

Churchman

EDITORIAL

Whom God hath joined together?

Until they were taken to court for refusing to let a gay couple stay in their guesthouse, Peter and Hazelmary Bull were virtually unknown to all but a few people in Marazion (Cornwall). We can safely assume that they had no desire to become martyrs for their faith, strong as that faith is, but they were thrust into the limelight by two men who believed they had suffered discrimination because of it and who were determined to fight back. The two men were a homosexual couple in a civil partnership, who had been refused permission to sleep in a double bed because they were not married.

Mr and Mrs Bull were at pains to point out that their stance was in no way homophobic. As Christians, they do not allow unmarried guests to sleep together, whatever sex or combination of sexes they may happen to be. The men, however, claimed that their civil partnership was the functional equivalent of marriage, a claim that was upheld in the Bristol County Court. In ruling against the Bulls, Judge Andrew Rutherford went so far as to say that Britain is no longer a country governed by Christian values and that the hapless guesthouse owners had not kept pace with the times (not to mention *The Times*, which has now virtually become an openly gay newspaper.)

It is still too early to say what the reverberations of this case will be, but it is just possible that we may have turned a corner in the struggle to protect the consciences of Christians who cannot accept homosexual 'marriage'. The Bulls are by no means the first Christians to have suffered at the hands of those who promote the civil partnership legislation as part of a wider 'equality' agenda, but most of their predecessors have been in a position that is rather different from theirs. The others were either employees of a company whose policies they were expected to uphold even if they disagreed with them, or they were civil servants who were obliged to administer the law regardless of their personal convictions. (Adolf Eichmann would have understood the importance of that.) The Bulls however have their own business, which they operate in, and from, their home. In that sense they are double proprietors and the

question up for adjudication might well have been whether people have a right to control what goes on in their place of residence even if it might be thought to infringe the rules of public trading.

It used to be said that an Englishman's home is his castle, but the Bulls may be forgiven if they now think that theirs is more like the Tower of London—a prison open to every tourist who is prepared to pay the entry fee. They might also be forgiven if they wonder whether a Muslim couple in their position would have lost the case especially since, if they had, the court and judge might very well have paid a high price for their insensitivity to religious scruples.

The case has important implications for the church because if the decision against the Bulls is upheld on appeal, it will be impossible to distinguish civil partnerships from marriage. Cynics and other realists have known all along that the two things are identical; the difference in the form of words being no more than a ploy to keep the traditionalists quiet, but the church has done its best to pretend that they are not the same thing at all. It has even allowed clergymen to enter civil partnerships on the ground that they are not marriages and tried to insist that those who do so should take a vow of celibacy! Even some of the bishops laughed at that one, but the charade has gone on. It is now very likely that the state will turn civil partnerships into full marriages and that the position the church has allowed itself to get into will be exposed for the hypocrisy it is.

What will happen then? There is no doubt that certain establishment voices will be heard to say that the church has no choice. If homosexual marriage becomes the law of the land, it will have to recognise it. Canon law may try to prevent the performance of such ceremonies in church, just as it forbids the remarriage of those who have been divorced (if the divorced spouse is still living), but it is hard to imagine that liberal clergy will lose much sleep over that. Those determined to flout the canons of the church will do so, and they will have the law on their side. A few bishops will wring their hands, but probably most will utter vague noises about being loving and non-judgmental, and that will be the end of the matter.

Evangelicals, as so often, will be the odd ones out because they will try to insist that traditional orthodox beliefs and practices must be maintained. This

scenario is now so familiar that we can write the script in advance. A couple of evangelical archdeacons will realise that if they want preferment they must compromise, and they will do so, fooling themselves into thinking that they can do more good in the long term by occupying higher positions in the church. A few more will take the liberal view and tell the world that not all Evangelicals are as benighted as most of them seem to be. But the majority will stand firm and find themselves being awkward against their will, a position to which they have now become accustomed. The practical consequence of this is that Evangelicals will keep getting into trouble with the authorities and get very little (if any) support from the rest of the church in their stand for Christian principles. Indeed, if the attempt to exclude Anglo-Catholics over women bishops succeeds, the liberals may well use the issue to turn their guns on the Evangelicals in the hope of getting rid of them too. After all, the church must be one, if not in Christ then at least in political correctness.

One of the problems here is that Evangelicals have an almost wholly undeserved reputation for being homophobic. The truth is that most Evangelicals reach out to gay people when they can and welcome them into the church, offering them spiritual and moral support as they struggle to live with their sexual orientation. But they still say that homosexual practice is wrong and not what God intends for his creatures. It is this that drives the gay lobby and its supporters wild, and makes them willing and eager to persecute (and of course, prosecute) those who oppose them.

One of the accusations levelled against Evangelicals is that we are fixated on homosexuality and say little or nothing about heterosexual sins, which are more prevalent and more clearly condemned in the Bible. Pre-marital (heterosexual) sex is seldom mentioned and often tolerated in Evangelical circles, or so it is claimed, as are divorce and remarriage. How much truth there is in these accusations is hard to say because there are no statistics and it is almost impossible to make inquiries about such matters. It is probably true to say that there is less laxity in these areas than people think, but the fact that the charges can be made at all is a reminder to us that we must do all in our power to maintain the highest standards, especially where the clergy and other church leaders are concerned. There are hard cases to be sure, but those are best handled on an individual basis and should not be publicised or made the basis for shaping general policy.

For a variety of reasons, involuntary celibacy seems to be on the increase now that more people live alone, and if that is true, the church has a duty and an opportunity to provide resources for single men and women so that they do not have to suffer the loneliness sexual deprivation is supposed to bring. Homosexuals should not be discriminated against any more than heterosexuals should be, but at the same time, the standard of lifelong heterosexual marriage needs to be upheld in fairness to all concerned.

It is not by our teaching on such matters that we shall impress others, but by our practice. The Roman Catholic church has a strict sexual ethic that it routinely traduces by the scandalous behaviour of some of its clergy, which all too often goes unpunished. Evangelicals wince at this, but have to accept that the outside world tars all Christians with the same brush, whether we like it or not. We must realise that nobody is going to listen to what we say unless it is matched by what we do, and accept that the church has a reputation for gross hypocrisy in sexual matters which is exaggerated but not entirely undeserved.

We must support people like Mr and Mrs Bull in their uphill struggle for justice, but at the same time we must seek to influence the moral climate of our country by our example and our witness to the power of Jesus Christ to change lives. The eighteenth century was a time of great immorality in high places, but revival swept through the land and a hundred years later Britain was renowned for its Victorian family values. Today those values have disappeared again and we are back to where we were in the days of the Wesleys and George Whitefield. Can we dare to believe that the Holy Spirit will move in our midst again and bring both new life and new hope to a generation which seems bent on destroying itself by its hedonism and rejection of the law of God? Political campaigns are important, but their effect is likely to be very limited. Unless the Lord builds the house, those who try to do so will labour in vain, as the Psalmist reminds us. The weapons of our warfare are spiritual, and only if we rely on them will there be any hope of victory in the great battle for the soul of the nation that lies before us.

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