

## From Exclusion to Inclusion: Marriage for All” Adrian Thatcher at CRC Conference, March 2014.

### Robin Story reports

With same-gender marriage becoming legal in England and Wales two weeks away, Professor Adrian Thatcher could not have come to St Mark’s at a more appropriate time to address this issue. Adrian, an Anglican theologian and Visiting Professor in the Department of Theology and Religion at Exeter University, is an internationally recognised authority in the sphere of human sexuality, gender identity and marriage.



In his first lecture he highlighted the medical and social advances since 1960 that had been quite dramatic. Reliable contraception had separated sexual pleasure from procreation. The increasing liberation of women from traditional roles had empowered them to extend their choices for careers and relationships. The decriminalisation of male homosexuality in 1967 had acknowledged and given growing visibility to gay, lesbian, bisexual and transgender people. The number of unmarried couples living together and the number of single parent households had risen year on year. At the same time the 40 per cent divorce rate had more or less remained constant. All these advances had caused ideas of marriage and relationships to change and diversify as never before.

Adrian then showed eight symbolic pictures to illustrate different Christian models of marriage. These ranged from a Trinitarian relationship fusing three equal identities into a single union; a parallel with the Eucharist; a sacramental ritual act; a mutual and consensual gift of each other’s bodies; a covenanting partnership; and, what we have today, a rite in which the two consenting partners publicly join themselves together followed by a priestly declaration. All these different models demonstrate how diverse Christian thoughts on marriage have been and how marriage had changed over time. In the same way there have been vast changes in the composition of families so that households have become more diverse.

In our small groups a set of questions encouraged us as Christians to express our approval or disapproval for these social changes since 1960. For example: “Can there be ‘marital values’ outside of marriage?” and “What is chastity for contemporary Christians?” Chastity is not abstinence.

In his afternoon lecture. Adrian gave an analysis of the scriptural and historical records of the changes that marriage and relationships had undergone since Adam and Eve. Marrying and marriage were totally subject to male domination. In the gospels he examined the betrothal of Joseph and Mary: they were not married. What was the effect of her pregnancy? The betrothal proclaimed that a committed relationship had been initiated. Later there would be a wedding, maybe after some years or until the woman was pregnant. This custom endured for centuries. In the 18<sup>th</sup> century both before and after the 1753 Hardwick Marriage Act, it is estimated that between 40% and 50% of brides were pregnant on their wedding day. This Act regulated marriage. It replaced the betrothal with an engagement and required banns to be called and marriage to be performed by an Anglican priest in a church. The age of consent was raised to 16 years, or 21 if parental permission was withheld.

Turning to the New Testament there was a diversity of views about marriage - most being either against marrying at all or, grudgingly, giving marriage as an answer for rampant male lust. The persistent theme was the domination of the male partner and his needs – a view that held throughout succeeding centuries. Notions of reciprocal loving relationships and gender equality in marriage are very recent innovations. If these ideals are now the requirements of a marriage, either formal or presumed, what prevents a same-gender couple deeply committed to one another from also enjoying these benefits?

A lively question and answer session concluded the conference. Adrian Thatcher has done us proud to analyse the elements of this controversial issue with knowledge, reason and wisdom.