

**Closer Than Kissing**  
**Epiphany 2, Year B**  
**18 January 2009**

The City of Corinth, like the city of Christchurch, had a highly visible prostitution presence. The difference was that, whereas prostitution here is for quick money, often to feed a drug habit, in Corinth it had religious overtones. The priestesses of the Temple of Aphrodite were also Temple prostitutes who, as they plied their trade on the streets, saw this as a service to and a connection point with their God.

No wonder Paul is keen to discourage any Christian participation in this divinization of sex. The Corinthian Christians are recent converts who are still learning the ABC of Christian behaviour. Paul has got the message across to them that they don't have to keep the Jewish law in all its severity, but the trouble is that they are struggling to find a new moral compass to steer by. All too often they fall back on the norms of the cheerful pagan immorality that they grew up with. The Roman world was full of religious cults that had impressive initiation ceremonies, engaging shrine rituals, and few moral demands. Time and again Paul has to stress that being a Christian requires big life style changes. This includes the sexual behaviour of Christians. In the end the early Church took all this on board, and Christians came to be recognised for their self-control in sexual matters.

What is different about our situation is that Christian norms of sexual behaviour have been undergoing a subtle, undermining influence from a powerful wave of cultural change called the sexual revolution. Since the 1920's there has been a steady

shift in what has been considered the norms of sexual behaviour towards an ethos of sexual freedom. Now, whenever we watch a film, or a television programme, or read a novel about relationships between men and women the chances are that these will be telling a story about attraction turning to explicit sexual behaviour very early on. The subtle and insistent message of all these opinion-shaping stories is that unless you are sexually active, and unless you are enjoying a sexually fulfilled lifestyle, you are not really alive at all.

This in turn has changed the courtship rituals and mating patterns in our society. When a couple start going out together and decide that they like the look of each other, the chances are that they will end up in bed. Sometimes it doesn't even take that long. In the Australian film "The Bank" a couple on first meeting are tearing the clothes off each other when the man says, "Shouldn't we take time to get to know each other," to which the woman replies, "But supposing we don't like each other."

The next stage in a continuing sexual relationship is usually that a couple move in together. This often happens quite quickly, and couples often live together for quite a while, sometimes even having children by one another, before they even think about marriage. Cohabitation rates are very high in our society, challenging to some extent marriage as the preferred being together option.

All of this has downwind consequences for the Church. The majority of couples coming to be married in Church now have been living together for some time. And we have instances of couples in their 40's, 50's and 60's, who have usually exited a

first marriage, and who now openly live together while attending a church of their choice, and who don't expect to be challenged about this. Let me make it clear – cohabitation is not an acceptable way for practising Christians to live. I will be getting to the spoilsport reasons why that is soon.

In fact the big challenge for observant Christians now is to honestly ask themselves to what extent their lifestyle is any different to their pagan neighbours when it comes to their sexual behaviour. I suspect that often it isn't – that the underlying attitudes and behaviour patterns I have just described are those also of the people of God – and that is odd, and compromises our witness and our mission. What is more Christian leaders are often reluctant to say anything about any of this, particularly in churches like ours that think of themselves as being tolerant and inclusive. In fact I would be prepared to bet that most clergy this Sunday will pass over the Corinthians reading in silence, and will gratefully hurry on to the calling of Samuel as their sermon topic.

Why then does God through his Church call on us to live a distinctively different life style to our unbelieving neighbours – and to exercise self-control in our sexual behaviour? At one level these are practical rules by which God seeks to protect us from our own unmaking, from the unhappiness that results from disastrous relationships. If we start going out with somebody new, and jump into bed with them at an early stage, and that side of the relationship turns out to be a success, then we tend to have star dust in our eyes in the way we look at that person, and we can't see them straight anymore. In such a state of enchantment we stop asking the important questions that might lead us to discover

who we are actually dealing with, and whether we are truly suited to one another – questions like, could I be on a desert island with this person and not get bored by their company, and, could I introduce this person to my friends and family without embarrassment. If we remain in this state of blissful ignorance for too long we can end up living with, or married to, a person, who when the sexual enchantment wears off, turns out to be someone that we have little or nothing in common with.

Alternatively it may be, as it so often is, that a relationship that has been sexualised early ends, as mutual discovery turns to mutual disappointment. In such a case the hurt is all the greater because you can't handle a person's body intimately and tenderly without becoming attached to them to some extent. Those who remain chaste in their courting will still suffer heartache when a relationship ends, but not nearly as much, and they will be less tempted to re-enter a relationship they know is going nowhere because they can't bear to be without the love drug.

Aha, our secular neighbours might want to interject at this point – all of this assumes that our courtship patterns are always about forming long term relationships, but the truth is that often couples just hook up briefly for the purpose of having some sexual fun on a here and now basis. To which God would want to reply that if sex is downgraded to simply a recreational activity that is about as significant as having a game of squash with someone then it becomes trivialised to the point where it loses any intimacy making significance, and will in the end become dull. Those who live like this end up experiencing a kind of inner deadening.

Something dies within them. As a journalist, my sister ends up reporting on some pretty bizarre gatherings. One of them was the annual sex festival when it was Palmerston North's turn to host it. Meeting some of the people at the centre of our nation's sex industry she observed that, "Those who live too close to the erotic flame for too long go dead behind the eyes."

But God's rules for relational health aren't just about the pragmatic avoiding of emotional pain. They touch on the deepest theological points about who we are, and about what we are intended for. God takes our embodied status very seriously indeed. We will be resurrected as a transformed, glorified body, so what we do with our bodies now is of considerable long-term significance. And when we gather here this morning we become his collective embodied presence in Avonside. So close is that association of our bodies with him as the body of Christ in the world that the intimate associations we form raise or lower the tone of the way his body is present in the world.

The relational destiny that God has in mind for many men and women is that of Christian marriage. Out of all the attachment relationships in the world God has chosen this one as the most significant one through which to disclose his love in the world. When a couple invite God into their relationship as they make their vows to one another and to him in church, they thereby make it possible for God to flow through the emotional and relational energy of their life together in such a way that in a hundred small ways they make God present in the world. In a wedding ceremony a couple make promises to each other that they spend the rest of their lives growing into. These promises provide the security

within which the couple can become what they said they would be for each other.

That is the problem with living together. The lets take someone for a road test philosophy doesn't work because when you don't venture much of yourself then what happens is that the relationship doesn't get a chance to grow under the ideal conditions that only commitment provides. In fact living together is a vote of no confidence in the other person, and in the future of committed relationships. In an article in the London Tablet a few years back entitled, "Shacking up and copping out," the author pointed that out that longitudinal studies in Britain have shown that couples who lived together before marriage are more likely to divorce than those who didn't.

Yet the deepest issue in all this revolves around what we consider intimacy to be, and here I think God is trying to lead us into a truth that we have yet to discover. I have called this sermon, "Closer than kissing," a quote I think from St Ephrem the Syrian. The point I assume of romantic relationships, of sexual relationships, of being married to someone, is to come to know them in a tender, satisfying, rewarding relationship at some depth. Sex I assume is a medium, but not the only one, through which we express our union with someone, our feelings of closeness. But what does it mean to be close to someone, to have an intimate relationship with them?

Different ages and different cultures have had different answers to that? In the traditional societies we emerged from marriage was seen as a uniting of two families to their mutual advantage, and as the successful carrying out of well understood roles – I

am the breadwinner and you are the homemaker. Now the point of marriage is seen as being the emotional goods that flow from it, the interpersonal satisfaction and happiness that it generates. We have rather overdone that side of things, to the point where Christians in the third world are reminding us that marriage is also about the wider dimension of couples contributing to their family life and to their society. Without that, intimate relationships tend to become somewhat stifling and claustrophobic. What will happen next, hopefully, is that out of this conversation between the different cultural zones of our Church will emerge a deeper understanding of the good things that God intends for us in our bonding relationships. If that happens then we will be well on the way to resolving the anguished debates we are currently experiencing around human sexuality.

My final point is one that St Paul I suspect would want me to emphasise. Those who engage in sexually irresponsible behaviour distance themselves from God. When we live like that God draws back from us, becomes a distant reality. One of the names of God is Holy Spirit, meaning that he is a source of moral renewal in human lives. This is one of the most important ways he contributes to human flourishing. We need to be holy to see the Lord, to be close to him, and that can't happen if we are narcotically infatuated with that powerful dimension of human experience that we call sexuality. If we want to be intimate with God then we need to love our fellow human beings wisely and well.