



Auckland Community Church

Easter 2007

Given by Mark Henrickson on the 7th October 2007

Readings : Song of Songs 3:1-4 2, Corinthians 5:14-17, John 20:1-2 11-18

Jesus said: *You did not choose me, but I chose you and appointed you that you should go and bear fruit that your fruit should last.*

It is, as always, a privilege to worship among you this day, and to preach on ACCs high holy day of Serge and Bacchus. We have heard part of their story again this evening, and surely every person who has struggled with their own sexual identity and longings for fulfilment in love will identify with their bittersweet story. Whilst there is no direct evidence to confirm that these two Christian martyrs were lovers in the modern sense of the word, there is equally no evidence to suggest that they were not. Queer communities have imposed our Western, contemporary assumptions and models of male-male relationships on these two, just as the churches have. Gay communities would like to think perhaps that Serge and Bacchus were martyred because of their love, but they were, martyred, as were Perpetua and Felicitas, because they refused to renounce their love of Christ, not of each other. Even so, we know what it is like to love deeply, profoundly, completely, and yet to be kept apart from a full and complete expression of that love by the forces of social exclusion, and even by our own self-imposed fears, anxiety and silence.

Similarly, we would like to think that David and Jonathan were lovers in the modern Western construction of that term, and that David just happened to have to get married with at least four named wives and umpteen other concubines, not to mention Bathsheeba. There is something almost satisfying to us in the longing of David and Jonathan, as though it mirrors our own adolescent crushes and unrequited dreams of perfect love. But again, there is no clear evidence for or against that assumption. So we make of it what we like. And what we like is to see two men, beautiful in our dreams, who loved each other deeply if for no other reason than it makes homophobic Biblical literalists squirm just a little bit more.

These are the stories that have survived over the centuries, and we make them our own, aware that there are doubtless countless other stories that did not survive. These stories are remarkable in that they are about (and probably by) men. Women may not find these stories particularly astonishing, or admirable, nor would we find these stories particularly memorable if they were about women. Women, after all, are socially expected to have tender feelings for each other, to hold hands, embrace and kiss their intimate friends, to have heartfelt relationships: was anyone undone by Anika Moa's disclosure last weekend? For men such feelings and their expressions are more complex, as anyone who has watched the complicated push-pull embraces and hair rubbing after an important try at the rugby World Cup can attest. For Gods sake, just kiss him! we moan to our televisions, clutching our Dan Carter underwear adverts. Would there be such a frisson at the netball? Would we be surprised? Would we care?

And so Serge and Bacchus become male symbols of love, and have been adopted by contemporary gay male communities as a kind of talking point about loving relationships between men; loving, sexual relationships, that is. It is an interesting coincidence that these saints have also been adopted as the patron saints of desert nomads, because these saints also give our love a home, an historical and even divine justification for our

love, if we need one. But we know, of course, that our love, indeed our identities, are divine gifts and need no justification or defence in this world or the next.

Jesus said: *□ You did not choose me, but I chose you and appointed you that you should go and bear fruit that your fruit should last.*

The gospel reading from John that we heard tonight comes from a lengthy discourse that Jesus gave his disciples at the last supper, just after Judas had gone out. Jesus knew he was about to be betrayed, arrested, humiliated, and crucified. Understandably, then, he was in a reflective mood, and we must consider everything in this section as of great urgency. It would be the last opportunity that Jesus had to speak privately with his closest friends. In John this speech is filled with rich imagery; Jesus describes himself as the true vine, the true Israel, fulfilling a vocation in which the old Israel had failed, through disobedience to the Law. Jesus urges the disciples to be faithful and to bear fruit; he urges them that is to be in a full and complete relationship with God the Creator, through Christ. In that way the Church, the new community of faith, would remain faithful to its mission of faithfulness and hesed, or justice-love. The old vocation of Israel was fulfilled through obedience to the law. The new mission of the new Israel could be fulfilled in only one way: through love. *This is my commandment: that you love one another*□. The old law is now gone. The new law is here: it is, simply, love.

Tonight is also a celebration of people who share romantic love with a same-sex partner (hows that for inclusive language!). Does that mean that people in partnerships are privileged, or that other people are excluded? I dont think so. Whilst I value and honour committed relationships, one of the amazing things about what we now call the queer communities over the centuries throughout the world is their capacity to embrace all kinds of relationships and the many different ways that human beings can and do love one another. Partnerships, dyads, triads, communal families, closed, open, and dont-ask-dont-tell relationships, men, women, transgendered and intersex in all kinds of combinations and permutations, in each others clothes and out of them, people with all kinds of variant identities and relationships have found a kind of home in queer communities. In 1976 I even heard the venerable homosexual (as he called himself) British theologian Norman Pittinger defend casual (read: anonymous) sex as an improvement on masturbation because at least it involved some kind of relationship!

There are so many variations on who we are that it is pretty clear that we couldnt be making this up: there is a gloriously multifarious array of human sexual identity and relationships in every time, in every place, in every culture, and surely it is those who are intolerant of that divine gift of identities who fail to fulfil the new commandment of Christ. What links this motley collection of communities together is our will to be true to the divine identities and love that we experience within ourselves. Perhaps it is we who have been chosen to witness to Jesus new commandment to the world. Perhaps it is we who have been called to bear all kinds of fruit that was perhaps forbidden under the old law, but that is now part of our divine mission.

One of the key things about the Serge and Bacchus story is that these two faithful Christians were confident about their faith, but they were not arrogant about it. Their story illuminates the new commandment of Jesus. Their story has borne fruit in that it illustrates the power of Christian love. But we in gay communities must be very careful about this kind of illustration of love, because most historical examples of Christian love involve one or more people dying a horrible death. We in queer communities are good at being martyrs and perceiving ourselves as victims. The 25 years of the HIV epidemic has only served to amplify that feeling. It seems to me that the risk that attends the Jesus story, in the Serge and Bacchus story, even in our own personal stories, is that there is a glorification of victimhood.

You and I do not need to behave as victims any longer. In Aotearoa New Zealand we have come a very long way in an historically very short period of time: in 25 years we have come from a place where we were illegal to a place where our relationships are now legalised. Twenty-five years ago Annika Moas revelation would have resulted in her records being pulled off the shelves, and now they are downloadable free on offer from the major newspaper in the country. Queer communities in New Zealand are no longer victims: we walk the halls of Parliament, and we are part of every walk of life, including the pulpits and altars of every single Christian denomination and congregation. We are here, we are queer, it is the destiny Christ chose for us, and John Banks and his ilk will just have to get used to it.

And of course there are many place in the world where there is much work to be done. Because we are privileged in Aotearoa New Zealand we have a responsibility to continue to work to help free our brothers and sisters in repressive countries and cultures such as Nigeria and Iran. We must ensure that repressive leaders such as Mahamoud Ahmadinejad know that we are here, that our phenomenon does exist in his country, and that we will not tolerate the oppression and murder of our queer brothers and sisters for another moment. We must put unrelenting pressure on Amnesty International, the United Nations, the World Health Organisation and other international organisations, and our own government, to ensure justice for queer communities throughout the world.

At the very least we as Christians can and must pray for our queer sisters and brothers who are still victims and who do face martyrdom today; and we can and must transform those prayers into action. We do this not only because we can, but because the gospel of Christ calls us to do it. It is our call to ensure that every street, every classroom, every home in New Zealand is safe for queer people; and then to continue that work with queer communities throughout the world. In that way we can ensure that the deaths of Serge and Bacchus have meaning. We do this work because we have been chosen for it by Christ himself. We do this because hesed, justice-love is our mission as Christians. We do this because we know how hard-earned is the right to be true to our God-given identities. We do this because we have learned how to love.

May God this night continue to inspire us with the story of Serge and Bacchus, and with the witness of Christ, so that we may find the courage to be witnesses to justice and to love throughout the world.

Amen.