

## **Sermon for LGBT Mass – St John Chrysostom’s - 5<sup>th</sup> February 2011**

### **Readings:**

**Isaiah – 58: 1-12** – What sort of fasting? What sort of worship? To remove the yoke from among you... the yoke that is the pointing finger, the speaking of evil... - ,

To give bread to the hungry, feed the poor – then your light shall shine in the darkness... your gloom will be like the noonday

And God will guide you... refresh you – rebuild you....

**Matthew 5: 13-20** – Salt and light to the world and fulfilling the law...

As I started to think about this sermon last weekend the news broke about the death of David Kato in Uganda

And the imminent deportation of Brenda Namigadde to the same country

Public outcry about the court’s findings

And the fairly solid evidence of homophobia provided by Kato’s death and events at his funeral, seem to have stayed Brenda’s deportation but only for the moment...

Her case is adjourned to this Monday

BUT it was too late for Kato... whose openness about his sexuality,

In a country that attempted to bring in the death penalty for homosexuality only last autumn,

Seems to have led to extra-legal execution instead... dressed up in a cover story of robbery

Thankfully in relation to Brenda Namigadde the Archbishop of Canterbury, in an unusually rapid and clear pronouncement, did join the outcry against her deportation

BUT again, it was too late for Kato... and a great contrast to the Archbishop’s procrastination last autumn before commenting on Ugandan attempts to bring in the death penalty for homosexuality

It struck me as I heard him last autumn that the Archbishop’s message and protest – being so nuanced, guarded and delayed... was a little lacking in saltiness

By contrast his denunciation of Kato’s death and Namigadde’s deportation was a clear beacon of light – against the gloom of an immigration system that could say there was no evidence that Namigadde was a lesbian – because she didn’t read gay magazines...

And the darkness of members of the church in Uganda – our Church, the Anglican church - that could continue to pour out homophobic bile at Kato’s funeral

Then on Sunday morning I arrived at the Church where I'm a curate to find a member of the congregation getting furious about the fact that Namigadde had been protected because of her sexuality...

By contrast with an Iranian in our congregation who, as a convert to Christianity, has had all his claims refused and is awaiting deportation...

In a furious outburst I got 'Perhaps he should claim to be gay instead of a Christian...'

Not the first time I've heard it...

And thereby summing up the continued problem about so many of these debates...

The continued perception that you can be gay or Christian but not both

And the continued perception that queer folk are protected more than Christians

The same thing happened the other week on the Moral Maze, which I confess to thinking is one of the most irritating programmes ever to exist in radio broadcasting!

I only listened because they were discussing religion and rights... and I made the mistake of thinking it might be interesting

In fact, they limited the conversation largely to the Christian couple who refused to allow a gay couple to share a bed in their B&B...

And again what passed for a debate perpetuated the perception that you cannot be religious & gay...

And the perception was not just amongst the Christians – the secular liberals on the panel also thought it was OK for Christians to exclude gay people from their B&B because the gay people could go and stay elsewhere...

With no thought for the fact that the gay couple might be Christians too... and that though they may be able to stay elsewhere in a B&B it is not so easy to go elsewhere if you're excluded from your church family or other religious community...

Because gay people do get banned from their churches

BUT this is permitted by the law of our land....

What has been obscured in all the hand-wringing about the Equalities Act

And how it affects Catholic adoption agencies or Christian B&B owners

Is that the Act specifically puts narrow understandings of religion first...

And allows religious organisations to exclude people who 'offend' religious sensibilities

Banning gay people from membership and in the case of both gays and women can exclude them from attending services and from leadership

And because the perception of religious orthodoxy comes from leaders –

It allows the entrenching of religious leadership that perpetuates narrow and bigoted understandings of faith...

So what does it mean to be salt and light in our world if you are both lesbian, gay, bisexual or transgendered and Christian?

And how do we live our faith in a society whose law has put religion into a narrow, bigoted box

And allows understandings of religion that exclude queer people to get on with it...?

And how – in the light of all this - do we hear Jesus's statement that he came not to abolish the law but to fulfil it?

Particularly when so many of those who profess to be Christians believe that religious laws exclude us?

And how do we deal with a church that is still so deeply mixed up about the issue –

That in some quarters bans gay people or prays for their conversion of ways

And yet on the other makes provision in its legislation for Civil Partners?

The confusion arises partly from the fact that unlike race there is often no external evidence of our difference – or an expectation of certain stereotypes

Which has led to the delightful irony of members of my congregation asking whether, having lived for a while in Brighton, I actually knew any gay people?

And this points to the nub of Brenda Namigadde's difficulty...

What really struck me about the immigration judge's decision in Brenda's case was his decision that there was no evidence that she was a lesbian...

His confusion because she didn't read gay magazines...

What, I thought, does he want by way of evidence?

A full-scale act of lesbian love-making in the court room?

A facebook posting asking the same question came up with a few less dramatic suggestions

Like video evidence or checking her record collection –

Whilst my mind started thinking along the lines of stereotypes like doc martins, dungarees and spikey haircuts!

The assumption that we'll be visibly & markedly different because of what we wear or music we like

Mirrors the concerns with outward identity that have recently been seen in court cases brought by those asserting their right to wear particular religious symbols or dress...

Now I have no problem with the wearing of particular types of clothing – whether symbolising religious allegiance or LGBT identity –

After all I spend most of my life wearing a clerical shirt, sometimes with doc martins...

BUT what is at the heart of what makes us Christians and lesbian, gay, bisexual or transgendered...

Is not what we wear but who we are and who and how we love...

And it is that which is flagged up in Isaiah.... fasting does not lie in abstaining from food and wearing sack-cloth and ashes but in who we are and how we live in the light of God's grace and God's kingdom...

Isaiah makes clear what God calls us to...

Here it is made clear that living in the spirit and fulfilling the law

Does not take away disciplines like fasting... and the search for righteousness... or integrity

But challenges us to real fasting, fasting that is about opposing injustice,

Liberating those who are bound, about service and humanity and love

Fasting that is not about giving up food but giving food to those who are hungry and in need

Bringing covering to the naked... and bringing those who are homeless into their homes...

Removing the yoke – not only of the violent oppressor but also of those who 'point the finger' and 'speak of evil...'

Living the law by God's grace, in the light of God's kingdom and the God who calls us to love...

Is not about using the law to exclude... and condemn

Those who like shepherds are forced by their work and who they are to break the law

That our God is a God of love, of love that is not above law but part of the law, is made clear not only by Isaiah

But by God calling the shepherds to the infant Jesus in the manger at Bethlehem

So this understanding of fasting... this kingdom vision in Isaiah

Is hope for those of us who are lesbian, gay, bisexual or transgendered and for all those whom some in our churches and wider society

Would wish to exclude from church and God's grace

Yet whilst Isaiah is hope for *us*, it is hope for lots of others also

It might be quite comfortable for us to sit here and think, 'Yes, this Jesus is for us... we're the excluded and he comes to save people like us...'

And so He is and so we are called and chosen and saved by Him, in God's grace

And yet, it would be so easy for us to feel complacent about this...

We're persecuted and excluded and silenced and so all we have to do is to glory in his saving us from that yoke and oppression...

BUT he also calls us to be Christians & that means not only to glory in our salvation

But also to remember and be in solidarity with all the others for whom the law is interpreted in ways that exclude and yoke and burden

All the others in need or hungry or homeless

Which means that we need to stand in solidarity with – not judgement over - all those in our society who are suffering...

The other thing that was happening last weekend as I was beginning to mull over this sermon was that students and teachers and others were protesting again

Protesting against the education cuts – the increases in fees – and all the other cuts likely to be seen in the next few months

And let's not under-estimate what that will mean for some families – it will not only be the loss of one job but entire livelihoods within a family...

It is likely to mean the loss of services, particularly for those in the most vulnerable sections of our society

So last Saturday I went and joined the protest in Manchester which processed down Oxford Road and then stood in the cold for speeches in Platt Fields Park

And there we stood – against the sky line of the local church known as Holy Trinity Platt...

Yet despite the church in the background there was no obvious Christian presence there

The Church needs to be there... with young people facing very uncertain futures, whether they are trying to study or looking for a job...

With those in all parts of our public services who are facing the loss of their jobs

With those whose homes are at risk because of losing their jobs

With those who have already lost their homes because of unemployment or illness

AND with those who are asylum seekers – whether Christian or gay or whatever the grounds of their claim for refuge - who are getting the backlash of the fears that there's not enough to go round

For what Isaiah and Christ and God call us to....

Is to illuminate and challenge injustice.... wherever it falls...

Rather than the current obsession with policing the boundaries of sexual morality... about which Christ said very little indeed.

And it is in this that we as LGBT Christians need to be salt and light to the world

Flagging up in our very bodies and orientation and being that God does love and call gay Christians too to be disciples – as fully rounded, fully human disciples

Not stereotypes whose sexuality is discerned by reading particular magazines or wearing doc martins or listening to stereotyped music...

And it is in our commitment and solidarity with all who seek the kingdom that we are Christians...

And called to be light to the world...

And I'd like to finish with an image of how that light might look,

Which struck me as I was cycling home up the Bury Road the other evening.

To the left of the road – which is goes uphill at this point

The ground slopes sharply away to the Irwell Valley –

And down through the silhouetted trees shone a ribbon of river at the bottom

And through the trees – against what was still a fairly bright afternoon

Shone a bright, intense winter sun...

And there it was – light – in all sorts of colours, intensities, sparkles and glints

And perhaps that is an image you can take away with you

To remind you of the hope that is God's call to you

And in working out what it means to be the light he has created you to be...

AND on a practical note I would also remind you

That Brenda Namigadde's case returns to court on Monday 7<sup>th</sup> Feb –

She still has to prove she's a lesbian... despite clear statements from David Bahati, sponsor of the Ugandan bill to bring in the death penalty for homosexuality, that unless she renounces her lesbianism she will go to jail...

She will need our prayers and solidarity

And on Saturday 26<sup>th</sup> March there will be another rally of the Coalition of Resistance... protesting the injustice of cuts that will be borne by those at the bottom of the pile and beyond the pale

Whilst the bankers behind much of the financial crisis continue to pay themselves bonuses....

Christians are called also to protest such injustice...