exorcism for being gay.

It was at the hands of my fellow Christians that I was told that the only reason I was gay was because of some trauma. This wasn't pastoral care. They

weren't interested in whether I'd suffered *trauma* or not. They were interested in proving their theory right. The end goal was not me - it was their theory.

My mother, god bless her, was told that she'd done something wrong. She has suffered enough. Why do you think it's appropriate to tell a good woman from Cork, a sixty five year old woman, that she needs to ask herself over and over and over and over again what she's done wrong?

Repentance is a word to love, because it's a word of power.

There are people who are gay, or lesbian, or bisexual or transgender or heterosexual who do not wish to be in a relationship with anybody. I am used to having my body and rights insulted by intrusive questions. I will not intrude their dignity.

What I will say, though, is that the protection of their rights does not justify an imposition on the rights of gay people who know that truth and love and faith and life don't have to be at odds with each other.

And I will also ask "Who told them that they couldn't embrace their identity or pursue a relationship?" Was the truth of their choice really free?

There are gay people who have been raped by other gay people. This does not make all gay people rapists.

There are many women who have been raped by men. This does not make all men predators.

There are people who have been violated in childhood. This does not make them gay. If it did, one in four of us would probably be gay.

Some families are psychotic. That doesn't mean that all families are psychotic.

Poetry talks about form and substance.

If you were in a relationship and it was awful, that is a question of substance, not form. All relationships aren't awful because one relationship was awful.

Loving words.

Part of my faith came alive when I heard a lovely Church of Ireland person at Summer Madness, in 1991, say that you can lie when you sing. I love words. I loved, and love, the integrity of that person's words at summer madness.

I learnt that if I said I was gay, then I'd be excluded.

So, I said that I was same-sex-attracted or that I
"struggledwithahomosexualorientation"

But here's the truth.

Being gay, or lesbian, or bisexual or transgender or intersex is not just about what you get up to in bed - apart from sleep.

It does not make you more or less moral than heterosexual counterparts.

Being gay is about living in a world where it's expected that you'll be one thing but you know another.

Where's your wedding ring, love? Strangers say to me often.

I don't have one, I say.

No girl caught your fancy? they say.

I'm in love with a man from Derry, I say.

Stop persecuting Christians, they say.

I love words. The word I love most, is love.

I sat in a lecture years ago where a Christian said that gay people don't love each other because they can't.

I was 20. By that stage, I'd already had three exorcisms, and been to see a counsellor who said I was gay because I wasn't open to being cured.

Something happened though.

I was in the lecture and the man said that gay people can't love each other, and that their lifestyle is only about sex, and I realised that there was a question he needed to ask.

Do you see this person? was the question.

He didn't. He, with patronising eyes, saw the fiction he wanted to see in order to make himself feel he was right. But he was wrong. Gay people love each other.

I know a gay couple in Belfast who, sadly, are now separated because after 40 years, one died. The other nursed her, fed her, washed her, did her cooking, slept next to her, held her, touched her body, and is heartbroken now that her partner is dead.

They went to church together when they could, and when they couldn't, the one who could go to church went and lit a candle for the other.

Love.

I hear regularly that people wish their intentions to be understood as loving. The test of love is not the stated intention, but the actual effect.

I know a man who was part of a church that said they loved him. They said they loved him, but didn't love his "gay feelings", or his "same-sex-attraction". The only way for him to meet God - who, somehow, he believed loved him - was through death. So, he hung himself. A year ago next week.

The test of love is not the stated intention, but the actual effect.

Love the sin and hate the sinner. Or is it the other way around? I usually hear that phrase used when people want to say "I'll talk about you in a way that makes me feel right. And I'll tell you what to call it. It's called love. I'm saying I love you. Therefore you can't say I don't."

Just try talking with rather than about. Then, ask people from the group you're speaking about to evaluate your love, or fear based on the effect of your words on them. We can speak and we can ask. We cannot use harsh words about each other and then dictate the terms by which the experience of and response to those harsh words can be articulated. Even if you are cautious about subjectivism or relativism, this is neither subjectivism nor relativism. It's just good communication.

I also hear people say that their opinions about 'homosexuality' aren't in any way meant to be personal. "It's not personal, it's just the truth." I usually hear that when people are trying to distance themselves from the effect of their actions, and justify their intentions without thinking of the effect of those intentions.

In your groups, you'll be talking about how it is that you'd like it if someone was to tell you that you should end your marriage or relationship because of

what they imagine you get up to in bed. I'll be interested in whether you think that's personal or not.

Loving Courage.

One time I took part in a debate with one of our church brothers.

I quoted your lovely liturgy. *All good things come from you and of your own we give you* - and mentioned that the love i have for my partner comes from God.

Our Christian brother said that what I called love was more akin to incest.

There were 400 people in the room, including my partner.

I think the Christian brother hoped I'd respond to the trap with anger.

I said I wasn't going to return an insult for an insult.

Afterwards, I invited him to a meal at my home. I love cooking, and we shared a curry.

I learnt that from the gospels.

If somebody asks you for your cloak, give him your tunic too, Jesus said.

If I want to speak about morality, then not only my concepts of morality but my relationships with those who disagree with me must demonstrate that morality.

I won't scream at you that I can love.

Even if you feel the need to say my relationship is all about the kind of sex that you *imagine* I have, I won't ask you about the details of your sex life. Truth be told, people who disagree with me spend a lot more time fantasising about my sex life than I do.

I will not give you responsibility for my moral conduct.

Unfortunately, I, like you, am perfectly capable of conducting myself without integrity.

I am trying to repent every day: prayer; the Bible; sharing in prayer with others; love of friends and love of my partner helps. "To love another person is to see the face of God", Victor Hugo wrote. And he's right.

A woman came to me once - a good evangelical woman from the north of Ireland - and said "I'd hate for my marriage to be commented upon the way I comment on your relationship". That took such courage.

Loving my partner.

I remember once, walking around a shopping centre, and 'Country Roads' by John Denver came on. I love that song. I was taught it by a friend of my dad while climbing Corrán Tuathail when I was ten.

As I walked around the supermarket - I was 25 at this time - I thought "I'd love to sing a song of love to a man I loved."

It was a little conversion, a little repentance. I'd been told that I was incapable of love, and here I was, with a simple hope of love that was so normal, so ordinary, so lovely that I was surprised into realising the truth.

Jesus was approached by some pharisees who asked if a man could divorce his wife? He answered, from both Genesis 1 and 2 that male and female are made in God's image and that a man leaves his parents and lives with his wife. Some say that that's a demonstration that Jesus believed only in heterosexual love. What I say is that he was uncomfortable with the question.

Can a man divorce one of his women? A woman could never divorce her man. So, Jesus answers that women are equal and that whether living with his parents or living with his wife, men belong to the people around them.

I love my partner.

My love for him is about putting him first, about the shared love we have for our friends and family, about getting through bad weeks at work, about having arguments, about making up after arguments, about thinking "I should be more loving". This is what active homosexuality looks like.

And as for the sex? Well, like yours, it's private, intimate, loving, and boring. I would never define any man and woman who told me they were getting married by "Urgh, keep your sex lives to yourselves".

I hear about the gay agenda. Destroy marriage and the family. Here's the gay agenda.

- Survive the day, and love.
- Survive the day without being beaten up, or fired, or told to be quiet about promoting your sexuality when all you're doing is talking about your holiday.
- Survive the day when somebody says "how can you reach out to your gay neighbour with the gospel?" indicating that often people think it's impossible or your gay neighbour to already love the gospel.
- Survive the organisation that says "if we have to be kind to you, then that's us being oppressed"
- Survive the voice that says "What you call love, isn't love"
- Survive the public voice on radio that says "We'll use our words for you, not your words for you"
- Survive the voice that says "we'll define you by what we imagine you do in bed with all those lots of people we imagine you sleep with".
- Be generous.
- Try to believe it when people say they don't mean it personally, even though it's all personal.
- Recognise that even when people say your love with your partner is as a result of being abused that somehow, it's possible to still speak cordially to each other.

THIS is the gay agenda.

When I was 18, I joined Youth With A Mission, a mostly evangelical Christian organisation.

I worked with them for 15 years, and there was love despite the three exorcisms, the reparative therapy and the thinking that I was incapable of love.

One time, i was going on a mission trip with them to the Philippines. My granddad gave me a card with a fiver in it, and said “God bless you on your great endeavour”.

I think about him every week. This great endeavour we share together is how to be Christian when we disagree.

In the first centuries it was whether you could be a Gentile and a Christian. And then whether you could be a slave and a Christian. Or if you were a Jew and a Christian. And what about Black people and Christian leadership? Or an Asian woman who’s a theologian? Or a divorced Christian?

Asking serious questions about LGBT people is not a slippery slope.

Because to imply a slippery slope implies we’re at the top of the slope and the only way is down.

Friends, we are at the bottom of a slope. We are rich Christians in an age where children in walkable distance from here are not getting an education, are going to fail, and will spend years in prison where they will receive the

lesson that says “the only money worth spending on you is the money to lock you up.”

We are at the bottom of a huge slope. Let’s hope it’s not slippery, because we have a long way to climb.

I love the gospels. I love Repentance. I love Words and Courage and my Partner. And I would like us to show love to each other on our great endeavour.

With thanks to the Church of Ireland for the invitation to speak at this conference.

Online versions of this paper can be found at:

padraigotuama.com/blog/loveisthegreatendeavour