**1 Corinthians 6.9b-20**

*Do not be deceived: neither the sexually immoral nor idolaters nor adulterers nor men who have sex with men[*[*a*](https://www.biblegateway.com/passage/?search=1%20Corinthians%206&version=NIVUK#fen-NIVUK-28477a)*]****10****nor thieves nor the greedy nor drunkards nor slanderers nor swindlers will inherit the kingdom of God.****11****And that is what some of you were. But you were washed, you were sanctified, you were justified in the name of the Lord Jesus Christ and by the Spirit of our God.*

***12****‘I have the right to do anything,’ you say – but not everything is beneficial. ‘I have the right to do anything’– but I will not be mastered by anything.****13****You say, ‘Food for the stomach and the stomach for food, and God will destroy them both.’ The body, however, is not meant for sexual immorality but for the Lord, and the Lord for the body.****14****By his power God raised the Lord from the dead, and he will raise us also.****15****Do you not know that your bodies are members of Christ himself? Shall I then take the members of Christ and unite them with a prostitute? Never!****16****Do you not know that he who unites himself with a prostitute is one with her in body? For it is said, ‘The two will become one flesh.’[*[*b*](https://www.biblegateway.com/passage/?search=1%20Corinthians%206&version=NIVUK#fen-NIVUK-28484b)*]****17****But whoever is united with the Lord is one with him in spirit.[*[*c*](https://www.biblegateway.com/passage/?search=1%20Corinthians%206&version=NIVUK#fen-NIVUK-28485c)*]*

***18****Flee from sexual immorality. All other sins a person commits are outside the body, but whoever sins sexually, sins against their own body.****19****Do you not know that your bodies are temples of the Holy Spirit, who is in you, whom you have received from God? You are not your own;****20****you were bought at a price. Therefore honour God with your bodies.*

Just because I’m in a pulpit doesn’t mean I’m six foot above contradiction. I may have had the advantage of being trained and given time to understand scripture and have a library of resources to help me but our tradition says it is each person’ responsibility to listen for how God may be speaking to them. Prayerfully under God I will offer what I sincerely believe is a understanding of the Bible.

Because you see, the Bible has to be interpreted. The New Testament was written in ancient Greek. The words it uses are often difficult to translate and know their meaning. It was written 2000 years ago in a different culture and context so what may be the plain reading of the text may be anything but the plain reading of the text, because we read the text with 21st century western ideas.

When people say they are just doing what the bible says they will be selective. The Bible says you shouldn’t eat shellfish. You shouldn’t have a mortgage. You should not get divorced. You should have tassels sown in the corner of your garments. I could go on.

So you have made an interpretation of what you selectively take from the bible and what you overlook.

Often you have had authority figures in the past who have influenced you in your interpretation of the Bible – old pastors, Sunday school teachers, parents, Uncle Tom Cobbly and increasingly some American on the internet. What happens is people grow up or start reading or start travelling or go to university and mix with people outside of their tribe and discover things aren’t how they were told. And they can feel like it is a betrayal.

Whenever I meet angry or bruised former religious folks who talk about being burned by the church or disillusioned with Christianity or done with the Bible I want to know about their past, who they trusted and what happened, because these issues of authority are relational realities. Can you trust those authorities.

The URC says the Bible is the highest authority for what we believe and how we should act, discerned under the guidance of the Holy Spirit. The Bible has authority because it recalls the works of God, the progressive revelation of the character of God – supremely in the coming of Jesus, (Christmas is coming folks) , the word made flesh – God in human form, and how the human writers of scripture tried to come to terms with that and what it means for our living, our hope, our concepts of justice and peace and the meaning of life and the hope for after death.

That’s why we give it the highest authority, but not the only authority – there an awful lot the bible doesn’t tell us – and the expansion of human knowledge and science is invaluable to help us today.

The Bible is our highest authority but that doesn’t mean we blindly accept it – it means we think about it and interpret it and wrestle with it and discuss it and challenge it!. And in all that we hope we can hear the word of God to us today not two thousand years ago.

Two pressing big questions are bearing down on us as a church and as a society. Our MPs will vote on the first reading of the Assisted Dying Bill on November 29th. It will be a massive shift in the emphasis of the law and of health care. From a right to life, where all life is precious, to a right to die where we start to consider that not all life is precious, and some lives need to end.

We, as a church, have to make a decision at our church meeting next Sunday (24th Nov) about whether we want to be registered for same sex marriage ceremonies. Do we vote ‘yes’ - in which case we take a new turn in our understanding of marriage, after 2000 years of church history. This would put us at odds with many of our Christian brothers and sisters in other churches who may well denounce us as being unbiblical and capitulating to the spirit of the age. Or do we vote ‘no’, but then have to justify why we wish to discriminate against a section of society and not treat them as equals. It’s a big decision for us that has ramifications on so many levels and to so many people.

So I chose this passage from Paul’s letter to the Corinthians to comment on a few verses.

Paul is writing to a church in a cosmopolitan city – Corinth was an important trading centre and port in Greece and had a large transient population. He is addressing all sorts of issues in this early church about what it means to be a Christian, to be a follower of Jesus and how that should have an effect on your behaviour and outlook.

*But you were washed, you were sanctified, you were justified in the name of the Lord Jesus Christ and by the Spirit of our God.*

In this chapter he looks at how it should influence your sexual behaviour and what you do with your body. He picks up on a number of slogans and maxims around in the day and which have echoes of slogans and maxims in our own time that tell us how we should behave and act.

If you are a responsible biblical interpreter you will want to ask questions about the culture and context of the day. We know more now about the culture and context of the biblical writings that at any other time in history apart from when they were actually written. That is not an arrogant claim it is a factual claim because of the extensive accumulation of research and academic study and the joining up and access to it through the internet age. If you have biblical commentaries written in the last century (that’s the 20th century) my advice would be to treat them with caution.

From what we now know the Roman world saw sexuality differently from the current western world. There were no categories of ‘heterosexual’ or ‘homosexual’ as specific separate orientations. The main categories revolved around practice: who was the dominant active partner in an encounter and who was the submissive passive partner. What mattered was your status and power not your gender.

For a freeborn man to maintain his high status and honour, he would have to act as the dominant active partner in any encounter. In contrast, a woman who had lower status in that society, was expected to be the submissive passive partner.

This basic pattern carried into a wide range of sexual encounters for example, a freeborn male could also have intercourse with boys (roughly speaking, from age ten until when a beard first started to appear), enslaved people of either sex because they had no honour and no rights; and prostitutes whether male or female (because again prostitutes had no honour). Sleeping with someone else’s freeborn wife or daughter was not acceptable, because that violated honour. Since enslaved people and prostitutes had no honour to violate, intercourse with people in either category was not classed as adultery and tolerated.

So, for example in the ancient ruins of Ephesus there is magnificent library. Next to the library is the main brothel. A married man might leave the library, have sex with a prostitute, return home and retire for the night with his wife. In so doing all of this he would not have incurred any particular shame or notoriety. It was just part of the social landscape. ‘Men being men’. Men doing what comes naturally. ‘It’s only sex’. Some of today’s slogans were yesterday’s slogans.

So pervasive was this attitude that in the first few centuries church leaders had a difficult time persuading their congregations that this was not honouring to the Lord. Hence this passage in Paul’s letter to the Corinthians.

 *Do you not know that your bodies are members of Christ himself? Shall I then take the members of Christ and unite them with a prostitute? Never!*

Men in the church argued back that it was both legal and provided a natural outlet for their sexual urge. Salvinas a fifth century bishop, described Roman attitudes in just four words: forbidding adulteries, building brothels.

Slavery was accepted but was wicked. If you were a slave you were you’re owners property. He owns you just like nowadays we might own cars, dishwashers. He can use you as he sees fit. He has power over life and death. Your master decides he has sexual urges that need fulfilling. You are to hand; he decides to use you. There is no issue of consent, because you are his property. If you try to fight back, or rebel against him, he can decide to have you killed – the common way at the time for those who had rebelled against their masters was crucifixion.

Masters used and abused those they enslaved as they saw fit. There was even specific terms for enslaved boys that were to be used sexually.

The more men exercised their power and dominance the more they were seen as real men. This was the cult of machoness. Still around today.

So Paul, from his Jewish background and now a follower of Jesus speaks into that culture. He comes up with what is termed a vice list - a list of what is acceptable and not acceptable behavior for a Christian.

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The word for sexually immoral is the Greek word pornoi – its where we get the word pornography from. In tits time it particularly suggested the use of prostitutes but it was also broadening to mean excessive lust, or even lechery. There is a difference between love and lust and Paul is challenging those in Corinth not to led by their selfish passions, indulging their sexual urges and saying this is not honouring to God. This is not loving when the sex is about your needs, your lusts. This is not honouring your body to God.

I could speak for hours on this passage but I need to cut to the chase.

Men having sex with men has been used as a clobber text to argue that homosexual practice and by extension same sex marriage is wrong and outside the acceptable behavior of followers of Christ.

In the Greek the words are malakoi and arsenokoitai.

ESV version of the Bible it is translated ‘men who practice homosexuality’

The King James Version has ‘effeminate’ and abusers of themselves with mankind’.

The Good News Version of the Bible says homosexual perverts  (not so Good News for those who are gay)

The NRSV has male prostitutes, sodomites

This is a problem for those who hold to Biblical inerrancy. Which version of the Bible is without error?

Malakoi literally means soft. If you call a person soft you are saying something about their character; that they are weak. In the patriarchal society of Paul’s time to be seen as weak, or effeminate meant others saw you as weaker, passive, submissive or more swayed by your passions and unable to control your lusts and urges.

Arsenokoitai is a unique word and Paul’s use of it is the first we have in ancient Greek writing. A lot of translators translate it as literally ‘a male bedder’.

In the Greco Roman world of Paul’s time, overwhelmingly the most common form of bedding males was the violation of male slaves and boys – boys who were usually enslaved or prostitutes or both. I could give you pages of references on this and Carole could hand you her 10.000 word dissertation on the matter.

It refers to humiliating, non consensual, degrading sex, treating other people as objects to be used and abused for the selfish gratification of you own desires and lusts. Thank God Paul called that out. Thank God those condemnations are in scripture.

But that is a million miles away from committed faithful loving relationships between two people which is what we need to consider in the same sex marriage discussion next week.

I would say that any translation that uses the word ‘homosexual’ is misleading. The word suggests an orientation, that the person will generally only find people of the same sex attractive. As I said earlier this is not the way sexuality was constructed in the Roman world at the time of the writing of the New Testament. What was considered important then was whether you were the active dominant party or the passive submissive party.

Looking at 1 Corinthians Paul is bringing a revolutionary ethic about treating everyone with respect, not using nor abusing anyone for their own selfish pleasures. He goes on in Chapter 7 to make what was then the radical claim that a woman had as much right as her husband to have her needs met in their relationship

*A man should fulfill his duty as a husband, and a woman should fulfill her duty as a wife, and each should satisfy the other's needs. 1 Cor 7 .3*

But this passage and all the other so-called clobber passages in the bible are, dare I say it, utterly different in their focus from that of two people wishing to form a faithful committed lifelong relationship.

It would be irresponsible of me, knowing what I know about the Bible, not to tell you that.

Read the paper Carole has put together and engage with the other issues and how our understanding of sexuality has changed and developed in society , our understanding of marriage and relationships, our reading of scripture.

How in just the last generation through science and in culture we accept that some people are attracted to people of the same sex. This is normal and natural not perverted or rebellious.

Our understanding of the sanctity of life is under revision too. The Assisted Dying Bill will give permission for people faced with six months to live, under strict safeguards to end their own life.

* *They must have the mental capacity to make the choice and be deemed to have expressed a clear, settled and informed wish, free from coercion or pressure*
* *They must make two separate declarations, witnessed and signed, about their wish to die*
* *Two independent doctors must be satisfied the person is eligible - and there must be at least seven days between the doctors’ assessments*
* *A High Court judge must hear from at least one of the doctors and can also question the dying person, or anyone else they consider appropriate. There must be a further 14 days after the judge has made the ruling*

*Under the bill, a doctor could prepare the substance, but the person themselves must take it.*

At the moment we believe we have a right to live. This bill would give us a right to die, albeit in very restricted circumstances.

Do we have a right to die?

The slogans being banded around are very catchy and very persuasive and tap into contemporary leanings towards freedom, autonomy, individualism. My body, my choice what I do over it. In this passage in Corinthians Paul quotes another similar slogan ‘***12****‘I have the right to do anything’*

We should be wary of popular slogans: think Make America Great Again, Brexit: Take back control. They don’t tell all the story. Free to choose when you die?

Well in our society we do limit personal choice already in many different ways. We do not assume that we have the right to do anything we want. As a trivial example I could drive down Kingshill Road at 70 miles an hour but it is illegal. It has been deemed by wider society that it would be dangerous for me to drive down Kingshill Road at 70 miles an hour and therefore whilst I can drive whatever car I want, my personal freedom is curtailed otherwise great harm could be done.

So don’t fall for this slogan- that its all a question of freedom of choice. It a question of how dangerous it would be to let someone legally kill themselves.

A change in the law to permit assisted dying would change the cultural air breathed by all of us, and affect attitudes to older people and those with chronic illness. It would risk a gradual erosion of values in which, over time, the cold calculation of costs of caring properly for the ill and the old would loom large. As a result, many who are ill or dying would feel a burden to others. The right to die would become a duty to die.

Imagine waiting for the doctor to say the magic words; ‘You have six months or less to live’. That is if doctors are now going to be confident enough to pronounce that judgement – its notoriously difficult to be accurate on how long someone has left to live.

But lets say the terminally ill person is living in a house worth half a million pounds and they have three children all hoping for their inheritance. And the terminally ill person doesn’t want to be a burden, doesn’t want all their money to be lost in care costs and wants it to be passed on to the children. But what if at least one of the children disagrees with their decision to end their life - because siblings do disagree don’t they? Now your final days are engulfed in a legal wrangle not in preparing for your death.

 I have a friend who is a lawyer who is rubbing his hands with glee at the money coming their way in possible legal cases if the assisted dying bill is passed. Not to mention who will pay for two doctors and High Court Judge to make a decision. You think paying for the funeral will be a big bill. You ain’t seen nothing yet.

People say we put animals out of their misery why can’t we do that for humans. Because humans aren’t animals. They can communicate their wishes. They have relatives, they have assets. Its incredibly sad and tragic to see how some people die. I can’t be flippant. I’ve been at the death bed of many a person. My own father writhed in agony for many a day before he died. The nurse said we could up his morphine but it would hasten his departure. We said do it.

We recognise that some palliative treatment for the terminally ill, makes the patient more comfortable and pain free, but can also hasten death. We think this to be acceptable, as long as the primary purpose of the treatment is pain relief and comfort of the patient.

We need to support palliative care more and the great work of the hospices. Thursday was the first anniversary of the death of my brother. His last days were in a hospice and it was tremendous care both he and we received during that time. And of course if our political parties had got a grip on the issue of social care and we as an electorate stopped colluding with their avoidance of the issue – because no one wants to pay for it - then maybe we wouldn’t be having this debate about bumping people off before their time.

Those final months can be a precious spiritual time – of letting go, putting right, asking for forgiveness and seeking peace, seeking peace with God. All now potentially cut short because we can’t do emotion, haven’t got the time, don’t want to bear the cost, can’t stand the suffering or the indignity. And it is a huge spiritual challenge – about control and dignity. We are in a culture that despises being dependent. I’d rather die than have some one else wipe my backside. Receiving loving care in our suffering is a huge spiritual challenge.

We had no choice about when and where and how we were born and brought up. We want to try and control how we leave. But we have no control over what happens after we die. And if you are convinced there is no God then I admire your faith. You’re the one taking the risk.

Paul in his letter to the Corinthians says

*Do you not know that your bodies are temples of the Holy Spirit, who is in you, whom you have received from God? You are not your own;****20****you were bought at a price. Therefore honour God with your bodies.*

You see you can’t do whatever you want with your body - because its not yours ultimately according to scripture. You have it on loan. Of course we have to take responsibility for our own actions in it. But we are bought at a price – we used those words last week on Remembrance Sunday when we remember that lives were sacrificed for our freedom. Paul reminds his readers that Jesus died for our freedom, our forgiveness, our hope that death is not the end, that God holds all life in God’s hands – it is not for us to give or take away.

As we come to two big decisions on Assisted Dying and Same Sex Marriage may we seek to honour God in all our decisions and our lives.