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Eden Revisited: the Christian response to AIDS and other sex-related disorders*

There is a story—no doubt apocryphal—about a small boy and a small girl who stood in an art gallery gazing at a picture of Adam and Eve in the Garden of Eden. 'Which is Adam and which is Eve?' enquired the little girl. 'I'm not sure', replied her companion, 'I could tell you if they had their clothes on'. It is a good story because it conveys an important truth. So much of what we believe about sex, that is, about maleness and femaleness, is the result of centuries of sexual stereotyping, the dressing up of men and women in the costumes belonging to the roles that, rightly or wrongly, we have assigned to them. The heart of the matter, as distinct from the outward trappings, often eludes us.

The Garden of Eden may seem an unlikely place to begin a Christian examination and assessment of the problems of AIDS and other sex-related disorders. But the story with which the Bible begins is, in fact, an extremely good story and full of enlightenment. It matters not at all that, like my own tale of the boy and girl, the story of Adam and Eve is not to be taken literally. We would be foolish, however, if we did not take it seriously.

Eden revisited

So let us spend a moment in the Garden of Eden. The Bible loses no time in reaching what must surely be the most sublime and illuminating summary statement about the true significance of human sexuality to be found in the whole of literature.

The statement to which I refer is in the 27th verse of the first chapter of the Book of Genesis. That verse says three things. First, that God made man—the generic title for the whole human race.

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Second, 'male and female created He them'. Here is the fact of sexual polarity plainly stated. Then third comes this tremendous assertion: 'in the image of God created He them'. We, as sexual beings, reflect the image of God. And what is that image? It is that of a community of beings: Father, Son and Holy Spirit in a perfect relationship of love. Never mind that the concept is larger than human minds can grasp. Take hold of the essence of it. God made us sexual beings in order that we might enjoy community. And note this: there is nothing about babies yet. Obviously one reason why God made both men and women is that by joining themselves together they can reproduce themselves. But that does not come first. Indeed, until sex has done its work of creating a loving relationship between a man and his wife it ought not to be allowed to do its procreative work, because a child needs, above all else, a settled, loving community of spirits as the cradle in which it can begin to grow towards maturity. This is one reason why marriage should be held in high regard. At its best it provides just the kind of security which is essential for children, not least in such an insecure world as this.

The Christian tradition

It is a thousand pities that the Christian tradition has linked sexuality primarily with one objective, namely procreation. There has been a tendency to run away from sexuality in any other than the biological context. Even within that setting some of the Christian spokesmen of an earlier age have talked almost as if the Creator was guilty of a grave error when He made the continuance of the human race dependent upon such a dubious mechanism as sexual intercourse. So, for example, the best that Jerome can find to say about marriage is that it begets virgins! Tertullian, another influential writer in the early days of Christianity, damns marriage with faint praise and describes woman as 'the devil's gateway'. Augustine, the Bishop of Hippo, whose influence on the development of Christian thought was, perhaps, second only to that of St. Paul, is a classic example of a man trying to escape from his own sexuality. Describing his conversion he said that he now did 'no more desire a wife nor any other ambition of this world'. I fear that I can tell you nothing about the girl to whom he was engaged but never married, nor about the mistress by whom in his unregenerate days he had a son, except that she went off vowing that she 'would never know man more'. History, not least Christian history, is largely, until this present century, a man's story told by men. So, if you are interested in 'the woman's angle', you must fill in the gaps with your own speculations.

But there are worse things still in the teaching of St Augustine. He

sees the virgin birth of Jesus as clear evidence that sexual intercourse is itself sinful. God, who made us the way we are, had to get round His error by getting His Son born by another method. I suppose that the comparatively recent invention by the Roman Catholic Church of the doctrine of the Immaculate Conception of the Virgin Mary is based on the same erroneous idea. Augustine seemed to believe that we Christians should leave the pagans to get the children born, and we could then concentrate on getting them 'born again'. Apart from anything else, that is an absurd assessment of the missionary task of the church. Anyone would think that getting the children of pagan parents converted was a simple matter. The good bishop seems to have overlooked the fact that the most fruitful field of Christian recruitment is the Christian home. But, to return to the major point, this rejection of sexuality is a slur on the character of the Creator.

A few moments ago I warned against the danger of taking the Genesis story too literally. The early Christian fathers did, with disastrous consequences. The fact that in the story Eve leads Adam astray is taken as a clear indication that woman is to blame for all the woes of men. She is the guilty party. In fact, what it clearly signifies is that the story was undoubtedly written by a man. The story that woman was created out of a rib taken from the side of man is said to demonstrate her inferiority and subservience. It is one of the most mischievous myths ever to circulate, and none the better for being in the Bible.

Now, if I speak critically of these negative elements in our Christian tradition, it is only fair to ask the question, 'Whatever could have led good and intelligent Christian leaders to adopt such perverse notions?' There are a number of answers to that question and before going further I ought in all fairness to mention them.

First, there is the fact that Christianity came into a world of alien religions and philosophies. One of the potent ideas which greatly influenced our religion was that of dualism. Briefly, and at the risk of oversimplifying, this was the view that spirit is good and matter is evil. This led to the excesses of ascetic practice. Men like Simon Stylites, who lived for thirty-seven years on top of a pillar, tried to mortify the flesh and cultivate the life of the spirit. Dualism is false because God made matter and spirit, flesh and soul, and pronounced all of it good.

Second, and closely associated with this, there was the idea of renunciation. It is, in fact, part of the experience of every true Christian. 'Anyone', said Jesus, 'who wishes to be a follower of mine must leave self behind. He must take up his cross and come with Me'. For nearly a thousand years this element of renunciation found its chief expression in monasticism. There is much to admire in the

monastic movement, though often the forms of renunciation adopted were morbid and misguided.

Third, I think we must accept that much of the false asceticism I have briefly described was a protest against appalling decadence. We should be very ignorant and short-sighted if we failed to recognise that sex when it is unbridled, uncontrolled by love and integrity, can wreak havoc. Does any reader of the daily paper need convincing of that? It has been true in every age.

These explanations of perverse attitudes may mitigate, though they cannot wholly excuse, the architects of a tradition much of which must be rejected. I have spent a few minutes looking back because I do not think we can understand without some knowledge of the past. It behoves Christians who are so often tempted to bang the drum of morality to show a little humility. There is much in our past of which we can scarcely be proud, and the past rubs off on to the present. If you are sometimes a little impatient with those who plead for a reassessment of our own Christian position, if you side with those who are always saying, 'what we need is to get back to the old traditional standards', I would ask you to think again. For the fact is that morality based upon the almost exclusive link between sex and biology simply will not do. There has been a revolution. Contraception has broken that link. Most marital intercourse in the Western world today is non-procreative. Dr. and Mrs. Annesly, the father and mother of Susannah Wesley, had 25 children. Susannah was the last, so it is as well they persevered, otherwise I, whose lineage is solidly Methodist, would not be here to deliver this lecture. But the difference between the size of their family and mine or yours is not that they were more given to sexual activity than we are. It is just that modern intercourse, as I have said, is largely non-procreative, and that by deliberate intent. Intercourse is good in itself. It is a fact of married life before children appear, and it usually goes on long after the last child is born.

In one sense the secular world, for all its folly, has seized the point. It celebrates the goodness of sexual activity. Christians must accept that without hesitation. We must renounce the negativities of our tradition and see our maleness and femaleness as a wonderful gift of God, full of a richness that goes far beyond the merely biological, though that, too, is a sacred wonder. But sexuality, like eating, is only good if it is made to serve the purposes for which it was ordained. The Church, and the Christians who belong to it, must seek more deeply to understand those purposes, especially as they relate to the making and sustaining of community between committed partners and within the whole life of society. Only then can we minister more

effectively to a world where marital breakdown and sexual disorder are rife. For our society is caught in a vicious circle. The damaged children of broken marriages all too often become the potential drug addicts, disordered personalities, sexual deviants, who are themselves unable to enter into and sustain a stable relationship.

The spread of AIDS is one of the symptoms of such a society. Other signs of sickness are violence, pollution, alcoholism, drug addiction, over-eating, and the slaughter on our roads—100,000 die annually on the world's highways. But I turn now to an examination of this painful and deeply disturbing phenomenon called AIDS. I must apologize in advance to any here who know a great deal about the subject already. I think I shall best serve the purposes of this lecture if I assume that we need to rehearse the basic facts. I shall endeavour not to blind you with science but tell you as simply as possible and as briefly as I can what we actually know.

AIDS

The word AIDS stands for 'Acquired Immune Deficiency Syndrome'. The first cases were reported in 1981. It is caused by a virus known as the 'Human Immunodeficiency Virus' (HIV). This virus is so weak that it can be killed by a splash of household bleach; it shrivels in sunshine, but in the human body it becomes a monster. Three million could be put on the head of a pin. In our bodies we have a remarkable defence system against disease. The body produces anti-bodies which attack and neutralise some infections; there are also the white blood cells which themselves deal with infections. The HIV virus destroys these immune mechanisms, and so the body is left more or less defenceless against the attack of marauding diseases.

People who become infected with the HIV virus may not show any symptoms for some time, or they may experience a glandular fever-like illness. Some will develop more severe symptoms described as the AIDS related Complex (ARC). But whether he shows symptoms or not the HIV carrier can infect other people. An HIV carrier may not develop the full symptoms of AIDS for as long as five years after being infected. No-one knows how many HIV carriers will develop full-blown AIDS. Some surveys have indicated that up to 34% have done so within three years. The characteristic symptoms of the AIDS disease are various cancers, viral infections, destruction of the retina of the eyes, and brain disease. There is no cure, and those who suffer from AIDS will die from it. They die because the body is unable to fight off the diseases which have invaded it.

Symptom-free carriers of the HIV virus may be anything from 50 to 100 times greater in number than those who have so far been

diagnosed as having AIDS. The number of those infected by HIV in the USA is probably around two million. By the end of March 1987 31,256 cases of AIDS had been reported; in Europe the number was 4000, and in the UK 724 of whom 420 had died. The DHSS expects 4000 deaths in this country by the end of 1989. In parts of Africa the disease is rife and one-fifth of the population is infected.

The AIDS virus is found at highest concentration in blood and semen. The main ways by which infection is passed on are: by sexual intercourse (about 75%); through the sharing of needles by drug users (17%); by blood transfusions (2%). Those percentages will vary from place to place. The highest number of sufferers is found among male homosexuals, the reason being that their sexual activities are most likely to cause abrasion of the skin. Stringent measures have been taken in the West to prevent the communication of disease through blood transfusions, if blood is not screened or treated. It is possible for an infected mother to infect her child. The disease cannot be passed on through casual, non-sexual, contact.

What is the origin of this dreadful disease? We can't be sure, but there is some evidence which seems to point to the African green monkey, which carries the virus but is not affected by it. The disease may have been transferred to humans by a bite or scratch, or by ritual use of the blood of the monkey. Another theory is that the virus had in fact been present but dormant for centuries among communities which had built up an immunity to it. Then through the movement of Africans into shanty towns it began to afflict groups which possessed no such immunity.

Some African leaders accuse the West of racism in promulgating the notion that AIDS originated in Africa. However that may be, the problem of dealing with AIDS, which is appallingly difficult in the developed countries, is much more so in Africa where the money and facilities available are so much less adequate (for example, needles in some clinics are used over and over again).

What about treatment and cure? A large company of experts in more than one hundred countries are engaged on the most intensive research programme in medical history. Some progress has been made in alleviating the symptoms of the disease, but the experts say that it may take many years before a cure can be discovered.

Having briefly rehearsed some of the main facts we must now face the question: what can be done to prevent the spread of the disease? The answer is contained in the one word 'education'. But what kind of education and by whom is it to be given? Our own government has undertaken an expensive programme designed to disseminate the facts and warn of the dangers. It was somewhat slow off the mark and

did not begin till well on in 1986. By then for many it was too late. Inevitably the material that has been used—especially on television—has been criticized. The susceptibilities of many people have been outraged by the crudity of some of the programmes. Others complain about the lack of moral education. The government's response is that they have to deal with things as they are and not as we would like them to be; and further, moral education is not primarily the job of government, but of parents, schools and churches. So the slogan is 'safer sex', and the instrument for achieving this is the condom. The propaganda must be crude and outspoken to ensure that it gets home to those in danger.

Debate about the government's responsibilities must and will continue. Another aspect will be the increasing cost of treating AIDS patients. This year the cost will be up to £30 million and that at a time when our NHS is under increasing stress. But OUR concern must be especially with the responsibility of the churches.

I am in no doubt that the primary response of Christians must be that of compassion. The bedside of a dying man is no place for moralizing. I would wish to dissociate myself from those who say that AIDS is a judgement of God on those who have offended Him. That does not square with the God whom I know and love. And what of those who contract AIDS through no fault of their own? And what of the lesbians, the female homosexuals? They must be God's chosen people because they do not pass on the disease to each other through their sexual activity.

I do not want for one moment to suggest that the problem of AIDS has nothing to do with morality. It does indeed have everything to do with morality. We are a race of sinners and the corporate consequences of that fall on all of us. We are members one of another and often the innocent suffer with the guilty. We serve the cause of Christian truth best, however, by stressing the positive aspects of the church's teaching. Love requires a compassionate understanding of the needs of those who suffer from AIDS and those who are dear to them. It also requires a more determined effort to share the sort of insights into the true meaning of sexuality to which I referred in the early part of this lecture.

In an article in the *Times* last February the Archbishop of York had some important things to say about intimacy and vulnerability. As I mentioned earlier, the HIV virus is very fragile. That is why it needs intimate contact for its transmission—sexual intercourse or the brotherhood of the needle. The same linkage between intimacy and vulnerability is discernible in the way the virus invades the body, exposing it to danger. This leads Dr. Habgood to reflect on the way in

which sexual intimacy and vulnerability are linked. Sexual encounters involve moments of exposure—physical and psychological. No wonder that intimate relationships have always been surrounded by conventions, ceremonies and taboos. For where intimacy is abused terrible things can happen. Most murders take place within the family. We live in a world where many of the sensible restraints of the past have been cast off in the interests of so-called freedom. As a consequence new vulnerabilities appear. One of them is AIDS. The so-called freedom can turn out to be freedom to die.

It is at this deep level that the Church has to work, seeking to educate itself and others in those insights which alone can open the door to happy and wholesome human relationships. Revisiting Eden is not to resurrect a fusty fable, it is to unveil the holy purposes of God, to stress the need to rescue love from trivialization, to emphasize the power of sex both to heal and to wound, and to show the essential reasonableness of the moral standards which an enlightened Church seeks to uphold. If we honestly face up to the demands of this task, we shall be driven on into the New Testament, there to discover the resources of power and redemptive wisdom made available through the gifts of the Holy Spirit.

The Trustees of this lecture initially asked me to speak about AIDS and this I have now done at some length. But the Christian context in which I have set the subject has important things to say regarding other sex-related disorders and I want now briefly to refer to some of these.

Homosexuality

The debate about AIDS has inevitably focused attention on the problem of homosexuality. Like many other issues this was once a taboo subject. To a large extent it still is in Africa, where they are reluctant to admit that the phenomenon exists. But in the West it is discussed incessantly. We have been made aware of the fact that the number of homosexual men and women is much greater than was once imagined. Moreover the self-styled 'Gay Liberation Movement' has campaigned aggressively in opposition to discrimination against homosexuals. Books and plays deal with the subject openly.

In the Church of England, and even more in the USA, there has been lively argument between those who take a strong moralistic line and are in danger of instituting a witch-hunt among the clergy, and those who believe that the issue is not as straightforward as their opponents suggest. The fact that, as I mentioned earlier, AIDS has spread most rapidly among homosexual men adds fuel to the fire of argument. It is not my intention to rehearse in detail all the points in

this debate. But I do want to indicate the main matters which should in my view constitute a Christian approach to the subject.

First of all we must insist that any sound Christian judgement must be based on knowledge of the facts. It is unfortunate that some of those who shout the loudest are among the least well-informed. The very first fact to be noted is that we don't know all the facts. For example, among those who have studied the subject there are still differing opinions about the causes of homosexuality. It is almost certainly true that there is no single cause. In some cases the cause may be constitutional, having to do with the balance of hormones or with genetic and chromosomal factors. In other cases it is likely that the cause lies in the relationship between parent and child. In some instances it may be that some early sexual experience with a person of the same sex determines that the individual concerned develops a homosexual orientation.

The second important point is to eliminate from our thinking some of the popular, and often very harmful, myths which surround the subject. For example, the idea that all male homosexuals are effeminate; that they are all of artistic temperament found only in certain professions; and that all homosexuals are promiscuous. These notions are without foundation.

A third point which must be of the greatest importance to Christians is that when we talk about homosexuals we are talking about people. Some of those people are men and women of the greatest integrity, many of them are devout Christians, not a few are priests and ministers of the church. Without doubt many homosexuals are promiscuous and irresponsible. So are many heterosexuals, and some of them bring unwanted babies into the world, which homosexuals don't. Again, if some homosexuals often seem to be acting in a loud and aggressive fashion, that is the inevitable result of their sense of injustice during the long years when they have been oppressed.

It is worth remembering that discrimination against homosexuals has been embodied in unbelievably harsh laws. In the 13th century English law provided that anyone found guilty of a homosexual act should be buried alive; later this was changed to burning at the stake. The publication of the Wolfenden Report in the 1960s marked a major turning-point in this country's knowledge and attitude towards homosexuals. I recall the long debate in the Methodist Conference on the recommendation that homosexual acts between consenting adults in private should no longer be a criminal offence. It was a debate of very high quality. The Conference gave general support to the Wolfenden Committee and its major recommendation became law in 1966. Few enactments have been of greater significance to large

numbers of people than that one. It gave impetus to the movement to reassess the harsh and quite unChristian attitudes which had pertained in the past.

The fourth and final matter to which I must refer is the need to work out a Christian position on the moral issues involved and to do so in the light of the best information and biblical scholarship available to us. In recent debates we have heard loud pleas for bishops and other Church leaders to 'declare the clear biblical judgement on homosexuality'. However, this is not so simple a matter as some might appear to think. If the 'biblical position' on every ethical issue were clear and concise, then you would expect all intelligent Christians to be of one mind, for there would be nothing to argue about. But I need hardly say that this is not the case. Christians do differ on ethical questions, not least within the sexual field. They differ about divorce, about contraception, about abortion, about homosexuality, and about other related issues. We need to work hard to achieve consensus.

If now we consider the teaching of the Bible on homosexuality, the first point to note is that there are remarkably few references to it: in fact ten in the Old Testament and three in the New. Jesus Himself never mentioned it. The popular belief that God destroyed Sodom and Gommorrah because of the sin of homosexuality is in the judgement of some scholars a distorted view of what is said in Genesis 19. However, there is no doubt about the fact that, in general, homosexual activity is condemned in the Bible. But there is no detailed consideration of the reason why.

There can, I think, be little doubt that the Christian tradition in this as in other sexual matters has been greatly influenced by the mistaken view that sexuality is for the sole purpose of procreation. That view was understandable in the past when science had not uncovered many of the facts known to us today, and also when the earth was underpopulated and there was a positive duty to produce many children, a duty made more urgent by the ravages of disease which decimated populations, and wars which led to wholesale slaughter. It is different today. Over-population is the problem, increased by our attack on the diseases which cause infant mortality. Moreover, we are striving to eliminate war, the other great and gruesome means of controlling population increase. All these factors, on top of basic new theological insights, enable us to recognize that non-procreative sex is not necessarily evil, and so the biblical view is seen in a new perspective. The task of interpreting the message of the Bible and applying it to the life of today is complex and demanding. It requires intellectual integrity and humble reliance on the Holy Spirit:

Come, Divine Interpreter,
Bring us eyes Thy book to read.

There is an emerging Christian consensus that recognizes the need for acceptance of the homosexual and the sin of discrimination against those who may be so described. The question whether homosexuality is in itself a defect, or whether the condition, which affects large numbers of people and appears for the most part to be unalterable, is within the creative purposes of God, is one on which Christians differ. Some argue that homosexuality is a biological absurdity, a perversion of what the Creator intended. It is as clear as day, they assert, that God made us the way we are so that the human race could be continued. But I have argued that there is more, much more, to human sexuality than that. The biological factor is not the only one to be considered. Sexual activity is not to be condemned purely on the grounds that it is non-procreative, otherwise we should have to say that people who marry when the woman has passed child-bearing age are living in sin. Nevertheless I believe that homosexuality is evidence of the disorder that disfigures the whole life of creation. It is not, I believe, the way God intended us to be. But I have to acknowledge that ALL sexual relationships are defective, for no-one is perfect and all of us are sinners. I believe that what is supremely important is the quality of love in the relationships we establish.

The question whether homosexual men or women who choose to live in a settled relationship of love with a person of the same sex may legitimately express that love in physical acts is still much debated. One thing that should be clearly stated is that promiscuity is as sinful and potentially disastrous among homosexuals as among heterosexuals. Whatever our sexual orientation, Christian obedience requires the exercise of demanding responsibility and a resolve not to harm any fellow human being. The debate about the rights and wrongs of homosexual behaviour must continue and be conducted with sensitivity and a great desire to learn more, that we may be wise and Christian in our judgements.

I want now to turn to four other evidences of sexual disorder and make a much briefer comment about each.

Abortion

Here is another great human issue in which, as in the case of homosexuality, the private and public, the legal and moral aspects, are inextricably intertwined. There are two extreme views. One is

that abortion is wrong in virtually all circumstances because it involves the destruction of human life. The other is that, if a woman wishes to have an abortion, that is the concern of no-one but herself. The law of the land in this and many other countries accepts neither of these views. It rests on the judgement that the law should protect human life and that it should also seek to safeguard the rights of society to ensure its continuance and the maintenance of moral standards. But the law recognizes the need for abortion in certain circumstances and attempts to provide regulations that take account of this.

In the past, English law has been affected by notions that are known to be quite false. Penalties for abortions performed before the time of 'quickening' (when the child is first felt moving in the womb) were more lenient than those imposed for later terminations. It was supposed that human life began at the time of quickening. But this was a purely arbitrary view. So also, I judge, is the view that human life begins at the moment of conception (or more accurately fertilization), or at the moment of nidation (or implantation) up to a week later, or at the moment of birth itself. The fact is that the potential of human life is present from the moment when egg and sperm are fused together.

The problem for the law, and indeed for the moralist, arises from the fact that the interests we wish to safeguard may be in conflict. The most obvious example of this is the situation in which the life of the foetus may have to be sacrificed in order to save the life of the mother. Another instance is where there is risk of gross abnormality in the foetus. Our present law allows abortion in both these circumstances; it also permits the doctors to take account of social factors. Clearly, the safeguarding of the life of the mother is construed very widely and covers more than actually preventing her death. As you will know, the introduction of the present abortion laws was undertaken because of the high incidence of back-street abortions which often led to disastrous consequences. That problem has been largely solved: a fact that can only be welcomed.

The abortion question can hardly be settled by quoting specific biblical texts for there are none that unequivocally settle the finer points in the debate. There is, of course, a strong Christian tradition which stresses the sanctity of human life, but generally speaking the Church has not taken an absolutist position on this. It has, for example, taught that the taking of life in war may be justified—a conclusion which I personally do not accept. It has seemed strange to me that the Pope, who heads a Church which has most strongly opposed abortion, should be willing to allow that nuclear weapons, which

might cause the death of millions, are permissible, at least as a temporary expedient.

The incidence of abortion is one of the signs of sexual disorder in our world. It raises issues which test Christian conscience most severely. Christians need to be very sensitive to the needs of those confronted with what may be an agonising choice.

Infertility

I want to make brief reference to the problem of childless couples. For large numbers of people the inability to produce a child is the cause of intense suffering. Infertility is a disorder for which there are many causes. There is great need for more resources to be devoted to research into causes and treatment. One important responsibility resting particularly on Christians is to avoid ignorant and insensitive comments like 'I suppose you are a career girl', or 'why don't you adopt?' Such thoughtless comments can be very wounding to a couple longing for parenthood and who may well have exhausted every possible attempt to overcome their problem.

Divorce

I remember sitting on a committee discussing divorce. The wife of an Anglican bishop said in a rather superior way: 'Of course, you Methodists remarry divorced people; we believe in the indissolubility of marriage'. I felt bound to say that many of the remarriages to which she alluded were referred to us by unhappy Anglican vicars. What is meant by 'the indissolubility of marriage'? Does it mean that marriages OUGHT NOT to be dissolved or that they CANNOT BE dissolved? If it is the latter, then I am bound to say that it is an assertion that seems constantly to be belied by the facts. As the Methodist Statement on the matter says: 'There are courses of conduct which so violate the pledges and obligations of marriage that of themselves, and in fact, they destroy it as a union of heart and soul'.

In view of the paucity of references to divorce in the teaching of Jesus it is remarkable how much has been written on the subject by Christians. There is no doubt that the Christian ideal is the lifelong union of man and wife. For centuries Christians have wrestled with the question of the status and meaning of the exceptive clause in Matthew 19:9 where Jesus says that it is unlawful for a man to divorce his wife 'except for unchastity'. I do not propose to go into the details of that debate nor of the changes in English divorce law over the centuries. I believe that since marriages do break down, divorce law should be so framed as to avoid, as far as possible, the unnecessary cruelties and painful indignities which bad laws make inevitable.

The question whether the institution of marriage is under greater threat today than ever before is not easily answered. When about one in three marriages ends in divorce it might appear to be so. We must, however, remember that all sorts of factors contribute to that sad statistic. The extension of the grounds for divorce, the granting of legal aid, the new economic independence of many women, the earlier age of marriage and the increased longevity of men and women: these are some of the factors that have led to an increase in divorce. Some of them allow people to gain release from their marriage vows who in earlier days would not have been able to do so. In 1971 the number of petitions filed by women in this country was 67,000. By 1981 that figure had risen to 123,000 compared with 46,000 filed by men. These figures clearly show how women have used their new freedom.

The widespread breakdown of marriage is immensely harmful. It leads to all sorts of suffering and to the exacerbation of a whole range of social problems. In the broadest, and sometimes also in the narrowest, sense divorce is a sex-related disorder. It results from the failure of a man and woman to relate to each other. The churches have not done anything like enough to provide sound teaching and training and to counter those false emphases in society which encourage wrong expectations concerning marriage and what it involves. Here is an item that needs to be lifted much higher on the agenda of the churches.

Sexual discrimination

In the early part of this lecture I referred to the way in which the more negative aspects of the Christian sexual tradition had resulted in the myth of male superiority and the relegation of women to the status of second-class citizens. If we now look briefly at this issue, we shall end where we began: with the supreme importance of the relationship between the two halves of the human race.

Let us revisit yet again the Garden of Eden. I have already quoted the opening chapter of Genesis. There is nothing there which suggests the subordination of women to men. In the second chapter there is a different account of creation. It describes woman as man's 'helper'. But the word used—EZER—is never an indication of inferior status. Indeed, it is mainly used with reference to God Himself. When we move into Chapter 3, however, we come to the story of the Fall. One of the consequences of this is stated in verse 16: 'your husband shall be your master'. You see that the destruction of the egalitarian nature of the man/woman relationship was distorted by sin. Jesus

came to save us from sin and, among other things, to restore the broken relationship between men and women. In His own treatment of women He showed that the sexes are equal: not the same, but equal.

I have no time to deal with St. Paul, except to say that those who regard him as a male chauvinist need to look with greater care at his teaching. Even if he sometimes seems to have absorbed the cultural emphases of his time and relegated women to a secondary status, theologians often speak of 'the development of doctrine'. I believe that Christian insights today on the subject of sex equality are the development of such seminal passages as Ephesians 5:21—'Be subject to one another out of reverence for Christ'.

I am grateful that I was brought up in a home where my father—a convinced feminist—regaled us with exciting tales of the suffragettes. He was present at a meeting addressed by the prime minister of the day. No sooner had he begun his oration than a booming voice started crying 'Votes for women!' An intrepid suffragette had been lowered into the huge base pipe of the organ before the meeting started and was making good use of its function as an amplifier. I used to meet elderly women who were part of that movement when long ago I sat on the National Executive Committee of the Family Planning Association. They were fighting to make birth control respectable, and they won the day.

But the battle for woman's rightful place in the world is not yet finally won even in this land. Women are seriously under-represented in the higher echelons of the professions. For example, though they form about 80% of primary teachers, only 40% of the headships are filled by women. Although they form the big majority of the membership of the churches, they occupy comparatively few of the leadership positions. I once took a woman bishop to 10, Downing Street. At that time she was, I believe, the only woman bishop in the world. When the uniformed official opened the door I said, 'Sir, this is an historic moment: for the very first time a woman bishop stands on the doorstep of No. 10'. With typical British phlegm he replied, 'Indeed, Sir'—in a tone of voice that clearly indicated his unalterable conviction that no such entity could exist. But he was wrong, and so are all those who stand against the tide of truth. For the myth of male superiority is a sexual disorder of the most serious kind. It distorts and disfigures the whole life of humanity. It is an alien intrusion into the world as God intended it to be.

I thank you for your patience. I have taken you on a journey across contested ground. On all the issues I have raised we hear a babel of voices. All must be heard lest we miss some crumb of truth. But

Christians must long above all else to hear the voice of God, 'the voice that breathed o'er Eden'. For it is only in obedience to that voice that we can hope to regain the paradise we have lost.