

The Big Picture

Part 3

John 8:31-47 (NIV)

³¹ To the Jews who had believed him, Jesus said, "If you hold to my teaching, you are really my disciples.

³² Then you will know the truth, and the truth will set you free."

³³ They answered him, "We are Abraham's descendants and have never been slaves of anyone. How can you say that we shall be set free?"

³⁴ Jesus replied, "I tell you the truth, everyone who sins is a slave to sin.

³⁵ Now a slave has no permanent place in the family, but a son belongs to it forever.

³⁶ So if the Son sets you free, you will be free indeed.

³⁷ I know you are Abraham's descendants. Yet you are ready to kill me, because you have no room for my word.

³⁸ I am telling you what I have seen in the Father's presence, and you do what you have heard from your father."

³⁹ "Abraham is our father," they answered. "If you were Abraham's children," said Jesus, "then you would do the things Abraham did.

⁴⁰ As it is, you are determined to kill me, a man who has told you the truth that I heard from God. Abraham did not do such things.

⁴¹ You are doing the things your own father does." "We are not illegitimate children," they protested. "The only Father we have is God himself."

⁴² Jesus said to them, "If God were your Father, you would love me, for I came from God and now am here. I have not come on my own; but he sent me.

⁴³ Why is my language not clear to you? Because you are unable to hear what I say.

⁴⁴ You belong to your father, the devil, and you want to carry out your father's desire. He was a murderer from the beginning, not holding to the truth, for there is no truth in him. When he lies, he speaks his native language, for he is a liar and the father of lies.

⁴⁵ Yet because I tell the truth, you do not believe me!

⁴⁶ Can any of you prove me guilty of sin? If I am telling the truth, why don't you believe me?

⁴⁷ He who belongs to God hears what God says. The reason you do not hear is that you do not belong to God."

Same sex marriage and the purpose of truth

(November 15, 2017, Australian Marriage Law Postal survey, 79.5% of the population voted. 61.6% vote yes and 38.4% vote no.)

A few months ago God dropped a series of messages into my heart, so I knew more or less what I would be saying this Sunday, I just didn't quite anticipate the events of this week and how timely that would make the message and how difficult.

A long time ago I encountered the overwhelming love of God and it changed me and I made Jesus the Lord of my life. Which means, that I don't live for myself, I try to live for God. I don't do it perfectly, but I trust God's Love, God's word and God's Spirit to lead me in the right path (Psalm 103:17, Proverbs 3:6, Romans 8:14).

Which means that I can't simply believe what everyone thinks I should believe, no matter how attractive the belief and how much pressure there is to fall in line, my life is not my own, I have been bought with a price (1 Corinthians 6:20). Which is why I stand here today and say, at probably the most awkward moment in history ever, that I can't say yes to same sex marriage. Those of you who know me well, no there is no hate in me, no malice, no bigotry. In fact in many way I'm genuinely happy about the yes vote, which I know sounds contradictory, but maybe this story will help explain some things.

It was the summer of 1977, I turned up for school on a Monday morning to be greeted by rows of police cars and ambulances with flashing lights and miles of police tape preventing us entering the school. Teachers gathered us and without explanation marched us around the back of the school to the sports fields where we spent the rest of the morning. Naturally we were totally curious to find out what was going on and it seemed that the only thing that anyone knew was that a dead body had been found on the school grounds.

In the days that followed we found out that the dead body was someone we knew, a year 10 student, the year below mine. He'd been found hanging from the roof of the canteen. I knew him well enough to know that he was constantly being bullied and taunted for being at least effeminate but mostly he was accused of being gay, often in that very canteen area. His parents chose to hold a private funeral and years later I realised this was because they blamed the school for allowing their son to be tormented to death over his sexual identity. That event still deeply troubles me so when I witnessed the euphoria and jubilation of rainbow draped members of the LGBTQI community I was glad. I was glad that this vote helped them feel safe and accepted by the Australian community. I was glad that maybe this would mean the end of the kind of hate, discrimination, cruelty and rejection what leads people to take their own life.

So why in the face of all that, do I believe that same sex marriage is wrong? For all of us who have been wrestling with this issue we know it's emotionally difficult, but as a question of right and wrong it's relatively simple. God's word clearly says

"A man will leave his father and mother and be united to his wife, and they will become one flesh. (Genesis 2:24).

That God's plan is built around males and females and the word is equally clear that same sex relationships are not part of God's plan (Leviticus, 18:22, 20:13, Romans 1:18-32, 1 Corinthians 6:9-10). Now there are some complicated and vigorous discussions that are being had around interpreting the bible and trying to work out if the bible knew anything about sexual orientation as we understand it today and if

people are interested in pursuing some of those issues we would be happy to schedule a group to discuss them. But this morning I just want to make the main thing the main thing. What is the most important truth for God? Because the answer to that is the most important truth for my whole life.

Jesus taught that the purpose of truth is to set people free (John 8:32)", and while there is a freedom that comes from equality which is a good thing and let's be clear about that, God invented equality;

In Galatians 3:28 we read - *There is neither Jew nor Greek, slave nor free, male nor female, for you are all one in Christ Jesus.*

God invented equality and it is good thing, it's just not the most important thing of all.

To illustrate what I'm talking about I want to go back to 1938. It was less than 20 years since Europe had fought the most terrible war in human history. Nobody wanted it to happen again so when the British Prime minister returned from meeting Herr Hitler, on the 30th of September, he waved an agreement in the air annexing chunks of Czechoslovakia in return for stability and peace. Later that day Chamberlain stood outside the front of 10 Dowling Street and said

"My good friends, for the second time in our history, a British Prime Minister has returned from Germany bringing peace with honour. I believe it is peace for our time. We thank you from the bottom of our hearts. Go home and get a nice quiet sleep." (The Oxford dictionary of quotations).

One year later, Hitler invaded Poland and the world was in another terrible war, one that it was completely underprepared for. You see peace is a good and Godly thing, wanting peace is to want a good thing, but as it turned out, it was not the most important thing. The most important thing was the truth about Hitler's character and Hitler's intentions and Chamberlain, blinded by his desire for a good thing, for peace, was unable to see the Big Picture.

However, Britain was not totally caught unprepared, there were other voices speaking of other realities; most notably Winston Churchill. In this quote Churchill is responding to an argument doing the rounds at the time that all that was happening in Germany was, that in the face of their humiliation at the end of the 1st world war, they were just looking for a little respect, equality.

"I believe the refined term now is equal qualitative status by indefinitely deferred stages. That is not what Germany is seeking. All these bands of sturdy Teutonic youths, marching through the streets and roads of Germany, with the light of desire in the eyes to suffer for their Fatherland, are not looking for status. They are looking for weapons, and, when they have the weapons, believe me they will then ask for the return of lost territories and lost colonies, and when that demand is made it cannot fail to shake and possibly shatter to their foundations every one of the countries I have

mentioned, and some other countries I have not mentioned." (Churchill: by Martin Gilbert)

So to summarise, while equality is a good thing it is not the most important thing, so what is the most important thing? Let's talk about sex.

If our society was a person, when it came to sex, it would be diagnosed with multiple personality disorder, **(what we would now call a dissociative disorder)**, along with a huge dose of denial. We are a very conflicted people. On the one hand we believe that sex with the wrong person, at the wrong time, in the wrong way is extraordinarily damaging for human beings. We have masses of information and testimony from the royal commission into institutional responses to child sexual abuse that tell us this truth again and again. Yet, at the very same time, our society holds freedom of sexual activity as an important value, and for some people, even a human right, and all this without blinking at the immense contradiction between these two truths. We attempt to live with these contradictions by playing elaborate word games around concepts such as consensual sex.

The truth is that sex being consensual doesn't make everything OK. I met a psychologist who works with high school children, who was telling me about this mental health catastrophe she is trying to come to grips with. Where girls are coming to believe that in order to be liked, in order to be accepted, in order to be loved, they feel that they have no choice but to be available for sex, for whoever, whenever, and there is no end of people, mainly but not exclusively, adolescence boys, willing to take advantage of the opportunities. Which is leaving girls highly vulnerable to abuse, to humiliation and being abandoned like objects. The fruit of this manifests as depression, self-harm, suicide, eating disorders, the whole box and dice. We should be shocked that there is little credible response to this ongoing crises, even though most of these girls are underage, but we mostly live with it because these young people are consenting.

Mission Australia's 2016 Youth Survey Findings

- Almost a quarter (22.8 per cent) of young people aged 15 to 19 show the symptoms of probable serious mental illness, up from 18.7 per cent five years ago
- Teenage girls are more than twice as likely as boys to be in severe psychological distress, even though the suicide rate is higher in males

An American study published in the medical journal Paediatrics late last year showed an increase in teens suffering depression from 8.7 percent to 11.5 percent in just 12 months.

Depression is now the leading cause of ill health and disability affecting 300 million people worldwide, the World Health Organisation has announced.

A similar study in the United Kingdom showed a dramatic rise in the number of teenagers being admitted to hospital for self-harming in the past decade -- shockingly, the number of teen girls admitted to hospital in the UK for cutting

themselves quadrupled in that period. Another British study shows rates of mental illness in young women aged 16 to 24 is at an all-time high.

And the issue is not confined to teenagers in developed nations. Last month, the World Health Organisation (WHO) announced that depression is now the leading cause of ill health and disability, having risen by more than 18 per cent worldwide since 2005.

So experts agree that it's a major problem -- and that it's getting worse. What is less certain are the reasons behind the rise.

You see the most important thing, the purpose of God's truth is freedom from the darkness within that manifests in all kinds of behaviours including sexual abuse. When everyone has become equal and discrimination has been totally abolished, there is going to be a big shock in our society to discover that the darkness in the human soul is still an ever present reality. That such darkness is not a consequence of discrimination, but that discrimination is a symptom of a deeper reality, of a deeper problem that we can't afford to lose sight of in the rainbow euphoria. Right now there are heterosexual couples who are betraying and hurting each other, there are homosexual couples who are hurting and betraying each other, there are strangers visiting evil upon other strangers. Paul says that it was for this reason he was called:

"To open their eyes and turn them from darkness to light, and from the power of Satan to God, so that they may receive forgiveness of sins and a place among those who are sanctified by faith in me." (Acts 26:17-18)

And this idea of the darkness within is not just a religious notion it's backed by solid scientific research.

In 2004 the New Scientist Journal published the results of research into the circumstances surrounding how individuals committed seemingly inexplicable acts of abuse in Abu Ghraib prison in Iraq in 2003 and 2004. The report was gathered from over 25,000 psychological studies involving eight million participants. The question was asked of researcher Susanne Fiske from Princeton University; "Could any average 18-year-old have tortured these prisoners?" She replied; "On the basis of this research I would have to answer: 'Yes, just about anyone could have.'" "If we don't understand the importance of social context and accept that almost anybody could commit acts of torture under certain circumstances, then we are setting ourselves up for situations where Abu Ghraib [atrocities] will occur again." But what was really interesting in this report was this small comment: *"People who opt out often have a strong sense of moral values or religious conviction that allows them to override their natural inclination to follow their superiors or fit in with their peer group,"*

(<https://www.newscientist.com/article/dn6727-everyone-is-a-potential-torturer/>)

You see, God's law shelter us from the worst excesses of our own dark side. It's because God knows that sex can be equally wonderful and destructive, that God places sex within the shelter of a very particular kind of loving commitment, in which

we are sheltered by having sexual intimacy with the right person, at the right time in the right place.

'For this reason a man will leave his father and mother and be united to his wife, and the two will become one flesh' (Matthew 19:5).

God's plan is for people to grow and develop under the shelter of male and female parents whose complementary strengths offer the most comprehensive form of shelter. From there we move carefully into our own complementary relationship in which God shelters us in a totally loving mutuality which Jesus describes as one flesh. Having recently spent three months entirely in the company of my one flesh partner, I am in awe of the wisdom of God to shelter my life in this way. It is so rich and so full and the truth is, that the experience of successful same sex relationships, does not in any way invalidate the objective reality that God's plan is the best plan for human welfare.

So what I hope you are hearing me say this morning is be glad that our society has become a safer and more loving place for gay people, the bible is clear we are to show proper respect to everyone (1 Peter 2:17). But we cannot become blinded to the big picture and the truth of the darkness that lurks in the human heart. Stand firm on God's word and do not allow your voice, the believer's voice, to be silenced. We face a real challenge in these days of rediscovering the churches mission and identity in the world, but one thing is for sure we won't find it by becoming more like the world. As the Apostle Peter said:

¹¹ Dear friends, I urge you, as aliens and strangers in the world, to abstain from sinful desires, which war against your soul.

¹² Live such good lives among the pagans that, though they accuse you of doing wrong, they may see your good deeds and glorify God on the day he visits us. (1 Peter 2:11-12)

I think we may have lost that sense of being aliens and strangers, of being counter cultural, of being in the world but not of the world. Many Christians, and I would include myself in this, appear unremarkable and indistinguishable in our behaviour from our neighbours and as a consequence we have no cut into our culture, no traction into the world, no obvious point of difference, nothing that makes people sit up and take notice and say about us what they said about those early Christians, that they were turning the world upside down (Acts 17:6).

In my heart I keep hearing this deep challenge in the words of an old Hymn

Who is on the Lord's side? Who will serve the King?
 Who will be His helpers, other lives to bring?
 Who will leave the world's side? Who will face the foe?
 Who is on the Lord's side? Who for Him will go?
 By Thy call of mercy, by Thy grace divine,
 We are on the Lord's side—Saviour, we are Thine!

(Frances R. Havegail)