

Hearing without Listening: The Eunuch and the Christian Church.

Commentary on the Intercessions and Meditation for the Transgender Day of Remembrance: November 20th 2017

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When Philip the Evangelist was on the road from Jerusalem to Gaza he met an Ethiopian eunuch. Philip had been to Jerusalem to worship and was returning home: (the story is in Acts 8:27). The eunuch was sitting in his chariot reading the Book of Isaiah, and had come to Isaiah 53:7-8.

*“He was oppressed and He was afflicted,
Yet He opened not His mouth;
He was led as a lamb to the slaughter,
And as a sheep before its shearers is silent,
So He opened not His mouth.
He was taken from prison and from judgment,
And who will declare His generation?
For He was cut off from the land of the living;
For the transgressions of My people He was stricken”.*

Philip asked the Ethiopian, "Do you understand what you are reading?" The eunuch said he did not, and he asked Philip to explain the text to him. Philip told him what it meant and the Ethiopian asked to be baptized.

So what did Philip understand the message of Jesus to be, and what would it have meant to the eunuch himself? The type of eunuch which is described in this passage and in Matthew 19:12 is a person that has long been viewed as a symbol of chastity and celibacy. First century Roman society took the opposite view. Every person who transgressed the severely enforced sex and gender boundaries in this socially and gender unequal society disrupted the good order it needed, and was made a scapegoat for sexual depravity that occurred. Roman society had strong codes of moral behaviour for its male and female citizens, but these did not apply to non-citizens. Responsibility was expected, but sexual abuse was rife. Any male Roman citizen could abuse another male of lesser status without legal penalty, and everyone who was not a citizen could be a target for that abuse. No high ranking official, including the Ethiopian eunuch was immune to the exclusions and condemnations this brought. Castration at that time was also considered to do much more than remove the reproductive organs: it created someone who was regarded as a member of a "third sex". These people were despised and were considered morally dubious and profligate because of the ways in which they transgressed the sex-gender boundaries, and their threat to the social structure of a male dominated society. Their loyalty was suspected because of what had been done to them. The higher the rank they were given; the greater was the perceived threat. Choosing a eunuch to be the symbolic messenger who took the Gospel to the world meant that the early Church was selecting someone who was a sexual outcast in society. More than that, this action also identified the Early Church with the actions of the Goddess Cults who were challenging the masculine domination and the abuses of male power in Roman society through the impact of their own self-castrated male priests and the gender disruption which their behaviour created.

If these gender disruptions were of no consequence to the early Church, they were also of no consequence to Jesus in Matthew 19:12 when he said: *“For there are eunuchs who have been so from birth, and there are eunuchs who have been made eunuchs by others, and there are eunuchs who have made themselves eunuchs for the sake of the kingdom of heaven. Let anyone accept this who can.”* It is of note that Jesus was expanding here on Isaiah 56:4-5 which says: *“For thus says the Lord: To the eunuchs who keep my Sabbaths, who choose the things that please me and hold fast my covenant, I will give, in my house and within my walls, a monument and a name better than sons and daughters; I will give them an everlasting name that*

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shall not be cut off". This Old Testament passage refers to those who were made eunuchs by the force of others. In the New Testament Jesus extends the same welcome to people who have voluntarily castrated themselves. In these societies a moral duality existed. A voluntary physical transformation was a mark of religious devotion, either circumcision in Judaism, or self-castration in the case of the Goddess Cults. However this statement in Matthew also means that such physical changes and gender non-conformities are of no consequence in lives which are lived in the love of Christ..... And that viewpoint is reflected in the Apostolic Decree issued by the early Church. There is little doubt about the authenticity of this text. The direct nature of the statement caused major difficulties for the Christian Church, and the present day idea that this passage simply refers to modes of behaviour was totally foreign to the first century world.

These first century attitudes must be compared with the doctrines of the present day Church which define homosexuality and, by extension, all forms of gender and sexually variant behaviour as disordered acts of grave depravity and lifestyle choices which can be diverted through the predations of others and are in pursuit of lust and immoral acts. Like the eunuch whose identity was forced upon him by the actions of others, the worldwide scientific consensus shows that gender and sexually variant people pursue a search for identity rather than delights of sex. The consequence of this is that a moral duality must exist; in which gender and sexually variant people who express their true attractions and identities in ways that conform to the highest moral standards of their own societies should be highly regarded while those who misuse these relationships ought to be very severely condemned for their acts. There is therefore a contradiction between the present day scientific consensus and the traditional teaching of the Church. To condemn every gender and sexually variant person for the abuses of some is akin to condemning all members of a minority community because some engage in terrorist acts and great harm has been done by the medical misdiagnoses which these doctrines have created.

What is important about these passages is that both Jesus and the early Church saw beyond the secular scapegoating which condemned every gender and sexually variant person who sought to express their true identity as disordered behaviour which disrupted the male and female stereotypes demanded by these gender and socially unequal societies. That understanding is totally absent in what today is regarded as the traditional teaching of the Christian Church, as exemplified in Article 2357 of the Catechism of the Roman Catholic Church, which condemns all forms of homosexual and by extension all forms of gender and sexually variant behaviour, regardless of purpose, as: *relationships between men or between women who experience an exclusive or predominant sexual attraction toward persons of the same sex. It has taken a great variety of forms through the centuries and in different cultures. Its psychological genesis remains largely unexplained. Basing itself on Sacred Scripture, which presents homosexual acts as acts of grave depravity, Tradition has always declared that "Homosexual acts are intrinsically disordered." They are contrary to the natural law. They close the sexual act to the gift of life. They do not proceed from a genuine affective and sexual complementarity. Under no circumstances can they be approved*". This has brought the Church to collude with the secular demands of a gender unequal society rather than to challenge them. It has also produced the contradictions between science and theology which create divisions in the present day Church. Not only has this consent reinforced the secular prejudices of such discriminatory societies; it gave and it still continues to give religious legitimacy to them. In many African countries extreme penalties against homosexual and transgender behaviour are being advocated or applied. In other parts of the world; and most notably in the United States at the present time Christian Churches are using this traditional to argue for legal permission to discriminate against gender and sexually variant people, and to deny transgender people the right to express or use public facilities in accordance with the gender identity that they know they possess.

A paradigm shift has therefore occurred in Christian teaching, where the first century condemnations of same-sex intercourse that were based on the abuses of power, purpose and hospitality in gender and socially unequal societies... which Jesus, John, Paul and the other disciples would have known... have been turned into the unvarying condemnation of the sexual act. In associated studies it is demonstrated that sexual morality in the first century was not primarily determined on a gendered basis. Instead the distinction was made between the between actions which fulfilled the noble pursuit of love, and those which sought the carnal abuse of sex. The abuses of secular power in these despotic gender and socially unequal societies of the first century also gave permission for the extreme abuses of sex and Paul's condemnations must be judged using these criteria and not those of the traditional teaching of the Church. By the time of the fourth century all references to the abuses of power had disappeared from Christian doctrine. Instead of a doctrine which could endorse same-sex relationships that were given in love it was assumed that all forms of same-sex relationships were invariably engaged in for the carnal abuse of sex.

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In the story of the Good Samaritan an equivalent need to step beyond this secular scapegoating by society is found. To the man who asked Jesus: *"Teacher, what good thing must I do to get eternal life?"* Jesus said: *"If you would be perfect, go, sell what you possess and give to the poor and you will have treasure in heaven; and come, follow me"*. There was no safety net for any generous giver and the Samaritan put himself in grave danger by stopping to give help to the Jew who was attacked. The scroll of the prophet Isaiah was given to Jesus when he went to the synagogue in Nazareth on a Sabbath day. He unrolled the scroll and found the place where it was written: *"The spirit of the Lord is upon me, because he has anointed me to bring good news to the poor. He has sent me to proclaim release to the captives and recovery of sight to the blind, to let the oppressed go free, to proclaim the year of the Lord's favour"*. Then he rolled up the scroll, gave it back to the attendant and sat down. When he began to speak he said, *"Today this scripture is fulfilled in your hearing"*. (Luke 4:16-21). Jesus also identified himself with the suffering servant of Isaiah 53:7-8. However it is in the triumph of the suffering servant the true message of the Gospel is found. As a sexual outcast, who was silenced by society, the role of the eunuch was also close to that of the suffering servant. When Philip explained the transformation of the Gospel message to him, it is hardly surprising that the eunuch asked to be baptised and went away content.

A major challenge and achievement of Christianity was its success in transferring the distinctive views of the minority Jewish religion into this dominant culture. However that transformation carried its own dangers. Jesus said: *"Blessed are you who are poor, for yours is the kingdom of God"* (Luke 6:20). In Matthew 23:1-12 Jesus condemned the Scribes and Pharisees for their behaviour as custodians of society and religious practice in severe and unequivocal terms. Quite correctly early Christianity vociferously attacked the sexual abuses in Roman society but, unlike the uncompromising condemnation of the Jewish specialists by Jesus, in the Epistles and Letters. Peter and Paul constantly emphasize the need for Christians to obey the authorities, and to conform to the behaviour expected of respectable Roman citizens. Christianity also had to quickly separate itself from the continuing social and gender disrupting behaviour of the Goddess cults in order to gain this respectability in Roman society. That transformed the teaching of Jesus and the early Church, which had recognised the moral duality in gender and sexually variant behaviour into a doctrine which enforced the gender complementarity and the male and female stereotypes which were demanded by this gender divided society. Instead of a Gospel message which had at first identified completely with the poor and social and sexual outcasts, as was presented in the story of the eunuch in Acts 8:27, and in the statement which Jesus made in Matthew 19:12, the Christian Church adapted itself to embrace the decorum which was demanded of its citizens by Roman society. It also condemned all departures from these stereotypes as disordered acts. In all cases there is no toleration of sexual abuse. This transformation leads to a challenging conclusion. From each of the scientific, theological and historical points of view it is demonstrated that the traditional teaching and doctrines of the Christian Church on gender and sexual variation are built on a false foundation. They do not correspond with the teaching of Jesus: they come instead from the need to gain the respectability expected of citizens in Roman society and to enforce the authority of the institution itself.

The final chapter of Luke's Gospel, (Luke 24) tells the story of two disciples of Jesus (Cleopas and one unnamed) who were walking from Jerusalem to Emmaus, on the day that Jesus rose from the dead. As they travelled, a man joined them and asked *"What is this conversation that you are holding with each other as you walk?"* They proceeded to tell the stranger of Jesus' crucifixion and the report of his empty tomb. In their despondency, the story of the suffering servant in Isaiah 53:7-8 must have been foremost in their minds. The man responded, *"How foolish you are, and how slow of heart to believe all that the prophets have spoken! Did not the Christ have to suffer these things and then enter his glory?"* Then beginning with Moses and all the Prophets, he explained to them what was said in all the Scriptures about Jesus himself. When they arrived in Emmaus that evening, the two disciples stopped to eat, and they asked the man to join them. He did, and as he broke the bread and blessed the meal, *"their eyes were opened"* and they recognized the risen Jesus, Jesus then vanished from sight. As a social and sexual outcast, who was despised and silenced by society, the role of the eunuch was close to that of the suffering servant. It is in the triumph of the suffering servant the true message of the Gospel is found. In this story the eunuch stands for the Church for the outcasts; and for Jesus himself. This is the same message that the risen Christ gave to the disciples on the road to Emmaus.

Christianity also had to grow from small beginnings and it is seen in the Letter to Philemon that the early Church sought to fulfil in full the radical nature of Christ's teaching within the Christian community, while accepting the need to conform to the social structure of society outside it. Change could not be instant. The authority to make these initial compromises appears to be given in the passage in Matthew 19:12: Its

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imperative structure, its close textual and contextual relationship to marriage, and the immediate declaration where Jesus says: *"He that is able to receive it let him receive it"* caused major difficulties for the Christian Church. It has already been noted that there is little doubt about the authenticity of this text. Equivalent qualifications are found in the Gospel of Thomas. They were needed for the Church to survive and take the Gospel message to the world. If these initial concessions were essential for a powerless group in a powerful first century Roman Society, they no longer apply. Therefore it is now time to follow in full the commandments of Jesus, and restore the radical teaching of Jesus on gender and sex to the present day Church.

For as long as the Christian Church was able to dominate the social structures and the moral values of society, these traditional doctrines which condemn all gender and sexually variant behaviour could not be challenged. The changes in present day society mean that this control has now been broken. The decriminalisation of homosexuality in the 1960s and the subsequent anti-discrimination legislation on a world-wide basis means that for the first time in at least 1000 years people are able to see the full range of experience in gender and sexually variant behaviour and assess, for themselves, the moral duality that exists. Despite its acknowledgement that the origins of these conditions has not historically been well understood: despite the mass of experiential evidence that is now available, the results of this author's research, the everyday experience of many people, who can now see for themselves the genuineness of transgender identities and intensity of love and commitment that can be fulfilled in same-sex partnerships, it is the continued refusal of the Church of England, the Anglican Communion and the Catholic and Orthodox Churches in particular to consider even the possibility of change to their traditional doctrines on gender and sexuality, which is destroying the credibility of Christianity and the Church in the present day world

If these humiliations are to come to a better resolution there must be no cover-up, and no holding back. Yet despite this collusion with the secular scapegoating by society and the other abuses and concerns, there is little evidence that many Churches are willing to move sufficiently on these matters. For as long as any Christian church continues to proclaim a doctrine which medically misdiagnoses how gender and sexual identities develop and excludes any consideration of the relationships between power, gender and sex from its remit, the abuses and discrimination against gender and sexually variant people will continue to take place. The 2017 report of the Church England "Bishop's Reflection Group on Sexuality" confined any future consideration to that of: "Interpreting the existing law and guidance to permit maximum freedom within it, without changes to the law, or the doctrine of the Church". On the 16th February 2017 following the decision by the General Synod not to take note of the report of the Bishops Reflection Group the Archbishops of Canterbury and York wrote a letter to members of the Church of England which restated the same position. In the later paper: "Next Steps on Human Sexuality" also written by the Archbishops of Canterbury and York, and which was presented to the General of the Church of England on the 7th July 2017, the same constraints were again applied. Pope Francis has repeatedly stated that there can be no possibility of change to the traditional teaching of the Catholic Church.

Far too often the Christian Church has put theology before science and its own traditions before the Gospel message. The condemnations which Jesus applied to the Scribes and Pharisees of his own day for their imposition of religious doctrine were complete and extreme. For Jesus, the true bearers of the Gospel message are to be found in the poor, the outcast, the Samaritan, the Eunuch, the captive and the oppressed. Through the role of Jesus as the suffering servant, the Gospel is revealed. In the story of Philip and the Eunuch, the Good Samaritan, the rich follower and the disciples on the road to Emmaus, this teaching has been heard, but is still not listened to.

In the present day that true voice of Jesus is more likely to be found amongst all people, transgender, transsexual, lesbian, gay, heterosexual and bisexual people who seek to express their own identities within roles that are true to themselves, and who attempt to live their lives in ways that fulfil the love of Christ. It is less likely to be heard inside the hierarchy or in the theology of an unheeding and unbending Church.

See <http://www.tgdr.co.uk/documents/000B-SG-SelectedPapers.pdf> for the supporting research

This commentary is also available online at: Gilchrist, Susan. (2017): "*Hearing without Listening: The Eunuch and the Christian Church*": <http://www.tgdr.co.uk/documents/013B-HearingWithoutListening.pdf>.

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