

Introduce video

There are a whole range of life stories that we are going to watch, some are easy comfortable viewing and others will change our ideas, we might be tempted to ignore or resist what some of the people are sharing, we might feel hurt or misrepresented but these are the stories of real people and their experience. They tell of their joys and their pain, the experience belongs to them and they are brave enough to share their story with us. All we are called to do is watch, listen and reflect.

Watch first video

Sara expressed her pain from the misunderstanding the people in the church have about her experience, she talked about the shame of others and of her journey in this. For me this story highlights why it is important that we think about difficult subjects.

For me the most important part of all these conversations is that we must be able to disagree, and know that that is ok.

1 Learning Together

Over the next four weeks we will be on a journey of learning together. We will be asking difficult questions and I am not planning on giving many answers. What I hope to do is to encourage each of us to listen, pray and think for yourself.

2 Studying the bible together

One of the things we will be doing over these series of sermons is to look at some difficult and contradictory passages in the bible. It is tempting to believe that the bible has one message on every issue of life and that it proclaims clearly and consistently. The bible is clear and consistent about one thing, both the Old and New testament are clear the we are to love God and to love our neighbour, particularly those who are poor, widowed, refugees and marginalised. With this exception the Bible can and has been used to justify and defend a huge number of contradictory causes. When we look at the Bible together over the next few weeks we will be trying to

work out our own understanding of each passage. There will opportunities to put passages into their historical and cultural settings as well as the chance to compare the ways different people have understood the passages over time.

Our first theme is identity.

It is my experience that for a large part of my life, I didn't have to think too hard about my identity, I lived in a world where I fitted in. I was privileged to live in a family with siblings and two parents, in a community where I felt at home and a school where I was valued and encouraged. In fact, it wasn't until I became ordained and realised that there was something about my identity that made my role as a priest unacceptable to some others that I first experienced any issues. I have to say I didn't like it.

As I have said I was very privileged to not have to worry about my identity. Our first reading today from Genesis is not one that has ever caused me any problems, it was not difficult for me to see myself in this passage and take comfort from it.

This is not the story of many people, it was not the story of Sara in the video, for many this simple identification of our identity as being founded on and in the image of God is full of complexity and hurt. The words of the Bible seem clear, black and white, male and female. But this binary approach is not the only way to understand these words.

We understand the story of Genesis to be just this, a story, a word picture, poetical language that describes what is important about the world, not its practical realities. For example from verse 30 "I have given every green plant for food."

A silly example but a good one, I don't eat just green plants, I eat red apples and brown mushrooms and yellow sweetcorn, but I don't think that in this sentence God is banning the eating of these things.

One way of understanding the image of male and female is to contrast it with the image of night and day, earlier in Genesis. This is how they are

described, binary pairs, light and dark, there is no image of dusk or dawn, those moments when it is neither light or dark but somewhere in between, we know the reality of these moments and don't dismiss our experience because Genesis says that God only made light and dark, day and night. Can we apply the same approach to that of gender identity?

The key piece of information that we must take from this text is that God created humankind in God's image.

When we consider messages of identity where it relates to gender and sex, it is important that we touch on the issues of culture and community. It would be helpful if there was a simple binary division between sex as biological and gender as cultural or societal but even that is not simple.

My experience is that of being someone who is cis gendered, that is someone who's gender identity matches the gender I was assigned at birth, but I am also someone who has never been satisfied with the stereotypical gender role assigned to people of my gender. I have always been driven more by logic than by emotion, I am not always very good at reading the emotional reactions of those around me, Mike will testify to the fact that I am not particularly good a romance. In any personality test you want to try I will always come out as being the type that is usually much more often associated with men than with women. This can be annoying, it means I often, often make mistakes and cause offence when I really don't mean to. I think it probably means that because of my gender people expect me to respond in a particular way and when I don't assume I am being rude, when if I was a man, it might not have been taken that way.

Fundamentally however I have never wanted to be anything other than who I am, but that is my story of the complexity of gender identity and sex, and it is not the same as yours and it is not the same as other peoples.

There is lots more work to be done by everyone on understanding issues of gender dysphoria and identity but it is not the place of the church to try

and understand the biological and neurological aspects to all these complex issues, it is our job to think about how we approach people.

People or as we should remind ourselves children of God, are what matter to us. This is message that Paul is trying to get across in Galatians. In contrast to the binary passage in Genesis Paul is desperately trying to free the early Christians from that binary, one or the other way of thinking. He is writing to a church that is focused on difference rather than unity. Focused on what drives us apart rather than what brings us together. "for in Christ Jesus you are all children of God through faith." The binary distinctions of the world no longer matter, what matters is that we are united by our love for Jesus.

To finish I want to quote a little from the teaching on this session from the Living in Love and Faith Course.

"We agree that all humans are equally loved by God, and we rejoice in our diversity. We may not agree, though, about human experience in the areas of gender and sexuality. Are they part of the God-given diversity of humans created in God's image? Or are they marks of the brokenness of that created image which God is working to restore?"

Remember the purpose of this teaching series is to LISTEN to the experience and stories of others, to STUDY what the bible may or may not be saying and to THINK and PRAY about how God might be calling us to respond.

And always and forever to remember that what unites us is our love for Christ and this is stronger than anything that might pull us apart.