

Learning, listening, Scripture and sexuality

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Current debates among Anglicans, especially on human sexuality, often focus on how the Bible should be read. Some of the people who regard themselves as ‘Bible-believing’ resist the idea that they might gain much from listening and dialogue, observation and study. From their point of view, the truth has been revealed in Scripture, and this is decisive. However there are other people who believe that Christians should be open to advances in knowledge and what the Holy Spirit might be revealing in today’s world. Some play down the relevance of much of the Bible except as a source of doctrine about God.

Yet the Bible itself seems, to some readers, to point to the vital importance of being attentive to the wider world and people’s experiences. The Gospel accounts of the teaching and actions of Jesus Christ, in particular, may offer valuable insights on how contentious issues could be approached. Some of the relevant themes are explored below.

Giving a fair hearing

It is today widely accepted that, if those in authority are to make a decision which will profoundly affect certain people’s lives, those people have a right to be heard. If, for instance, a court’s decision might result in someone losing his livelihood or liberty, it would be regarded as unjust if that person were not given an opportunity to argue his case with the aid of a competent lawyer, bring evidence and respond to accusations. And it would be regarded as unjust for a state agency to build a road through someone’s land unless she had been given the chance to put her own view forward and this had been properly considered. Being judged without being heard can undermine people’s sense of personhood, and those such as dictators and brutal jailers who wish to break the spirit of those in their charge may make use of this.

The right to a fair hearing is not a new principle. The Old Testament emphasises its importance: ‘You must not be partial in judging: hear out the small and the great alike’, Moses urges the judges he has appointed.¹ Yet this is a world where, all too often, bitter rivalry and injustice are encountered, where ‘each hunts the other with a net’, ‘the prince and the judge ask for a bribe’² and wicked rulers ‘condemn the innocent to death.’³ Even those who are usually just may be led astray, though listening may set them back on the right path; David is so enraged by the rude inhospitality of a rich livestock farmer, Nabal, that a bloodbath almost follows, until his wife Abigail rushes out to plead with the young warrior. David listens, and afterwards is profoundly grateful: ‘Blessed be the Lord, the God of Israel, who sent you this day to meet me! Blessed be your discretion, and blessed be you, who have kept me this day from bloodguilt and from avenging myself with my own hand!’⁴

In the New Testament, too, those in positions of responsibility are required at least to try to be just, while God goes beyond mere justice and is more merciful than people deserve or expect. The seemingly

¹ Deuteronomy 1.17

² Micah 7.2-3

³ Psalm 94.20-21

⁴ I Samuel 25.2-35

powerless move out of the margins and find a voice. Indeed, the hero of one of Jesus' parables in Luke's Gospel is a widow who is so persistent that she manages to get a judge who has 'no fear of God and no respect for anyone' to listen to her demand for justice and take action!⁵

It is of course courteous for people in general to listen to one another, but there is a particular obligation for those in positions of power. A judge's feelings may be hurt if a defendant is rude to him, but the defendant's life may be shattered if the judge refuses to allow evidence which would prove her innocent. Making every effort to allow different perspectives to be heard is all the more important because it is all too easy to hear only what fits in with one's preconceived notions and filter out anything else.

Church leaders in today's world exercise power within Christian communities, and often considerable influence in society, and part of their vocation is to listen with attentiveness and humility not only to ecclesiastical superiors and wealthy patrons but also the poor and marginalised. This can be hard. People in congregations and dioceses are often deferential and avoid challenging what leaders say, and it can be tempting for them to come to believe they can make pronouncements on those with less power without making an effort to hear their perspective. For instance male clerics may feel they can offer guidance on how women should behave without hearing from women, other than those who submit to their own authority and echo their own views. And lay and clerical leaders who are reasonably well-off by the standards of their communities may pronounce on economic issues without studying these in depth or listening to various perspectives from poor people.

All too often, lesbian, gay and bisexual people are talked about without being heard ourselves, and our families and friends may also go unheard. For instance, church leaders who have never knowingly spent time with same-sex couples, and whose lesbian and gay acquaintances are generally closeted and unwilling to speak honestly for fear of being penalised by society or the church, may make sweeping statements about same-sex relationships. This is unjust: all should be given a fair hearing on matters that affect their lives.

Avoiding 'false witness, slander'

In Matthew's and Mark's Gospels, when Jesus is challenging the notion of purity held by the religious leaders of his day, he discusses what makes someone unclean. 'Listen and understand: it is not what goes into the mouth that defiles a person, but it is what comes out of the mouth that defiles... what comes out of the mouth proceeds from the heart, and this is what defiles. For out of the heart come evil intentions... false witness, slander' (in the New Revised Standard Version).⁶

The wrongness of making negative statements about other people which are untrue is mentioned in various other Biblical passages, including the Ten Commandments.⁷ This is perhaps because it is so easy for humans to do, for instance to gain an advantage, give vent to jealousy, pursue a grudge or go along with the prejudices of a particular social group. Such false claims may arise from deliberate malice or willingness to believe the worst of certain people without being open to evidence which may lead in a different direction. Instead of seeing each person as a unique child of God, she or he may be stereotyped as unclean, dishonest, useless or dangerous.

Negative rumours and prejudice can do considerable damage. James, in his Epistle, warns that 'every species of beast and bird, of reptile and sea creature, can be tamed and has been tamed by the human species, but no one can tame the tongue – a restless evil, full of deadly poison. With it we bless the Lord and Father, and with it we curse those who are made in the likeness of God. From the same mouth come

⁵ Luke 18.1-8

⁶ See Matthew 15.1-20; also Mark 7.1-23

⁷ Exodus 20.16

blessing and cursing. My brothers and sisters, this ought not to be so. Does a spring pour forth from the same opening both fresh and brackish water?’⁸

People, families and communities can find themselves shunned or even attacked because of the bad things said about them. In many societies, for instance, particular ethnic groups can become targets. Worryingly, the Bible itself has been misused, for instance to justify discrimination and violence against Jewish people and women labelled as ‘witches’. What was intended to edify and uplift may be twisted by the fear, prejudice or greed in human hearts into an excuse for maligning one’s neighbour.

Lesbian, gay and bisexual people have often been at the receiving end of such vilification. Sometimes from an early age, perhaps before we can name our feelings which set us apart from the majority, we can find ourselves targeted on the basis of half-truths and untruths. This is not to claim that we are saintly victims: we are ourselves capable of prejudice against other minorities, and indeed against ourselves, turning hatred and contempt inwards.

It is sometimes claimed that our actions, and even our orientation, arises from wilful selfishness, despite all the evidence to the contrary. There is often a refusal to acknowledge that, especially in places where we can live together openly, many of our relationships embody faithful and long-lasting love and self-sacrifice, and mutual care for other family members and neighbours.

It is not only in wider society that we are reviled but even in church circles. On such an emotionally charged issue as human sexuality, ‘deep and dispassionate study’ which takes seriously ‘Scripture and the results of scientific and medical research’, and genuine ‘dialogue’ (to use the words of the 1978 Lambeth Conference), are much needed. Yet some of the language used by church leaders makes this difficult, for instance claims that homosexuals are ‘deviants’, that our behaviour is equivalent to bestiality and comes ‘directly from the pit of hell’. Even such a carefully-worded document as the 1997 Kuala Lumpur Statement uses language in a way that can confuse rather than clarify when it states that ‘The Holy Scriptures are clear in teaching that all sexual promiscuity is sin. We are convinced that this includes homosexual practices between men or women, as well as heterosexual relationships outside marriage.’ However, whether or not partners entering a monogamous same-sex partnership are right or wrong to do so, they are not promiscuous in the usual sense of the word.

The false witness of some religious leaders has helped to create a climate which makes reasoned discussion difficult and in which some people feel justified in denying us basic human rights, even locking up, attacking or killing us. Our families and friends, too, may suffer. We may believe and internalise the negative images of us, and act accordingly. However, to those who know that such claims are untrue, it is the credibility of the church which may suffer. Why should those who make untrue statements about lesbians and gays be believed when they talk of the good news of Jesus Christ? So the ministry and mission of the Church are undermined.

Not ‘straining out a gnat and swallowing a camel’

For everyone, keeping a sense of perspective is sometimes difficult. Self-interest, and the dominant views in one’s own society, can all too often lead to exaggerated importance being given to some issues, and not enough emphasis to others. The vivid and comic picture painted in the Gospels by Jesus in his criticism of those who are judgmental – ‘Why do you see the speck in your neighbour's eye, but do not notice the log in your own eye?’⁹ – is still relevant.

⁸ See James 3. 1-12

⁹ See Matthew 7.1-5, Luke 6.37-42

Being knowledgeable and scrupulous about scriptural teachings does not necessarily ensure balance: Jesus also challenged the ultra-religious who ‘tithed mint, dill, and cumin, and have neglected the weightier matters of the law: justice and mercy and faith’, who ‘strain out a gnat but swallow a camel!’¹⁰ Those so pious that they seek to abide by God’s will in even the smallest things and encourage others to do the same can get their priorities wrong.

Sometimes those with a different perspective can play an important part in jolting humans into recognising what is most important and urgent. The authors of the book of Isaiah challenged the religious of their day, who asked why God did not respond to their piety: ‘If you remove the yoke from among you, the pointing of the finger, the speaking of evil, if you offer your food to the hungry and satisfy the needs of the afflicted, then your light shall rise in the darkness and your gloom be like the noonday.’¹¹ True worship of God, who delights in generosity and mercy, does not involve oppressing and condemning others while neglecting the needy and vulnerable and upholding exploitative and violent social systems.

Time and again, the prophets challenge their listeners to question what they take for granted, as does Jesus in the Gospels. Throughout history, scholars and campaigners, and the voices of the downtrodden and marginalised themselves, have helped people to reassess what is most important. This is especially important on complex ethical matters or where there are competing priorities.

There is of course ongoing debate about human sexuality, and the circumstances in which physical intimacy is proper. This is important, but is it truly the central question for Christians today, and if so why? A handful of passages from the epistles, the meaning and in some cases translation of which is much disputed, are frequently quoted, but Paul is not preoccupied by sex. Romans 1, for instance, includes, ‘For the wrath of God is revealed from heaven against all ungodliness and wickedness of those who by their wickedness suppress the truth.... They were filled with every kind of wickedness, evil, covetousness, malice. Full of envy, murder, strife, deceit, craftiness, they are gossips, slanderers...’ Yet the spiritual dangers of malice and slander directed against minorities and people of lower social status are often overlooked, and the main point that Paul is trying to get across lost through too narrow a focus.

The priority which some Christians give to denouncing gay and lesbian partnerships, and the passion which this arouses, are disproportionate in a world where so many are starving, victims of war, enslaved or abused. Indeed homophobia and other forms of prejudice can be ways of avoiding the distress and uncertainty that some would otherwise feel amidst so much insecurity and suffering, and difficult questions about personal and collective responsibility. In today’s world, as in ancient times, it is all too easy to ‘strain out a gnat and swallow a camel’.

Loving one’s neighbour as oneself

To ‘love your neighbour as yourself’ is indeed more important than burnt offerings and sacrifices.¹² But pious observance is in some ways easier. For some people, caring even for themselves is hard, but at least they are likely to know if they have a headache or if they feel like crying or laughing. They will also, unless they have severe memory problems, know something about their lives, for instance whom they rely on or who has threatened them.

Yet it may be difficult to understand the inner world of those who are close friends or relatives, let alone strangers and members of other communities. This may partly be because people sometimes avoid certain topics and hide their feelings, fearing that these are wrong or will cause them to be criticised or

¹⁰ Matthew 23.23-24

¹¹ See Isaiah 58

¹² Mark 12.28-34, Matthew 22.36-40

that others will be upset. Wives may not speak of their fears and frustrations to their husbands, laypeople may be polite and respectful to senior clergy but not reveal certain thoughts and experiences, young people becoming aware that they are attracted to members of the same sex may not mention this to their parents or peers. And those in leadership positions may lead busy lives, not having much time to listen except to those whose support or cooperation they need, and may feel so confident about their own knowledge that other people's fears and longings, joys and sorrows can go unnoticed.

This can make love difficult, unless it is a kind of impersonal charity or brisk kindness. Sometimes, indeed, needs and their solutions are obvious, but at other times this requires attentive listening. A good doctor will tend to listen carefully to his or her patients, to other caregivers who may have observed something the doctor has not and to researchers and others with useful knowledge about improving health, and be aware of the risk of making assumptions about the right course of action. A good friend, too, will tend to try to be open to what their companion is trying to tell them in words, gestures and silences, even if this may be uncomfortable. Job's friends would have been better off just keeping him company in his sorrow than coming up with seemingly pious comments which turned out, in the end, to be based on a misunderstanding of God's ways.¹³

In the Gospel story of the rich man and Lazarus,¹⁴ there is no indication that the rich man is not religiously observant; indeed those who thrive while others suffer may be encouraged in their complacency by reading carefully-selected verses of Scripture.¹⁵ Yet he is barely aware of the reality of the beggar at his gate, and this distance from his neighbour distances him from God.

Christians often claim to 'love' everyone, but may be acting on their own unconscious wants and unexamined beliefs and be insensitive to others, especially those who are 'different' and marginalised. 'How does God's love abide in anyone who has the world's goods and sees a brother or sister in need and yet refuses help?' asks 1 John. 'Little children, let us love, not in word or speech, but in truth and action.'¹⁶ To lesbian, gay and bisexual people, claims to 'love' us by people who know little about our lives and seem unconcerned about the daily realities which confront us may appear hollow. If others truly listen to us, even if there are disagreements on some matters, we know that they are disagreeing with us, rather than some imagined version of us, and that this happens in the context of a love which can enable an ongoing relationship. And, in addressing our experiences, they may be enabled to recognise the often virulent homophobia which still infects all too many people, doing great spiritual harm to them as well as to us, and challenge it more effectively.

Being open to the Wisdom from above

The book of Proverbs recounts how Wisdom 'cries out in the street; in the squares she raises her voice', and emphasises the value of 'making your ear attentive to wisdom and inclining your heart to understanding', of searching for understanding 'as for hidden treasures'.¹⁷ Indeed this and several other books of the Bible are designated as 'wisdom' books, and Wisdom is central to some of the Deuterocanonical works. 'If you love to listen you will gain knowledge,' urges the book of Sirach, and 'Do not find fault before you investigate; examine first, and then criticise.'¹⁸

The wise are not content simply to accept what is on the surface but will dig deeper. In the Deuterocanonical story of Susanna, judges are faced with what seems on the surface a straightforward case: two elders, men looked up to as guardians of morality in the community, have witnessed a young

¹³ Book of Job

¹⁴ Luke 16.19-31

¹⁵ See e.g. Proverbs 3.9-10, 6.9-11

¹⁶ 1 John 3.17-18

¹⁷ See Proverbs 1.20-21, 2.1-7

¹⁸ Sirach 6.33, 11.7

wife engaging in adultery. She denies it but, in a patriarchal set-up, her testimony carries far less weight than that of her accusers, who are themselves judges, and she is condemned. Young Daniel, however, inspired by God, challenges the verdict, asking his community whether they are really willing ‘to condemn a daughter of Israel without examination and without learning the facts?’ He probes the evidence for the prosecution – and it falls apart. In fact, the elders are seeking revenge because they have sexually harassed Susannah and she has not given way to them: it is they who are at fault, yet without Daniel’s intervention it is she who would have been punished.¹⁹

Wisdom, whom some commentators identify with the Holy Spirit, also features prominently in the New Testament. For instance in the epistle to the Ephesians the author prays ‘that the God of our Lord Jesus Christ, the Father of glory, may give you a spirit of wisdom and revelation as you come to know him.’²⁰ ‘Who is wise and understanding among you?’ asks James. ‘Show by your good life that your works are done with gentleness born of wisdom. But if you have bitter envy and selfish ambition in your hearts, do not be boastful and false to the truth. Such wisdom does not come down from above, but is earthly, unspiritual, devilish. For where there is envy and selfish ambition, there will also be disorder and wickedness of every kind. But the wisdom from above is first pure, then peaceable, gentle, willing to yield, full of mercy and good fruits, without a trace of partiality or hypocrisy. And a harvest of righteousness is sown in peace for those who make peace.’ Wisdom from above leads to right relationship with God and neighbour.

In the parable in Luke’s Gospel of the steward facing dismissal who fiddles the accounts to reduce the sums owed by his master’s debtors, so that he has their goodwill to fall back on when he loses his job, his master praises him ‘because he had done wisely: for the children of this world are in their generation wiser than the children of light’.²¹ This rings true even today: while salespersons may listen attentively to prospective clients and go to great lengths to strike up a rapport, Christians may be so wrapped up in piety that not enough loving attention is paid to feelings and needs of others. Yet in Matthew’s Gospel, at the last judgement the righteous are told that ‘just as you did it to one of the least of these who are members of my family, you did it to me.’²²

Truly listening to lesbian, gay, bisexual and trans people, and studying material on sexuality by scholars from different disciplines and standpoints, may at first be uncomfortable for some Christians. It may involve dealing with matters of bodily intimacy and family life – subjects which may arouse strong emotions; coping with the challenge of taking on board unfamiliar experiences and re-examining long-held assumptions; and risking anger from church members who feel undermined or threatened, as well as the complications of church politics. This may involve an element of renunciation, even death to self, and yet beyond this lies the hope of resurrection into a life where those previously marginalised are now beloved brothers and sisters.

Following Jesus

Through Christ’s example as well as teaching, readers of the Gospels can learn about the value – and difficulty – of offering the marginalised a chance to be heard, avoiding false witness and excessive harshness, loving one’s neighbour as oneself and being open to divine wisdom.

Jesus is portrayed not as teaching and healing in an impersonal way but is wonderfully attentive to those around him, taking seriously those whom others would write off, ready to have detailed theological discussions not only with learned scholars but also with a Samaritan woman with a far-from-regular

¹⁹ Susanna

²⁰ Ephesians 1.17

²¹ Luke 16.1-9

²² Matthew 25.40

family life, to the surprise of his followers.²³ Each person matters, and is different: when a woman with a haemorrhage touches him, even in the midst of the crowd he senses her and calls her out to tell her story, then praises her faith, so that one who was ‘unclean’ and destitute is heard by many and respected.²⁴ When he is condemned by the pious for eating and drinking with tax collectors and sinners, he urges them, ‘Go and learn what this means, “I desire mercy, not sacrifice.”’²⁵

In Mark’s gospel, it is understandable that his critics are appalled when he appears to be justifying defiance of God’s own words, set out clearly in Scripture,²⁶ with the claim that ‘The sabbath was made for humankind, and not humankind for the sabbath.’ What is more, he himself engages in sabbath-breaking,²⁷ which they have been taught from childhood is a sin so grievous that the penalty is to be cut off from the community or even killed.²⁸

The Sermon on the Mount in Matthew’s gospel indicates that Jesus’ understanding of the Old Testament is profoundly affected by his compassionate attentiveness to human need and deep awareness of the corrosive effects of anger and contempt. ‘You have heard that it was said to those of ancient times, “You shall not murder”: and “whoever murders shall be liable to judgement.” But I say to you that if you are angry with a brother or sister, you will be liable to judgement; and if you insult a brother or sister, you will be liable to the council; and if you say, “You fool,” you will be liable to the hell of fire.’²⁹ (There has been much written about the precise meaning of the wording, including whether there is a direct reference to insults based on sexuality.³⁰ Certainly there is a glimmer of humour in the notion of being hauled in front of the Sanhedrin to explain to learned judges what is an everyday form of speech – but behind this is a serious warning that such attitudes can cause serious harm and even destroy lives.)

Anglicans have long tended to emphasise the value of Scripture, tradition and reason, and indeed these are closely intertwined. It is very difficult indeed to read a text without being in some way influenced by the expectations and desires of oneself and one’s community, and unless one is aware of these tendencies, it is possible to be certain that the words have a particular meaning when, in fact, they could be understood in a different way. Those who mix mainly with the likeminded and do not listen to alternative perspectives may be reinforced in their view that theirs is the only true way. Tragically, in the gospels, many of those most passionately opposed to Jesus believe they are conscientiously obeying God’s will as set out in Scripture: but in trying to show reverence for the words of God they unwittingly seek to kill God’s living Word.

John’s gospel portrays the dogmatic refusal of the religious authorities, who believe they are safeguarding God’s law and tradition, to consider the possibility that this wandering preacher and healer, whom they believe is leading people astray, might be doing God’s will (let alone God incarnate). When the police are so impressed by Jesus that they refuse to arrest him, the leaders ask, ‘Surely you have not been deceived too, have you? Have any one of the authorities or of the Pharisees believed in him? But this crowd, who do not know the law – they are accursed.’ And when dissident religious leader Nicodemus points out, ‘Our law does not judge people without first giving them a hearing to find out what they are doing, does it?’ his colleagues are dismissive.³¹ From their point of view, they know what Scripture and tradition teach, and must safeguard it. Christians who are honest would probably admit that church hierarchies can sometimes act like the Jewish authorities portrayed in the gospels, so wedded to the familiar that they fail to acknowledge what God is doing in their midst. And now, as in the past, humility

²³ John 4.1-2

²⁴ Mark 5.24-34

²⁵ Matthew 9.10-13

²⁶ Mark 2.23-28

²⁷ Mark 3.1-6

²⁸ Exodus 31.12-15

²⁹ Matthew 5.21-22

³⁰ See e.g. Varnell P, *WWJD: Jesus on Anti-gay Slurs*, <http://www.independentgayforum.org/news/show/27000.html>

³¹ John 7.45-52

and faith like that of Rabbi Gamaliel, who in the book of Acts opposes the persecution of the Christians,³² can be hard to sustain, especially when others are urging that what seems heretical must be stamped out.

Even today, religious leaders may refuse to consider the kind of evidence to which (in Matthew's and Luke's accounts) Jesus refers the followers of John the Baptist, sent to check whether he really is the saviour – 'Go and tell John what you hear and see',³³ or which he cites when explaining how to distinguish between true and false prophets: 'A good tree cannot bear bad fruit, nor can a bad tree bear good fruit.'³⁴ But many Christians know from experience that Scripture and tradition can yield unexpected treasures when read in the light of knowledge gained from painstaking study and hard-won experience.

In one scene in the gospels, Jesus expresses his frustration at the hardened hearts and closed minds of those who will not listen: 'The queen of the South will rise up at the judgement with this generation and condemn it, because she came from the ends of the earth to listen to the wisdom of Solomon, and see, something greater than Solomon is here!'³⁵ One can imagine the indignation of pompous male religious leaders at being compared unfavourably with this foreign woman, whose beliefs and lifestyle were unlikely to have met with their approval! But the lengths to which she and others pursuing wisdom went are indeed impressive.³⁶

Before the days of the printing press, film and internet, when so many instruments used in modern science had not been invented and investigative techniques now taken for granted had not been devised, gaining and sharing knowledge and deepening understanding could involve huge effort for what might seem like limited gains. It could be all too difficult to distinguish truth from myth, decide whether travellers' tales were factually based or tall stories and find out what treatments might work for sick people, yet there were some who made the effort. Today, it is easy for those who are literate – now a large proportion of the world's population – to read about the lives, hopes and fears of people living thousands of miles away, or watch documentary footage of creatures so tiny that they can barely be seen with the naked eye. There are fewer excuses for failing to seek in-depth knowledge and understanding, weighing up different perspectives and making informed decisions. Christians in the twenty-first century can follow the example of the queen of Sheba without having to spend months in travelling across the globe!

However, as in the past, people tend to be reluctant to rethink their views, especially those on which they have acted – one reason that miscarriages of justice are so hard to correct even when evidence comes to light that shows the innocence of someone unjustly convicted of a crime. Tobacco companies may fund dubious 'research' which supposedly proves that cigarettes are not really that harmful, and some of their senior managers may themselves be smokers, despite all that is now known about the health hazards. Shying away from uncertainty and the possibility of change, especially where this may mean admitting to have harmed one's neighbour, is an aspect of human weakness to which both believers and unbelievers are prone. Indeed people of faith may project on to God their own misconceptions, claiming that their refusal to listen carefully and study diligently is a sign of how good and faithful they are. Yet, in the end, 'Wisdom is vindicated by her deeds', or in another version 'Wisdom is vindicated by all her children'.³⁷

The story of the Syro-Phoenician woman, about which much has been written, is a particularly startling example of divine humility, and underlines the importance of listening. In Matthew's version,³⁸ Jesus, who is uniquely close to the Father, is at first clear about his mission: he has been sent to the Jewish

³² Acts 5.27-39

³³ Matthew 11.2-6, Luke 7.18-23

³⁴ Matthew 7.15-20, Luke 6.43-46

³⁵ Matthew 12.42

³⁶ 1 Kings 4.29-34, 10.1-13

³⁷ Matthew 11.19, Luke 7.35

³⁸ Matthew 15.21-28

people. This makes sense: if he can win over those most likely to be receptive to the proclamation of the Kingdom of Heaven, they can go out and make disciples of all nations;³⁹ but if he gets deflected, the whole enterprise may fail. Who would know best what the Father wills, the beloved Son or a woman whose community's beliefs distort what is sacred, and who perhaps engages in unsavoury religious practices herself? What point is there in listening? Yet Jesus listens, debates with her, recognises wisdom in her response – and does what she asks! If Jesus is depicted in the gospels as showing such openness, perhaps it is not beneath the dignity of church leaders today to do likewise, and Wisdom may bestow unexpected treasures on them and those around them.

Moving forward on the listening process

While a process of study and dialogue on human sexuality has supposedly been going on for thirty years or so across the Anglican Communion, in some provinces this has been hampered by various factors, including the urgency of other problems and repressive attitudes from state and society which make it dangerous for lesbian, gay, bisexual and transgendered people and their family members to talk too openly about their experience. Even journalists and academics may decide, in such circumstances, not to go too deeply into the issues, and deliberately or unwittingly they may pass on half-truths or untruths.

Nevertheless, even in the midst of the harshest circumstances, including sometimes enforced secrecy, many LGBT people have managed to live with some measure of dignity and develop loving and self-sacrificing relationships with partners, other relatives and friends and those in need in their communities. Some are now in their latter years, and able to look back and reflect on the often unexpected twists and turns that their lives have taken, perhaps discerning God's faithful love at work even in the midst of turmoil and uncertainty. There are also many local Christian communities whose members have struggled with questions of human sexuality over the years, watching sons and daughters, nieces and nephews, godchildren, babies they have baptised and children they have taught in Sunday school grow up and discover that they are lesbian, gay, bisexual or transgendered. Many have come to understand things in a different light. Their testimony too should be heard.

One of the greatest obstacles however is the all-too-common notion that one must choose between being 'Bible-believing' or taking people's experience seriously. Yet many of the authors of the books which came to be included in the Bible, while obviously not having access to all aspects of modern knowledge, were perhaps more sophisticated in their approach than some Christians today. These writers understood that the Scripture could take on different meanings, harmful or liberating, depending on the extent to which readers were open to God and compassionately attentive to their neighbours. Time and again, they underlined the importance of listening carefully and seeking truth, however uncomfortable or seemingly strange. Even now, members of the church may find that, in listening to strangers or outsiders who contradict what others take for granted, it is possible to be refreshed by the good news,⁴⁰ or even to encounter the living God.⁴¹

³⁹ Isaiah 55.3-5, 56.3-8

⁴⁰ Mark 6.7-13

⁴¹ Luke 24.13-32