

Welcoming the Neighbour.

Words for the launch of Changing Attitude Ireland's Parish Welcoming Leaflet.
May 17, 2012, St. George's Church, Belfast.

I remember once, going into a Christian bookshop in Belfast, and looking through the bookshelves. I found a book entitled "How to speak to my homosexual neighbour". I flipped through the pages - and noted that it said that you should treat your neighbour with friendliness, perhaps by bringing an apple pie to them, in order to establish a relationship before telling them that their lifestyle was wrong.

The question of "Who is my neighbour" is inextricably linked with "How do I treat her, or him?"

One way of thinking about your neighbour (and I think this is a dangerous way of thinking) is to think "I must befriend my neighbour whose life seems different to mine, in order that I can make her or him more like me".

This can seem friendly. It can seem good. It may involve apple pie, cups of tea, helping with the car, feeding their cat. But such a manipulative underlying motive is unlikely to nurture a real friendship, and it, I would say, not the kind of neighbour-relationship enlivened by Jesus' response when he was asked that question.

The way that I read "neighbour" in the gospel opens up the possibility that one's neighbour, especially if they are different, must be welcomed for who they are, with the possibility of relationship growing, understanding deepening and agendas made secondary.

This way, rather than looking at "how can I establish friendship with my neighbour to change her", we can look at "how can I establish friendship with my neighbour so we can have a relationship" or "how can I establish friendship with my neighbour so I can learn". Or even "How can my neighbour, who is different to me, be my teacher?".

We see it with the good Samaritan story. The point is not only that we need to be like good Samaritans. The serious and demanding point is that we need to be able to accept help from sources that we consider morally dubious. We see this call also put to Simon the Pharisee - he who judged Jesus for even allowing a woman with a questionable reputation to touch him. Jesus challenged Simon to see in this woman a depiction of love - to see love where before he had seen moral decrepitude.

So here, curiously, we have a piece of work by Changing Attitude Ireland that aims to bring insight into the most basic part of how the church can treat LGBT people as neighbours - simply by welcoming. It is sad that we need this - it is sad that a group of people need to produce a piece of paper that says to the church, of all places, "here is how we would like to be treated".

It highlights where we are at.

One of the things that is most lamentable in the way that LGBT people are treated today is that we are often told:

“Here is a doctrine that speaks, directly, or indirectly about you.”

Followed immediately by:

“Here are the parameters for your response to this doctrine. We do not believe that it is unkind to LGBT people, therefore it is not.”

The sad, but real, story is that it is simply not the case. The church cannot continue to speak about us AND define the parameters of acceptable response to their words. If the church wants to speak about us in this way, where questions are cast upon the morality of our love, then the church at large needs to have the courage to say: “We will have the moral courage to ask you how it feels to be spoken about in this way, and we will believe that you are telling us the truth when you give us feedback.” This would be a real listening process. Currently the church at large wants to say “we are saying this about you” and “here is how you should feel about it”. This is not listening at all. I have been asked, many many times, whether I am willing to offer the same kind of listening that I am firmly requesting. The answer to that is this: I have no choice. In order to survive in society I have to demonstrate a generosity of listening day after day that I rarely see reciprocated from Church voices who call it their moral duty to speak more *about* me than *with* me.

So - here is an authentic piece of work which really should be listened to. It takes the stories, the realities, indeed the truth of LGBT people into consideration.

It is appropriate that this piece of work is being launched by Changing Attitude Ireland this week. There are people more attuned than I to the synodal inworkings of the Church of Ireland. What we have evidenced, however, in the last week is the difficulty that Church of Ireland society has on a formal level in speaking about LGBT people, our lives, stories, morals, relationships. Is this a North-South split? Is this a Liberal-Conservative split? Is this a split about Biblical Readings? There are many good people with many readings of this.

However one reads the inworkings of Church of Ireland governance in the last week, there is one point I think should be read very carefully. One of the proposals mentioned since the Synod was that Dean Tom Gordon, that man whose civil partnership contributed, in part, to this latest round of discussions within the Church of Ireland, might be asked to give details of his erotic life with his civil partner.

I am deeply saddened at this. Beyond all the synodal preparations, the governmental-style debates, the careful language, the astonishing contents of the document that finally got passed last Saturday morning, beyond all of this seemingly mature speak lies the underlying question of:

What do you do in bed?

And in response, there are some things to be said:

- Firstly - it is not a surprise to us that underlying all of this is a fascination about LGBT erotic activity.
- We are often accused of defining ourselves by our own sexuality - but the truth is that we are defined, often by people of faith, by their fantasies of what our sexual activity is like.
- We are not summed up by erotic projections upon us.
- We are more than the things that are fantasized about us.
- Our relationships are as human as all relationships - we take walks, we enjoy holidays, we enjoy the cinema, we enjoy our erotic lives, we have meals, we have friendships, we seek to live well in love with each other.

We will not demand for church leaders to speak about the erotic intimacies of their own loving marriages because we believe that loving relationships should be honoured - we will honour those marriages by respecting their privacy - we gently, but firmly, assert that our intimate, sacramental relationships be treated with the same respect.

Furthermore, to speak about sex: Sex, to be sacramental, must be loving. This is an invitation to all. We all know that there is plenty of unloving sex that happens within the confines of a church-sanctified marriage. Just because a church has legal jurisdiction over a marriage license, it does not mean that the church has moral jurisdiction over the boundaries of rightly ordered love. We define ourselves by the quality of our love. By the fidelity and faithfulness of our love. By the beauty of our care for each other - each other's families, each other's bodies, each other's hopes, fears, finances, provisions. We, as LGBT people of faith, wish to give and receive support: legal, sacramental and societal in the supporting of loving couples.

We are not afraid of the Bible because the Bible as a collection of writings portrays a variety of relationship shapes - many of which, during the course of the span of biblical history, have needed, and received, social development.. We thank God for the progression of our society, and our religious society, where we understand that if a man and a woman divorce then they should not be prevented in entering into a new sacramental marriage. We thank God for the evolution of our society where if a sham marriage is entered into by force, then it is not considered either by law or sacrament, to be binding. We thank God for the understanding that marriage is between two free people - and everyone is free. It is not only the jurisdiction of a citizen whose freedom is determined by wealth, privilege of birth, and economic status. We thank God that when a woman and man marry they both make vows to each other - this was not always the case in biblical depictions of marriage.

In answer the question whether a man can divorce his wife (note that the possibility of the woman divorcing her husband is not mentioned) posed by the Pharisees in the 19th chapter of Matthew, Jesus points to the equality of human creation from the Priestly account of creation in Genesis 1, and he points to the equality of “two becoming one” in the Yahwistic account of creation in Genesis 2. So, we can note that when asked a weighted question that presupposed the privilege of men, Jesus pointed toward two texts that highlighted the equality of women. Today, many people use this passage to highlight that Jesus refers to a binding moral norm of marriage being between male and female. What I would offer to this idea is that when an unequal vision of divorce between a man and woman was posed as a trick question, Jesus answered by challenging the inherent prejudice (both human and legal) that underlined the question posed him. To use this text now to make a new division of inequality is to misread the tone of the text. This weighted question was being asked a/ to trick Jesus and b/ with an inherent misogyny toward a party who couldn't initiate divorce. And, Jesus responds with a firm statement underpinned by an equality agenda.

We are not afraid of the bible - and we are not afraid of the quality of our own love. We do not doubt but that God is found, sacramentally, in the love that we commit to each other every day. We are not defined by the loudest voices that define us, those voices that not only speak about us, but also seek to dictate the boundaries of legitimate responses that should come from us.

This is the truth that we know. Love is hard. This is not a piece of LGBT wisdom - it is a piece of human wisdom. Love is made harder when people speak about you as an “issue” or a “debate” or a “question”. This publication by Changing Attitudes Ireland seeks to highlight wisdom on how best love might be demonstrated. It is right and appropriate to listen to the ones who have been the subject of policies, debates, and synodal arguments. We are not here judging the quality of the marriages, or the erotic lives, of church leaders. We are here discussing how we are discussed. And it is important to listen to us, because we are the ones most affected, in real and tangible ways, by poor language and poor listening in public society today. It is the right, Christian and moral thing to do.

The resource released by Changing Attitude Ireland today seeks to be a part of one of the most basic steps in neighbourly treatment - giving ideas about how to be genuinely welcoming. It is a sad thing that the church needs this. But it does. LGBT people are the ones who are the authentic spokespeople on the weak quality of ecclesial welcomes thus far - and we can firmly state that this resource is needed.

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polot@me.com