

## **Same-sex Marriage – Kemptville Presentation May 30, 2018**

Over the time I have been engaged with the issue of same-sex relationships and same-sex marriage, and it's been about 30 years, I have found that, speaking very generally, there are two main groups, and they have different focuses. Both are defending something. One group are defending homosexual people and their rights. The other are defending the authority and place of Holy Scripture in the church. And part of the reason for the difficulty of the discussion is that when we are defending something, we tend to assume that the person who is disagreeing with us is attacking what we are defending. In fact, they may be defending something else. With this issue, it seems to me, no one is really attacking anything. Defenders of Scripture are not attacking homosexuals, and defenders of homosexuals are not attacking Scripture. But the issue is going to be resolved one way or another, and this causes people who are primarily defending homosexuals to say things about Scripture, and people who are defending Scripture to say something about homosexuals. We have to remember that there are two different issues going on here.

I am part of the group whose first concern is defending the place and authority of Scripture. Because of this issue I have thought quite a lot about homosexuality over the years. I have known homosexual people well and cared about homosexual people. But my starting point is Scripture. I think what I have to say about Scripture and homosexuality needs to be taken on its own merits – but I want to say that I am not primarily attacking anyone or anything. I see myself as defending the authority and place of Holy Scripture in the church. Fortunately, tonight that is not at issue because I know that Barbara also adheres fully to that authority.

To talk about any group of people that you don't belong to can easily get offensive. I think in this discussion, the potential for offense becomes less if we are all aware of what Scripture says, I believe, about all of us. That we are all sinners, who without the grace of God in Jesus cannot be saved. That our minds are darkened and our wills have gone astray and that we are all essentially lost without the light that is there in Christ. So if we feel we have to point out errors and sins, we do it as sinners, who are no doubt in error in many ways. No one in this discussion has any room for self-righteousness or a sense of moral superiority. If a lost person says to someone else, "I don't think that's the right direction," it can be at best a sharing of grace received.

What I want to try and show is that usual framework within which the same-sex debate has taken place is not the most faithful to Scripture. The texts of Scripture speak against same-sex unions, I believe, but more than that, Scripture leads us to think about the issue in a different way, and that this way is actually compelling, although it goes against the grain of much modern thought.

The scientist Laplace had a famous conversation with the Emperor Napoleon. He was explaining his science and Napoleon asked him about the place of God in it. Laplace said, "I have no need of that hypothesis. His comment represents a tendency in modern thought. Much of modern thought has put to the margins anything that is not directly observable and quantifiable. At the same time, human will and human freedom not to be limited by anything that is not observable and quantifiable has been placed at the centre. And God is not directly observable or quantifiable.

The soul is also not directly observable or quantifiable. The soul as at the centre of human personhood in Scripture and in the Christian tradition but has been pushed to the margins in modern thought about the human person. We can see the consequences of this in the issue of euthanasia. Surely the ground for maintaining the sanctity of the lives of people without the observable capacities of others was the idea that they had souls which were equal to other souls. Without that, their personhood can be dismissed. Ethicist Joseph Fletcher argued that anyone with a score under 40 on the Stanford-Binet IQ test was "questionably a person." Anyone under 20 was not a person. Down's Syndrome children are known for their capacity for love and affection. Fletcher was clear about his view of them: "True guilt arises only from an offense against a person and a Down's is not a person."

We shouldn't see Fletcher's view as a personally evil one. He was spelling out the consequences of seeing people solely in terms of what can be observed and quantified, rather than as having a soul. It is not that this kind of so-called scientific thinking has ruled out anything else as fantasy or unsubstantiated belief. There is a whole tradition of thinking about God and about the soul that is rational and rigorous and logical. We can think about God and the soul. We just cannot think about them if we assume that only what is observable and quantifiable can be thought about at all.

Much of modern thought might be described as what happens when you try to limit your thinking to the observable, measurable part of reality and put human freedom at the centre. The church has tried to deal with the collision between this view and its own message by various combinations of trying to work with it or to oppose it. At the heart of the issue of same-sex relationships is another collision, a collision between modern thought and the Christian idea of nature.

We love nature. We love being in it and watching it. And science deals with it extensively. But I would suggest that nature, in the Christian sense, is not really a scientific category, because it has elements of purpose and design in it that are, again, not directly observable and

quantifiable. An example: we may have been lucky enough to see the run of the salmon back to their birthplace in order to spawn. They will fight to overcome great obstacles of terrain and predators to reach their goal, or else die in the attempt. A part of the Christian tradition might have seen in this a wonderful example of God's purposes operating within nature: the salmon give everything to perpetuate their species because the perpetuation of their species is the way they strive for eternity and so to imitate within their natures the nature of God. Another part of the tradition might have seen in the salmon run the hopefulness of the natural creation that it will one day overcome its enslavement to decay, as is promised in Romans 8.

Well, we all look at the run of the salmon with a sense of awe, probably the scientist more than anyone. But the thought of the scientist is limited to observable, measurable questions: how do the fish locate their birthplace? What biological processes are involved in their determination to spawn? Worthwhile and interesting questions – but meaning, purpose and design are left out of it by the very nature of science.

What is the application of all this to the question at hand? We turn to Romans chapter 1, a passage bound to be offensive to many, but we have to look at it. "For their women exchanged natural relations for those that are contrary to nature; and the men likewise gave up natural relations with women and were consumed with passion for one another..." This is perhaps the most important passage in the Bible about same-sex relationships and it seems very negative about them. The best argument disputing that is given very ably by James Brownson in his book, *Bible, Gender, Sexuality*, a book referred to on this question by *This Holy Estate*. Brownson draws on the Jewish context of the New Testament and its view of homosexuality. He says that the predominant view was that homosexual practice resulted from a lust that was unwilling to settle for the natural objects of attraction and in deliberate defiance of nature, chose unnatural objects instead. He suggests that neither St. Paul, nor any other Jewish or non-Jewish thinker was familiar with the concept of sexual orientation – a same-sex attraction that was not chosen but given. So while what St. Paul was talking about – an overweening lust that burst the bounds of nature – would be an instance of rebellion against God, the modern experience of the same-sex couple, wanting to be faithful within marriage, is not.

To consider this passage and this argument further, we have to look further at what the Bible says about nature and how that compares to modern thought. First of all, in modern thought, the material world is the stable centre of reality. In the Bible, God is that centre, and creation is a dependent and changeable secondary reality. Ps. 104 speaks of the whole of nature and especially the animal and plant creation: "They all look to you, to give them their food in due season...when you hide your face, they are dismayed; when you take away their breath, they

die and return to their dust. When you send forth your Spirit, they are created, and you renew the face of the ground.”

Nature is created according to God’s wisdom and purpose, as in the great passage in Proverbs 8, where Wisdom says: “When he made firm the skies above, when he established the fountains of the deep... then I was beside him like a master workman, and I was daily his delight, rejoicing before him always, rejoicing in his inhabited world and delighting in the children of men.” Gerhard Von Rad says, “This ‘wisdom’, this ‘understanding’ [signifies] something like the ‘meaning’ implanted by God in creation, the divine mystery of creation.” Purpose and meaning are discernible within creation – discernible but not directly observable and not measurable. Just as God can be discerned but not observed and the soul can be discerned but not observed, so the meanings and purposes within nature can be discerned but not observed and measured.

In Scripture nature is fallen. The last part of Genesis 3, where childbirth is cursed with pain and agriculture is cursed with heavy toil gives an indication that nature does not follow its intended pattern. St. Paul expands on this in Romans 8, where he says that creation was subjected to futility with the hope of being set free on the day of redemption. We aren’t given much about this but we may suppose that the cruelty of nature may be a part of this fallenness of nature. A friend once told me of walking in the woods and finding a hawk on a stump, feeding on a bird that was still alive and crying out. He drove the hawk away and put the bird out of its misery.

Nature in the Bible is more than just the material world. There are patterns and meanings in it that can be discerned. But these patterns are imperfectly realized, because nature is fallen from its original design as well, subjected to futility. Thus one of the ways the Christian tradition has thought about moral issues is through what is called natural law, particularly, though not exclusively in the Catholic tradition. Natural law is like nature itself because it can be discerned but is not always explicitly observed. It is at work beyond the differences between cultures. Here is what the Catholic catechism says about it:

“In the diversity of cultures, the natural law remains as a rule that binds men among themselves and imposes on them, beyond the inevitable differences, common principles. The natural law is immutable and permanent throughout the variations of history. It subsists under the flux of ideas and customs and supports their progress. The rules that express it remain substantially valid. Even when it is rejected in its very principles, it cannot be destroyed or removed from the heart of man. It always rises again in the life of individuals and societies.”

The idea of an immutable permanent natural law defining human actions is certainly against the grain of modern thought. But is it against the grain of what Christian thought ought to be?

If it exists it resides in the intersection of nature and the human mind and God. The idea is certainly open to many challenges. But do these amount to more than this: it is not directly observable, it is not measurable. It is only discernible as the meaning and patterns of nature are only discernible, as the soul is only discernible, as God is only discernible.

Many commentators, including James Brownson, acknowledge that the idea of natural law lies behind what St. Paul says in Romans chapter 1. The idea of what is natural and what is unnatural comes from Scripture but it is understood in light of the idea of natural law as found in the ancient Stoics and Platonists. In this, St. Paul was no different than other Jewish commentators, such as Philo or Josephus. And Brownson acknowledges this but then he says, "That's what St. Paul thought, but we don't believe in natural law any more. So we need to reinterpret what he said for our times."

First of all, the largest ecclesial Christian body in the world, the Roman Catholic Church, with great theological resources at its disposal, does believe in natural law. That is in fact the basis on which it cannot accept same-sex unions. But secondly, the work of interpreting Scripture is not done when we locate the background thought against which it operates. The ancient world believed in natural law, and the modern Roman Catholic Church believes in natural law, but much of modern thought rejects it. Where does that leave what Scripture says? Surely we have to look at which system of thought is more in harmony with the whole sweep of Scripture. We have to avoid what C.S. Lewis called "chronological snobbery." What is old is not necessarily untrue because of that, what is new is not necessarily true. In this darkened world, different aspects of truth may come to us from different ages. Our age is rich in scientific and technological expertise. Is it rich in wisdom and moral thought?

What is the Scriptural background to the natural and the contrary to nature in Romans 1? In Genesis chapter 1 we read, "So God created man in his own image, in the image of God he created him; male and female he created them. And God blessed them. And God said to them, "Be fruitful and multiply and fill the earth..." There are different aspects to what is meant here by God making humanity in his own image, but surely part of it is that humanity is created with male or female *natures*. These verses come after the many distinctions in creation of creatures "after their own kind," "each after its own kind." The whole action of God in creation is distinguishing and giving to each kind its own place and its own nature. There is a purpose here and, we might say, a mystery. The kinds and natures are given with the purpose of filling the earth and being instruments of God's bounty.

Now I want to turn to another book by the British neuroscientist, Simon LeVay. It's called *Gay, Straight, and the Reason Why: The Science of Sexual Orientation*. LeVay is a self-described gay

man and he writes with great clarity about the science surrounding sexual orientation. He operates entirely within the realm of the observable and the measurable and has a wide knowledge of the studies that have been done on the subject. His essential argument is that homosexual orientation in men and women is largely a product of the levels of sex hormones during pregnancy, associated with a genetic disposition. By the time a child is born, he argues, a disposition towards sexual orientation is already established. He backs this up with experiments varying hormone levels in rats, for instance, while they are in utero. He acknowledges the possibility that highly motivated people of homosexual orientation may change somewhat, but he says that basically, the orientation is fixed at birth and he doesn't see any need to do anything other than accept that.

Simon LeVay doesn't say anything about male or female *natures* or homosexual *natures*. Such a concept is not a part of his scientific vocabulary. He locates heterosexuals and homosexuals on a scale ranging from masculine to feminine characteristics. That is what can be measured. But what is interesting to someone who believes that male and female *natures* underlie the range of human behaviour is that the spectrum of orientations that he identifies are all in relation to male and female characteristics. This is what he says, "Some characteristics of the bodies and minds of gay men are shifted in a female direction compared to straight men, and some characteristics of the bodies and minds of lesbians and bisexual women are shifted in a male direction compared to straight women." He emphasizes that these are only shifts, but they include various body traits and brain structures, and traits observable in childhood.

If we take from Scripture that God created humanity with male and female natures, we may find that there is nothing incompatible between that and Dr. LeVay's findings. Dr. LeVay does not say that homosexual men and women are that way by nature, because that lies entirely outside his kind of knowledge. He says that they are homosexual in orientation and that there are contributing factors from in utero development and genetics. But the variety of orientations are all in relation to masculine and feminine traits that given, we might say, in nature.

What difference does it make? Well, to be true to your own nature is a moral imperative. But an orientation is not a moral thing, it is a matter of observation. From the scientific point of view there is no moral significance to sexual orientation. But wouldn't we say that from a Christian point of view, God's will is that we realize and grow into our natures?

That might seem like a strange statement but surely human beings are the species that develops least by its own instincts and most by nurture and upbringing. The capacity for language, for instance, is part of our nature, but we don't learn to speak "naturally", we learn

to speak socially. More than any other species, we grow into our natures through family, through our society, by our efforts and choices. And we realize our natures imperfectly because of the great gulf between God's purposes imbedded in our natures and the fallen reality we are a part of.

My conclusions I will put in a very summary fashion and look to the discussion for further consideration. You probably see where this has been going at such great length. If things are as I suggest, Scripture teaches that humanity has male and female natures. The reason for the Scriptural prohibition of homosexual unions and St. Paul's statement about what is natural and contrary to nature is that sex is a part of the mystery of male and female according to which we were created. It is tied to procreation in its nature. Variations from that pattern, such as infertility, miscarriages, and birth defects are the product of the fallenness in nature itself, subjected to futility for a time. And homosexual orientation, whatever the hormonal or genetic factors that might contribute to it, would be part of the gulf between the way we are and the natures we are meant to realize. We must absolutely be sensitive to the difficulty of living with that, but surely, if we are seriously trying to live out God's purposes for us, we all deal with great difficulties of one kind or another.