

Bishop Gene Robinson speaking at the Greenbelt Festival

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In 2003 Gene Robinson was elected as the first openly gay, non-celibate Bishop to the Episcopal Church in the United States – the Anglican Church in America.

He has been in a committed relationship with his partner for over 21 years, and they plan to get married in 2010 when gay marriage is legalised in the state of New Hampshire, where Gene is Bishop.

I had the privilege of hearing him speak at this year's Greenbelt Christian Festival near Cheltenham.

Over the course of the festival Bishop Gene spoke on three occasions to a packed-out auditorium, receiving standing ovations and jubilant applause each time. I would like to share with you here some of the sentiments he expressed, which particularly touched my heart.

In his talk on 'Sexuality and Spirituality' Gene raised the point that it is not only gay people who have a sexuality, but straight people too! He argued the point that as humans we are sexual beings and that our sexuality informs our spirituality and vice versa. He argued against the dominant cultural discourse, which is reiterated throughout the writings of St Paul, that 'the flesh is sinful' and 'the spirit is pure'. Further he highlighted the common adage which has emerged as a result of this discourse: 'sex is dirty – save it for someone you love' – an oxymoron which presupposes that sex, which hitherto whilst growing up we are told is bad, should suddenly become something good the moment we get married! Bishop Gene emphasised the point that God became 'in-carn-ate' in the form of Jesus – that God became flesh – and that to be flesh is to be sexual. He made the point that how and with whom Jesus experienced his sexuality is unknown to us, but that to deny that Jesus was sexual is to deny that God became fully human in the form of Jesus.

Gene talked about sex between two people – be they of the same or of opposite genders – as taking a risk. To be intimate with another person in a sexual way is to make yourself vulnerable to that person. To say to another person 'I love you' and await their reply, is a pretty scary thing to do – but in making ourselves vulnerable to one another in this way, we can learn to be good stewards of each other's vulnerability. Just as God gave his people the free will to choose whether to love him back or not, we can discover how we are made in the image of God in the way that we steward each other's vulnerability in the act of love making. For this reason Gene argues for committed relationships, whether married or not, because the risk we take in making ourselves vulnerable during sex, needs to be supported by the foundation of a loving committed relationship. He added that if heterosexuals need help in coming to terms with their own sexuality, then just ask gay people – their sexuality has been under intense scrutiny by the world for decades!

In another of his talks Bishop Gene sought to unpack what he refers to as the seven biblical 'texts of terror' for gay, lesbian, bisexual and transgendered people. While not attempting to argue that these texts say anything positive about homosexuality as we understand it today, he demonstrated that none of these texts actually refer to our modern concept of an equal same-sex committed relationship, because such a concept didn't exist in biblical times. Rather these texts refer to homosexual rape, threats to patriarchal hegemony and the spilling of seed. Gene reminded us that in biblical times male sperm was thought to contain all the components necessary for the creation of new life, and therefore to use it for practices other than procreation was considered sacrilegious. Of course we now know that male sperm contains only half the components necessary to create new life. Gene also pointed out that the Levitical Code, which contains some of the perceived prohibitions against homosexuality, also contains many other prohibitions, for example, not to wear two types of cloth interwoven, which we do not adhere to today. His argument was that the Levitical Holiness Code was culturally specific to the situation of the Israelites wandering through the desert, exposed to the practices of many idol-worshipping peoples. He further states that similarly to the way in which we have learnt not to oppress women, as is proscribed in many biblical texts, now it is time to cast off the tradition of the oppression of homosexuals. Gene argued that the church should be taking a lead on this, rather than lagging behind society. He also noted that Jesus never said anything condemnatory against gay people.

You can download Bishop Gene's talks or purchase them as CDs from
<http://www.greenbelt.org.uk/shop/talks/years/2009>