

*“Be compassionate as your heavenly Father is compassionate. Do not judge and you will not be judged yourselves; do not condemn and you will not be condemned.”*

Last week, prompted by the Bishops of England and Wales, I started talking about priesthood and vocation. But that gave me to thinking about gender and sexuality.

Just over half of the human race is female. And a substantial minority of the human race is homosexual. What are the implications for the Church, priesthood and vocation?

*The first **man**, Adam...being form the earth is earthly...the second **man** from heaven is a life-giving spirit.* Adam was a man, Jesus was a man. The twelve disciples were men. Bishops priests and deacons have been men ever since. Is there a fundamental here that needs preserving?

Jesus says in today’s gospel *“You will have a great reward and you will be **sons** of the Most High.”* Is it okay to translate that as **sons and daughters** of the Most High or as **children** of the Most High? ...or is there something fundamental to being sons? Is this just about the use of language or are there deep truths here that our 21<sup>st</sup> Century world still need to hear?

I’m afraid this is a homily of questions rather than answers, but questions are important and they need facing up to with honesty and openness. We can’t carry on just ignoring these issues. Nor must we try to close down the debate.

On one of his in-flight press conferences Pope Francis famously said, in relation to homosexuality, “Who am I to judge?” As Vicar of Christ and successor of St Peter one might have thought that he is precisely the one to judge. And maybe in a sense he has.

And then there is *Amoris Laetitia* where he famously opens up the possibility in certain circumstances of allowing Catholics in second marriages to receive Holy Communion. I think the general principle here is that the rightness and the wrongness of such an action cannot be drawn from some moral text book. The rightness and wrongness can only be drawn from the conscience – the conscience of the people concerned in dialogue with their pastors – a methodology that should arguable extend to all questions of sexuality and relationship.

This is not a free for all, anything goes. It’s about patient listening and accompaniment. Relationships in this life will always be a work in progress.

Back to women priests. The priest is an icon of Christ, a walking sacrament of Christ. Does that require a male member of the species to perform that particular role?

Jews, Christians, Muslims have traditionally thought of the husbands and fathers as the head of the family, the one who presides, the one who breaks the bread and pours the drinks. And is this a tradition we need to preserve, deeply counter-cultural though it may be?

I really agonise over all of this. Is the maleness of the priesthood a way of asserting power or is it at the service of the gospel? Is the Holy Spirit bidding us to listen to the winds of change, or is the Holy Spirit bidding us to hold fast to the tradition of the past?

To put it another way, what is the most compassionate? What kind of priesthood do we need in the world of today to model the compassion of God?

*“Be compassionate as your Father is compassionate. Do not judge, and you will not be judged yourselves, do not condemn, and you will not be condemned.”*

What we need is a priesthood that is compassion and love.

Fr Michael