



Transcript of
The Inclusive Church Annual Lecture
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LGBT and Faith: Building Bridges in a Polarised World
Leicester Cathedral
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Notes:

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Faith and LGBT: Building Bridges in a Polarised World, 25th July 2018, Leicester Cathedral

Thank you very much for coming this evening. I'm surprised by the size of the audience, considering the beautiful weather and how lovely Leicester is, at this time anyway. As a Catholic, we don't usually get to stand in this position, so I always feel a little bit conflicted when I have to do presentations! When Simon asked me to speak- about a year ago actually- it seemed like something that it was very easy to say yes to, and as I was travelling up, I thought 'actually I'm not sure if I've got enough to tell you!' The reason why I doubt myself is because I'm not a theologian. I don't know my Greek translation of Leviticus and how it might conflict with the new translations of the second interpretation of ... yeah, I'm not that person. I'm not that person who can necessarily provide every biblical rationale for the acceptance of LGBT people in the Church. I'm a campaigner, I'm an activist, and I'm a Christian, and it's from that perspective that I will talk with you today. For those of you have heard me before, I will try and vary my [?] a little but there might be some repetition. The other thing I have to apologise for is that Simon emailed me a week or so ago and said, 'Can I have a copy of your lecture?' and I had to say no, because I don't write lectures. The reason I don't write lectures is because I'm very, very dyslexic, so reading stuff out is never something that works well for me. Also, I like to keep the Stonewall comms team on their feet- they're never quite sure what's going to happen! What I will say is please feel free to share anything on social media this evening, but if I do talk about my parents, would you not talk about that? They prefer not to read about my interpretation of their upbringing via the medium of Twitter, and I respect that as part of our relationship.

So tonight I'm going to be talking a little bit about my history and my faith within that, and my journey parallel to that with Stonewall, and as a campaigner, and where I think we are today, as a society, as communities, in a world which feels increasingly fractured and fracturing. What is the role, more broadly, for inclusive Christianity, and how can we play a role in that? ... of which, sexual orientation, gender identity, is an element of that, but it's an element of which we often become the canary in the coalmine for other dissatisfaction and division in our societies.

So, I was born in 1980 into a Catholic family- my parents and my extended family were very Catholic- in a way that was quite natural for me. I was brought up in Wales. Wales is not a big Catholic country, but that probably is why my parents went for it! We absolutely had a normal, Catholic upbringing. We went to our local school and we went to our local church, and we were very much part of the community. As a child, as with a lot of children brought up in the Christian faith, that was our normal. We had our first communion, we had baptisms, my cousins all came through the schools, and the school was an absolute place of safety and security and moral values- a moral heart. In my day, in the 1980s and 90s, we didn't talk about sex very much, we certainly didn't talk about sexual orientation- I'll talk a bit more about that in detail- but we did talk about love and respect and treating each other well.

When I reached 11/12, I of course started thinking about all sorts of matters of faith, but was a studious reader, and by the age of 11, I'd probably read the Bible twice in school. I didn't know long division, but we certainly knew our Bible at our school! And by the age of 11, what I had been struck by was of course the story of Ruth- every child in the world goes to their story- and the relationship between Ruth and Naomi, which I didn't then and I don't now interpret it as a same-sex relationship. What I do interpret it as is a woman who goes against convention, in doing what she believed to be right, when society was asking her to do something different. The loyalty that Ruth demonstrates to Naomi moves me now and it moved me then.

My brother is called Thomas, and my parents were very clear that the reason why they'd called him Thomas was because he was the one apostle when everybody was saying 'this is how it is' who said 'I don't believe you. It's not how it is.' You know, 'I do not accept that 9 of you have told me it's like this, and I'm just going to go along with that!' So my parents, although hugely respectful of God in the Catholic tradition and the Catholic faith- we believe in one Holy Catholic Church- were very clear that Ruth and Tom both did something quite different. So the narrative in our family was that Ruth and Tom had both done something quite different, and that was an important part. It was not incongruous with one's faith- it was absolutely in keeping with God's will that one should sometimes challenge the status quo and the authority around you.

When I was 12, I was beginning to realise that I was attracted to women- girls- but that didn't really have any impact on my faith whatsoever. What superseded that very big thought was the death of my aunt, at the age of 12. When I was 12, she was 32, died in childbirth, and had three little kids under the age of 5. And what happened at that key moment in an adolescent life is those children came to live with us, and we were part of this Catholic school and we were part of this Catholic community, so suddenly the church and the school wrapped itself around us. And the hymns and the Bible readings- all that stuff became profoundly important to me- and fancying girls didn't seem like a big deal! I certainly didn't question that that was a wrong thing or a bad thing- bearing in mind I was at school during section 28, so there was no mention whatsoever of homosexuality in schools in any context. At 14, I remember talking to my priest and saying 'Father, I think I'm attracted to girls not boys' and he said: 'The most important thing, kid, is to do your GCSEs, alright?' And we might in 2018 have more guidance as to what a priest should say in these given moments- and perhaps he should have said more- but actually that's kind of what I needed to hear! Get your head down, get on with your work, don't get too distracted... And I think that was an incredibly important moment for me, where I'd obviously wound myself up for two years that this might be a problem, but then actually it completely de-escalated.

And as I continued growing up, I studied English at A-Level and went on to study English at Oxford, and during all of that time- 13 to 18 – I was reading Julian of Norwich, C.S. Lewis, the Bible, and still that rich, Christian tradition stayed very much a part of my discourse and dialogue and thinking. And I think you can't really study English at Oxford... at Oxford you study everything from Beowulf to Virginia Woolf- anything past Virginia Woolf, which was from 1910/1915 was considered too modern for Oxford, and anything not British was considered too modern for Oxford! – you can't really get away from the influence of the Bible on English Literature from Beowulf to Virginia Woolf. I mean, you read Milton, you're reading the Bible, you read Blake, you're reading the Bible- all this stuff is integral.

When I did go to Oxford though, I went back into the closet. I didn't really

When I did go to Oxford though, I went back into the closet. I didn't really talk about my faith at all, mainly because when you go to university I think, especially when you go to Oxford, you kind of have to choose your tribe. I had very much chosen the gay tribe, and CathSoc was pretty hardcore at Oxford! So what I found myself doing is going to local parish churches. There was something quite comforting about going to family churches, rather than the hardcore, theological, Dominican monk university approach. I didn't feel I was Catholic enough to be allowed into that space. I didn't feel like I could hold my own in that space, and I was also very 'out', you know. I was President of my college and President of the Student Union and very 'out'. I think I just closeted that bit, because it wasn't really something to talk about.

I think when I left university- from 21 to 25- I lost God a bit, and I remember feeling incredibly angry that the organised church and organised religion continued to say nothing about me. I think that the Catholic Church speaks great volumes about gay men, and barely recognises trans people, and lesbians just don't exist. And that was about me understanding female sexuality and about the role of women in the church. I remember behaving in a way which was unbecoming for a Catholic girl I think, and feeling deeply sad, and thinking 'I can't believe God has forsaken me. Why would God leave me?' and having quite a profound realisation that He hadn't left- I'd left Him. But it came at a time when I thought that if I was going to be hung for being gay, I might as well do as much gay stuff as I can! To hell with the consequences- and the feelings of my partner! – if you're going to do it, let's do it! It took me maturing for me to realise that that was deeply uncomfortable for *me* and that that was undermining *my* values and *my* integrity, and that's actually what my faith comes from. So I've given you a whistle-stop tour into something which has obviously taken years of therapy to unpick! It was really important moment for me.

I joined Stonewall when I was 25, so the two things coincided, and Stonewall in 2005 was quite an interesting organisation. In those days, we were 25 staff, and a turnover of about 1.7 million. Stonewall doesn't take any government funds at all, mainly because they were never offered. In 2018, we're probably closing in on about 8 million, and we've got 140 staff, so that gives you an idea of how much the organisation has grown and changed. When I took over in 2014 as CEO, we were about half that size, so it's been growing and growing. In 2005, my predecessor- a guy called Ben Summerskill- Stonewall was relentlessly pursuing what I would describe as an assimilation agenda. It was an agenda where we were 'as good as you'. Every establishment, every institution we talked to, we were about making them feel better about the gay thing, whether that was politicians, whether it was employers, schools- it was all about presenting a very nice, neat idea of gay- I use the word gay purposefully- Stonewall wasn't trans-inclusive in those days, it barely mentioned bisexuality at all, and I remember as a lesbian- I was a little baby dyke, no. 3 haircut, baggy jeans- I remember being really encouraged to what I would describe as 'femme up', make myself a little bit more palatable to the men we were trying to influence, maybe start wearing brooches, you know! I encountered a huge number of people who tried to help me on my way. This went on for a good decade- different ways of influencing! And when I became CEO in 2014, I was very clear that I didn't want to carry on the organisation in that way. I think there is a way of both influencing establishment organisations and being able to acknowledge the complexity, the richness, the diversity of this LGBTQQI community. I don't think that's incongruous. It's a bit of a stretch at times, I'll admit, but there is a possibility to keep these two things together.

When I was deputy director of public affairs, I once took a call- I was on media phone- and I took a call from one of the gay media outlets who said, 'We've heard that Soho is closing down its gay Catholic masses. Does Stonewall have a view?' and I said, 'Yes. Ruth Hunt, deputy director of public affairs, says that it's a real shame that they're closing down the Catholic masses, because it's really important.' And the journalist said, 'Do you know any gay Catholics?' and I said 'Yes, I'm a gay Catholic', because I was going to church and I was practicing. 'Deputy Director of Public Affairs is a Catholic' is not news, but 'CEO of Stonewall is Catholic' really is news. So the first article when I became CEO, on the front page of the Independent, was 'Practicing Catholic Takes Over Stonewall'. That was a moment where I had quite a big decision to make. I had to decide whether I would talk about being Catholic, and about my faith in public, or whether I would say 'This is a private matter, I don't want to talk about it'. I went through what can only be described as an absolute crisis of confidence- I don't know the Greek translation of Leviticus, or what if someone asks me about the evangelical tradition how it should be split from the Church of England and its influence on it... – and I don't know that stuff! What I know is that God is important, and God is love and God is part of my

life. I had a real anxiety about that. I then thought that I'm not Catholic enough to be able to talk about God and God is going to judge me for not being Catholic enough to be able to talk about God, because I'm not sure I want to believe in Him all the time, and my partner said 'If you're worried about what God thinks about that, you've probably passed the test of being Christian enough to talk about being Christian! If you're concerned that He might judge you for that, I think you're alright!' And that was good advice.

What a very wise man once said to me is 'Ruth, you're a campaigner and you are a communicator, and it is time that you use this opportunity and this role to talk about the role of faith in achieving social change, that you talk about your values and connect them to your faith, and that you try and find ways to make progress with faith communities – and that's what I chose to do. I think over the last 5 years, I have done that to the best of my ability. I did Greenbelt- my poor atheist partner was like 'Why are we in a tent?! Why are we at a Christian festival in a tent?! This is not my idea of fun!' I have tried- here I am! – I have tried to answer the call when it is asked of me, but with a constant sense of inadequacy which I suspect is not unfamiliar to many of you in this room. I think that what I've tried to do with the Church of England is speak truth to power, and I think increasingly what Stonewall has been doing over the last two years, is stand up for communities who do not have a voice and speak for those who do not have a voice.

I'd like to just talk now about how hard that is, and I'd like to talk to you as a group of friends, about how relentless it is to continue to try and do the right thing in a culture and a context where people really don't want you to do the right thing. One of our high level donors and supporters spoke to a junior member of staff today saying that he is disgusted that a Catholic is running Stonewall and that it is an indication of poor mental health on my part and I shouldn't be allowed to lead the organisation, and that I am complicit in the oppression and the pressure from organised religion against LGBT communities and I should be instead condemning those communities from the rooftops. Condemning from the rooftops is not always Stonewall's technique. I'm always more likely to enjoy a good quality conversation in Lambeth Palace- albeit in a slightly odd situation sometimes, but we have to influence where we can, and Stonewall tries to influence where we can.

This year we have stood up to a small but increasingly vocal group of lesbian feminists who totally object to trans inclusion. As a dyke running Stonewall, that's been pretty tough. Your own tribe turning on you is pretty tough. We are strongly supportive of UK Black Pride and I think that the way that other organisations have treated those who are working on UK Black Pride has been unacceptable, and we will do everything in our power to support Black, Asian and minority ethnic LGBT people find their voices. If that means money, we will find money. If that's what we can do, we will do it. And lo and behold, by calling out discrimination against Black people, by calling out discrimination against trans people, the volume of 'Ruth's lost her way. She has no sense of mission. What about the gay men?' has got louder and louder. There are times when I sit in my fourth year as CEO and think 'This is just really hard actually. It's really hard to push against boundaries when those boundaries are constantly coming back in and reinforcing themselves.' And I reflect on that in relation to race and in relation to gender identity- and for the record I think that the abuse that trans people are experiencing now is the like of which we saw around HIV in the late 80s, and it should be a wake-up call to all of us. And that combination of the lesbians being angry about that, and the gay men being angry about protecting Black people, and people saying we shouldn't be doing God, there's no place for God in this, feels very indicative of where we're at as a world. What I've always been struck by- 13 years I've been doing gay rights- is how we replicate the dynamics that take place externally internally continually, all the time. We constantly find hurt with each other and we constantly find fault with each other, because it's easier to fall out with each other than it is to speak

truth to power out there. And I say that because what we're experiencing at Stonewall is some of that collapsing in. 'Ruth, you hate gay men. Ruth, you hate White people. Ruth, you hate lesbians. Ruth, you hate non-Christians. Grumble grumble.' And it's like- the enemy's there! And that's who we need to talk to and that's who we need to persuade.

I think that that inward-looking, that collapsing that happens in civil society organisations all over the world- that feuding that happens- is what happens when things get really, really tough. And I think that we're in a time when things are currently really tough. I think that everyone has less power than they once had. You look at our Prime Minister- far less powerful than previous Prime Ministers. The President of the United States- far less power. Look at the Archbishop of Canterbury- far less power. Everybody is commanding less power and simultaneously trying to control even more, and that combination is incredibly dangerous. And all our research shows that in order to achieve social change you have to get 25%. When 25% of extra people are converted to your cause, change happens. So you've got your base supporters and you need to convert 25% more people. And I think that keeps happening in the Church of England and in Christianity. I think there are 25% outside your core group who are saying 'Actually, we stand with you, and God is love and the world is really hard so why are we excluding anyone?' And something keeps pushing back, and when I see the hurt and pain- especially from LGBT Christians- it is so deeply entrenched that we've got to try and change the narrative a little bit.

I think we are a hurting community and I find myself feeling increasingly hurt. I recently stopped going to my Catholic church and attended an inclusive church and I feel like I'm taking an easy way out- that's a very Catholic response to God isn't it? I feel like I'm cheating! We all have to shake hands at the sign of the peace, which is way to extrovert for me! And there's something very different about that space that I wanted to reject, because I don't feel worth it. I don't really feel like I'm allowed, I don't feel like I'm allowed to have a community, a pastoral faith community. I'm talking very frankly about my instincts- I sit there on a Sunday and go 'Have I got to shake hands with everybody? Is somebody going to ask me about my week?' – because this never happens in a Catholic church! We don't even talk to each other in the Catholic church! This could be cheating! We are encouraged to not seek comfort and solidarity in each other, in the way in which society is currently building walls. We are encouraged to fear each other, we are encouraged to believe that trans women have such complex narratives that they can't possibly be part of LGB. We're encouraged to think that the church is our enemy, we're encouraged to believe that Orthodox Judaism hates gay people so there's no point working with them. This *polarisation* that is happening. What's interesting is that social media is no longer a reflection of that but is driving that. Social media used to be the way in which you could take a barometer of that, and now it is creating hostility, creating division, and polarising communities more than ever before. We work with a peace-building organisation which works in the Sudan- to try and help us work out how to do nonviolent communications between trans communities and radical feminist communities. These are the lengths we're going to try and navigate this space, because the tendency to revert to hostility is really, really powerful at the moment.

I guess what that means for me personally is that if we ever needed an explicit, vocal Christian faith, now is the time. Now is the time. I think that we desperately need to find different ways of talking to each other and building bridges not walls. The thing that breaks my heart about the Church of England is that I think that the issue of the inclusion of LGBT people is a proxy for a bigger discussion. I don't think it's really just about just LGBT issues. And I find their weakness unforgivable. I would find their defiant opposition more palatable than their weakness. That's where my anger has reached. Catholics are a mess of contradiction. Catholics have always been a mess of contradiction.

The sooner the Vatican gets a gay network group, the better! You know, we can actually start making some progress! The Church of England should be better than this. It's how it works. It should be able to cope with dissent and disagreement- good disagreement. I spoke to Synod last year- some of you may have been there. I was slightly undercover, in that I didn't tell Stonewall I was doing it! – and I thought 'This suits you. This indecisiveness suits how you work.' And we need to be better than that.

So, I haven't got many easy answers for you, except that I keep praying to give strength to Stonewall and the organisations to keep standing up to those who oppose trans people, and the people in the gay community who seem to think that it's acceptable to be racist. And we will keep standing up to those who say, in the name of God, that there is no place for lesbian, gay, bisexual and trans people, because it's simply not true. And it has never sat comfortably with me, even at the time when I think it should have sat most uncomfortably with me, when I was in a time of crisis. But we need to be louder, and I think that the time for polite dissent and disagreement is passing. I think we should be angry about the way in which people are excluded from our communities, and I think that we should find a way to express that anger with love and respect. This should not be done in the name of Jesus and it should not be done in the name of God, and I will continue in my amateurish slightly clumsy way to do my best to speak truth to power. And I hope that anything we can do to support you, we will do, and anything you can do to support us, we will embrace. Thank you very much.