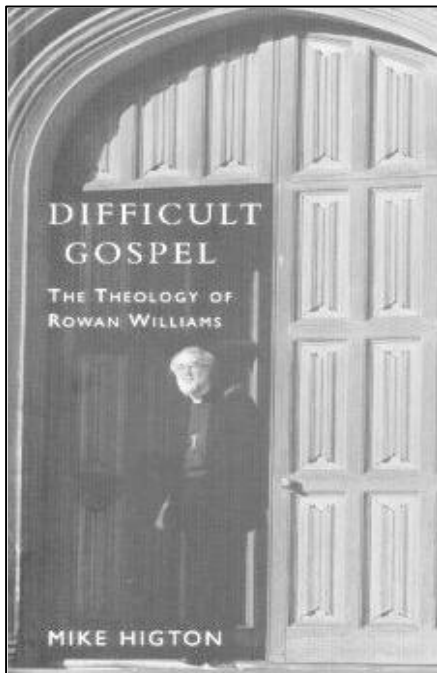


# Difficult Gospel

The Theology of Rowan Williams

Mike Higon



September 13 • Disarming Acceptance-----	1
September 20 • Source of Life-----	4
September 27 • Cloud of Witnesses -----	6
October 4 • Adulthood and Childhood-----	8
October 11 • Sex and the Gospel -----	11

Canon Jim Irvine  
*animator*

DIFFICULT GOSPEL

Archbishop Rowan Williams

Session 1 – Disarming acceptance

Text

Notes

**1-A**

To believe in this loving acceptance is to know this self to be judged and overturned; to hear this ‘Yes’ is to hear a ‘No’ to the current shape of our lives. And so the Gospel comes to us as a gift and as a task, or rather a gift that is a task. It comes to us as a completely free, utterly gratuitous, totally unearned gift, with the givenness of a wholly loving relation – but it is nevertheless a gift that we have to *learn* to accept, if we are not, like Jacob, to walk away from it, taking our possessions with us. [18]

**1-B**

If the first question that Rowan Williams’ understanding of the Gospel puts to us is ‘What difference does it make to my self-understanding if I believe myself to be held in a loving, accepting gaze?’, the second question is, ‘What difference does it make to our understanding of how we might live together if we believe that *each* of us is held in the same loving regard?’ [19]

**1-C**

[T]he Gospel pushes its own question at us in response: aren’t our normal ways of seeing this questionability, ways which assume the primacy of competition, exclusion, insecurity, and violence, themselves part of the problem?

The Gospel message is, for Williams, not simply one which percolates down into the lower reaches of our psyche, loosening the knots which have held us in place and enabling us to live with a new kind of freedom as mortal creatures in an overwhelming world. It is, also, unavoidably social: it forces us to rethink the ways in which we organize our relations with others - family, friends, neighbourhood, nation, world. None of our relationships are left untouched by this Gospel, and it cannot remain a personal or private matter. The Gospel is unavoidably *political*. [20]

**1-D**

The Gospel is a message of disarming acceptance, a message of crucifying love. But who is it that accepts us? Who is it that loves us? After all, the Gospel is not, for Williams, a self-help mantra that we repeat to ourselves in the mirror every morning, a message that we create and control, and can modify to suit our felt needs. Nor is it a message about a generalized, abstract idea of love, distilled on a laboratory bench or in a theologian's study. It is not the message that we are loved by nobody in particular, or that we can and should love ourselves. It is a message from beyond us; it is a message that we hear but do not own, a message which always retains the power to challenge

and upset our understanding of it; it is a message that has a particular shape which we do not control, and which we must painstakingly learn. But where or who does it come from? [21]

#### **1-E**

Williams says, the first Christians heard the Gospel not when they invented a message of love to sooth themselves, but when they were addressed or called out of themselves by Jesus of Nazareth. His whole life was the message of disarming acceptance to them. [21]

#### **1-F**

Jesus, who had been betrayed, handed over, tortured, and crucified, returned to his betrayers and his torturers, still bearing the marks of their betrayal and their violence, still as the crucified one, and once again stepped over the barrier that their rejection and abandonment had created between themselves and him – and offered them his love, his acceptance. He, their victim, offered them forgiveness and the possibility of transformation, creating with them a community of forgiven people. The resurrection, says Williams, creates forgiven persons, in a community of the forgiven. [22]

#### **1-G**

The Gospel which we see in Jesus' life tells us that we are held in *God's* loving regard. It is not a message we invent for ourselves each morning, hoping to shore up our flagging self-regard before facing another grueling day; it is a message that tells us the deepest truth about ourselves. It is not a message about a lifestyle which we might choose to entertain; it is a message about the true source and end of human life – a message about the character of the one who holds us in being, the one who draws us onwards. ... [The disciples] believed they had encountered 'the primary and irreducible *meaning* of what it is to be human, the fundamental context of what we say about God'. [27]

#### **1-H**

The disciples did not meet in Jesus something which resembled God's love, or something which taught them what God's love was like; they did not simply encounter something which transformed their understanding of God's love: they encountered God's love itself. They encountered, in Jesus, God loving them. [29]

#### **1-I**

Christian talk of incarnation directs our whole attention to the whole shape of Jesus' life; it is Jesus' whole life that is the Word of God. This fully human life, lived in a particular time and place, among a particular group of people, is God's word of acceptance and judgement for us; this messy, complex, finite, bounded reality, a life lived jostled by disciples, crowds, opponents – a life lived towards and on the cross – is God's face turned towards us. [30]

### **1-J**

[T]he healing which the risen Jesus brings – the transforming effect of his acceptance – is not something complete and achieved all at once, as if his resurrection were simply the dispensable trigger for that healing, or a ladder that could be kicked down once it has been climbed. That healing is something that is worked out only in constantly repeated encounter with Jesus, as his disarming acceptance is repeated heard afresh and its meanings discovered in deeper areas of our lives, new areas of our world. As Williams puts it:

“Jesus grants us a solid identity, yet refuses us the power to ‘seal’ or finalize it, and obliges us to realize that this identity only exists in an endless responsiveness to new encounters with him in the world of unredeemed relationships” [32]

### **1-K**

The disciples, and all Christians, become carriers of the acceptance and the judgement that they have encountered in Jesus, not as people who live fully the gracious acceptance he has demonstrated (we remain ambiguous, conflictual, more Esau than Jesus) nor as people who grasp fully the message they bear, but as those who point continually away from themselves and towards the living one whom they trust. The righteousness which Christians take out into the world is Christ’s, not their own. [32f.]

### **1-L**

The revelation which found Christianity is not the revelation of ‘a theory of everything’, an intellectual or practical system which tells us everything worth knowing. It is, instead, the irrupting into historical life of God’s pure, selfless love for us in Christ – that love which comes to us as a gift and as a question. ... What difference does that make *here*? What is it to hear this question *now*? What would it be to believe the Gospel of Jesus Christ *here and now*? [33]

### **1-M**

This is the unrelenting focus of Williams’ discussions of the Gospels: the cross of Christ, which stands as a condemnation of all our attempts to secure for ourselves the kind of consolation, the kind of security, which Christ refused. Williams is painfully aware of the many ways in which we dilute this Gospel, trying to make it more palatable. We do not, it seems, wish to live with the implications of a loving acceptance so total, and so universal; we do not wish to see our defences and achievements bypassed and rendered irrelevant; we do not wish to be shown up as fearful and deceitful. We coat even the cross with sugar, and protect ourselves from the bitterness of the Gospel. [35]

## DIFFICULT GOSPEL

Archbishop Rowan Williams  
Session 2 – The Source of Life

*Text*

*Notes*

### **2-A**

The word ‘God’, in Christian theology, does not name a being or reality of unfettered power, who has chosen to love – it does not, that is, name a reality in which power goes deeper than love. Rather, it names a reality for whom – if I may put it like this – love goes all the way down. In the Christian picture, God’s power always and only emerges from God’s love – God’s will from God’s loving nature – and so love trumps power, every time. There is no shadow of power without love in God. [39]

### **2-B**

Christians are called, according to Williams, to the ongoing task of working at all our ways of speaking about God in order to root out of them anything that has not been shaped by the Gospel. The God of the Gospel is one who loves; so Christian theology must learn to speak in such a way as to show that love in God goes all the way down, and is not trumped by power. The God of the Gospel is one who gives life; so Christian theology must find ways of proclaiming that God is wholly, unreservedly giving. The God of the Gospel is one who is not defeated by our betrayals and failures, but who always continues to call us to fellowship; Christian theology is called to think of God in ways which do not limit the resourcefulness of his call, the creativity of his love. [41f.]

### **2-C**

To think of God as anything like an isolated individual who decides to come into relationship is to betray the Gospel – it is to reserve some part or aspect of God’s being from the Gospel, to say that there is some territory in God which is not thoroughly caught up in the Gospel. [43]

### **2-D**

God is not one more character on the script, one with whom we must negotiate: he is the author of the script, the paper on which it is written. [47]

### **2-E**

There is always more of God; God is always breaking out of the conceptual boxes into which we have placed him. We cannot predict where the journey into knowledge of God’s love will take us

Williams finds something like this proclaimed in the resurrection, drawing a parallel between the stories of the empty tomb, and the stories of the empty space between the cherubim on the top of the ark of the covenant in the Old Testament. The latter functioned as a constant reminder to Israel that their God was an uncontrollable and inexhaustible presence. The empty tomb, Williams suggests, does something similar for us: it

prevents us from thinking that Jesus' identity and work is finished and receding into the past; it prevents us from thinking that we have done with it and can move on to new things or supposedly deeper levels of spirituality. The Jesus who is represented by the empty tomb is a Jesus who has a continued, uncontrollable, and inexhaustible presence; the Jesus represented by the empty tomb cannot be controlled or tied down or finished with. [49]

## **2-F**

It is God himself who lobs rocks into the smooth pond of our language about God, shattering our complacency – and only so can he keep us from preferring the idols which our words construct. '[W]e must be surprised, ambushed and carried off by God,' Williams says, 'if we are to be kept from idols.' 'God himself is the great "negative theologian", who shatters all our images by addressing us in the cross of Jesus.' [51]

## **2-G**

[T]he temptation ... is to think that this warning applies to other people, to people who have not heard the Gospel, perhaps, or people who perversely cling to a theology less pure than ours. *They* are the ones who need to hear this; *we*, of course, have ears to hear ... No doubt the High Priest and his court, who knew their Scriptures well and prayed and worshipped often, would have said something similar. Yet for us, as for them, to defend ourselves in this way from Jesus' challenge is already for our voices to slip into the old accents of 'the insane world'; it is to close our ears to God's shattering judgement. [53]

## **2-H**

Williams stresses at every available opportunity, there is nothing in God that is kept back from relationship, from gift, from involvement. [54]

## **2-I**

Whatever metaphors one chooses, however, there is something overwhelming at work: a searing light or a torrential current; a life that refuses to be domesticated. Just as with his focus upon the cross, Williams' vision of God will allow us no easy Gospel: to know God is to be caught in this fierce current, and to have all the comforting accretions which have cushioned us against its flow stripped away, one by one.

If the Church is to do justice to a vision like this, then we must realize more clearly that we sometimes do that our journey into knowledge of God is unending, and sometimes a painful journey, on which our images of God need repeatedly to be torn down and remade – and that our sacraments and liturgies, our hymns and songs, our sermons, our courses and retreats, all exist to serve this journey. [59f.]

## DIFFICULT GOSPEL

Archbishop Rowan Williams  
Session 3 – Cloud of Witnesses

*Text*

*Notes*

### 3-A

The Gospel is not a message that we can tell ourselves – it is not the sort of message that can be derived from a little introspection or analysis: we need to hear it, to be won into it – to be taught it. [61]

### 3-B

Theology, if it is to speak about the Gospel, has to be scriptural – in the sense that it must be, by means of Scripture, exposed to God’s unsettling love as it showed itself in one particular history; it must be tripped up by it, turned round by it, questioned by it, and provoked to wonder by it. In fact, ‘The essential test of a theology claiming to be “scriptural”,’ according to Williams, ‘is whether it begins and ends in this sort of wonder.’ [62]

### 3-C

Williams suggests that we have developed many ways of avoiding Scripture – many ways of refusing to listen to it, ways of refusing to pay attention to the witness it provides to something intractably historical. There are obvious and overt ways in which this takes place, but there are also more subtle ways: Williams argues, for instance, that all too often we rush to substitute our unifying, systematizing, harmonizing readings or summaries of the text for the text itself – stepping away from the kind of historical *learning* to which this Gospel calls us, to something quicker, easier and more controllable. [63]

### 3-D

Williams’ is a theology that requires of us slow, patient, loving, repeated reading of Scripture; reading practiced intensely and devoutly over years; reflective and prayerful reading; reading which begins and ends at the foot of the cross, however strange and difficult the journeys are which it takes along the way. But Williams’ theology also requires of us to read *in company*. Because the Bible is not immediately and effortlessly transparent – because we do not simply open its pages and let its meanings leap fully formed in our minds – we constantly need to learn how to read from others. To accept the primacy of the difficult and awkward text, rather than the authority of my own smooth harmonization of it, means accepting the necessity and value of discussion, debate, argument, even conflict, between readers of the Bible.

### 3-E

The Christian tradition can be thought of as a vast living exegesis of the Bible – a vast training ground in scriptural reading, a vast ongoing excavation of the riches which are buried there. [68]

### **3-F**

“If we had to choose between a Church tolerably confident of what it has to say and seeking only for effective means of saying it, and a Church constantly engaged in an internal dialogue and critique of itself, and exploration to discover what is central to its being, I should say that it is the latter which is the more authentic.”

Rather than thinking of the Church as the bearer of answers, it might be better to think about the Church as the bearer of a question – the bearer of the question which the Gospel poses; we might say with Williams that the Church is ‘[t]hat which transmits God’s question from generation to generation’. [69]

### **3-G**

Williams can say that ‘The Christian is involved in seeking conversion – the bringing to judgement of contemporary struggles, and the appropriation of some new dimension of the transforming summons of Christ in his or her own life’; the Christian, that is, is one who seeks to hear Christ’s question ever more deeply in his or her own life, and seeks to bring others to hear that question too. The Christian’s vocation is not to answer every question and make everything simple, but to bring every answer to Christ, to be questioned by him – and thereby, in a sense, to make everything difficult. [70]

### **3-H**

‘[T]he great mark of discipleship to the risen Christ is, as the New Testament has it, that we eat and drink with him after his resurrection.’ This is a gift which sets no preconditions. It is given to the faithful and faithless alike, and is given again and again and again despite the deepest failures and betrayals – and so it is a gift that demands everything of us. [73]

### **3-I**

Heresy is any drastic deduction in the capaciousness of Christian language – the resource which it provides for making sense, and for asking questions, in any and every situation. It is any too strong culling of orthodoxy’s rich and diverse ‘doctrinal ecology’, ‘a variety of theological discourse wide enough to communicate the full and disorienting significance of the generative theological experience’. [83]

### **3-J**

Jesus calls us to share his life, and the life which he shares with us is a life of self-giving. If we are drawn into this life of self-giving, then it will be by ourselves becoming self-givers – and that means that our selves will become gifts – gifts to God, and gifts to each other. To put it another way, we could say that to be drawn into the life of Christ is to become those who pass on that life, by embodying that life in our own distinctive ways: the medium of the giving is our own lives; what we give is a

reflection of the life of Christ in our particular circumstances – the life that emerges when his whole life is brought to bear on each of our whole lives. We become those whose lives give God’s life – and that is what it means to be Church. [84f.]

#### DIFFICULT GOSPEL

Archbishop Rowan Williams

Session 4 – Adulthood and Childhood

*Text*

*Notes*

#### 4-A

The call to adulthood is not a call to isolation, but a call to become unreservedly a giver and a receiver – to be caught up totally into the economy of giving. ‘[T]he resurrection gospel’, Williams says, ‘speaks of the proper expectation – the right – of all men and women to responsible identity, the capacity to be self-aware agents empowered to take active part in the “net of exchange” – the ‘net’ of giving and receiving. In different words ... it is a divine call, an invitation to become fully ‘personal’, where ‘personal’ means something like ‘constituted by what we receive from others and by what we give in return’. In still other words, it is a call to the life of the spirit.

‘[F]lesh’, as St. Paul uses the term, is ... a word that describes human life minus relationship. Or perhaps ... human life that is not properly inhabited. Flesh is human life somehow alienated, cut off from its environment, cut off from the life of spirit which in St. Paul’s usage is always about relation ... The gift of the spirit in St. Paul’s theology is a gift that always brings relation. And the life of the spirit, as opposed to the life of the flesh, is life in free relation to God and generous relation to one another. [90f.]

#### 4-B

Our ability to act is a result of our having learnt a language through which we can respond to the world, a language which shapes our responsiveness, giving it more or less discrimination, more or less resilience. Our ability to act therefore *depends* upon what we have received, *depends* upon others having acted upon us. We act by means of the gifts we have been given. [94]

#### 4-C

The Gospel calls us to recognize ‘the breakdown of performance and the emptiness of gratification’. [95]

#### 4-D

Williams argues that, however much it has from time to time been a note sounded uncertainly by Christians, Christian theology has from its earliest years required us to value bodiliness and finitude. Christians have, however falteringly, found that the Scriptures they have inherited, the stories of incarnation and bodily resurrection that they believe, and the

rites of baptism and of Eucharist that they practice, make more sense if we assume that the Gospel has to do with the drawing creaturely beings – souls *and* bodies, inhabited flesh – into relationship with a transcendent God.

The Christian vision holds our hope not of escape but of redemption. It does not, that is, give us the hope of an escape or rescue *from* bodiliness, finitude, and creatureliness, but the hope of salvation *of* bodiliness, finitude, and creatureliness. It holds out a vision in which ‘Our language and our bodies will not be mechanisms for isolating ourselves, but will be the sharing of God with each other, the showing to one another of the divine freedom and creative mercy ... We shall be to each other not idols but icons, effective signs of God’s transfiguration of the world.’ It holds out a vision not of the stripping away of flesh, but of flesh become meaningful. [96f.]

#### 4-E

The forgiveness, the acceptance, which meets us in the Gospel is one which sees all this mess that we are in – all this mess that we are – and sees what it can become, how it can be transformed, how it can be made to shine. What we are given by God’s acceptance is ‘hope, the apprehension of present truth, present reality as infinitely open to the transfiguring and glorifying action of God’.

Williams’ central biblical example for all this is Simon Peter’s encounter with the risen Jesus in Galilee. Having betrayed Jesus three times, he is deliberately reminded by Jesus of his betrayal. ... Jesus invites Peter to discover that his betrayal has not broken the call which God has for him. He is invited to discover that Jesus ‘accepts, forgives, bears and absolves the hurt done’, and that he can take Peter the betrayer and make him the feeder of his sheep. What Peter receives is not ‘innocence’ – the pretence that his betrayal did not happen – but transfiguring *grace*. [98f.]

#### 4-F

Williams suggests that becoming adult, in a Christian sense, will involve us in the careful, prayerful, disciplined nurturing of certain ways of seeing and acting – and that those careful, prayerful disciplines might cluster around at least two foci, which he calls the ‘dark night’ and ‘contemplative pragmatism’.

The ‘DARK NIGHT’

... falls time and time again on one aspect of the process of learning by which we mature into adulthood – an aspect which he learned above all from John of the Cross and from Luther. We must, if we are to become adults, be weaned from gratification, and that includes being weaned from our attempts to package God and grace as commodities which fit neatly into our world. In particular, we need to be weaned from the notion that God is worth pursuing because of how he makes us feel, or because of how he helps us cope, or because of what he enables us to do. We need to be weaned from any notions that God is worth pursuing *because of*

anything else. God is not the means to any end; God *is* the end. To be loved truly, God must be loved for his own sake – or, to put it a different way, God must be loved for nothing. [102f.]

#### **4-G**

‘CONTEMPLATIVE PRAGMATISM’

...is ‘an attitude of time-taking, patient, absorbing awareness of the particular situation you’re in ... a willingness to look at apparently secular, apparently unpromising situations, to look long enough and hard enough for God to come to light...’ ... God works in and through the messy stuff of the world – other people, ourselves, the Church, the situations in which we find ourselves – but what God reveals of Godself through these things is not something we can safely predict in advance; it is an ‘utter strangeness’, a ‘revolution’, which we will need ‘enormous selfless patience’ to discern. [104]

#### **4-H**

What are we teaching children in a culture where their achievement is measured and tabulated at every turn, and the success or failure of the adults and institutions around them is made to rest on their results – an environment in which children are taught that value comes on numerical scales, and that life consists of the struggle to move up those scales? What are we teaching children in a world where language is dominated by ‘the deadness of bureaucratic jargon, the deadness of uplifting waffle, the deadness of acronyms and target setting’ rather than the development of resources for linguistic discrimination and expression, the developing of a resource for the patient exploration of the world, and ‘for the extremities of experience, obsessive passion or jealousy, adoration, despair’? ... We race to teach children what they do not need, and neglect what they do need; we fit them for the market, but do not win them to the world of speech and interaction, of relationship and gift. [108f.]

## DIFFICULT GOSPEL

Archbishop Rowan Williams  
Session 5 – Sex and the Gospel

Text

Notes

### 5-Background

We are very good at letting ourselves off the hook. When we look for clear moral guidance, we often do so in part so that we do not have to *think* – so that we do not have to ponder our actions, or ask ourselves what they communicate. If we're following the rules, we think, we must be all right, so there is nothing further to be said. This is Atkins diet morality: we see ourselves as consumers faced with a supermarket shelf of possibilities; we check our rule book to see which ones we are not allowed, and then happily and without deliberation are able to do whatever we like with the items that remain. Unsurprisingly, Williams thinks that making moral decisions is a good deal more difficult than this. [135]

### 5-A

What we seek as we choose our path in life is what reflects the demands of the covenant, what is an appropriate response to the complete commitment of God to us. The Law tells me what kinds of action in themselves represent betrayal of God, but in deciding what, positively, I must do, I seek to show the character of God who has called me through my people and its history.

'How can we so act to *show* the character of God?' is a far more demanding question, and a far more open question, than 'Is this on the list of forbidden actions or not?' It is a question which demands of us not just knowledge (of what the law demands) but *wisdom*: the kind of responsiveness, discrimination and insight built up by slow, deep learning of the nature of God. [135f.]

### 5-B

...[T]hese are people I meet at the Lord's table; I know they hear the scriptures I hear, and I am aware that they offer their discernment as a gift to the Body ... I am forced to ask what there is in this position that I might recognize as a gift, as a showing of Christ.

Struggling to be as open as he can to what this discernment might have to offer to the body, Williams recognizes that his opponents' stance

Reminds me that in a violent world the question of how we take responsibility for each other, how we avoid a bland and uncostly withdrawal from the realities of our environment, is not easily or quickly settled. In this argument, I hear something that I need to hear which, left to myself, I might not grasp.

He can glimpse a dim flicker of gift in his opponents' action – but is forced to ask, is this enough? Is it enough to ameliorate his sense that

they are speaking a wholly different language, and one which does not build up but destroys the Body of Christ? Should this be, for Williams, a point at which he finds himself out of communion with his opponents – a point at which he can no longer recognize that they are serving the same Christ? [137f.]

#### **5-C**

The temptation [is] to forget that ‘Unity at all costs is indeed not a Christian goal; Christian unity is “Christ-shaped” or it is empty.’ [139]

#### **5-D**

The question we face when making moral decisions is, ‘Can my action come to show Christ to others?’ – and the question we face when asking whether our disagreements must break our communion is, ‘Can I see that my opponents are making their decision in service to one who is recognizably the same Lord – recognizably the Jesus of the Gospel?’ [140]

#### **5-E**

Sex is – or at least can be – about mutual vulnerability, about being exposed to another, about being placed into another’s hand metaphorically as well as literally; it is about no longer being able to protect and secure my ego behind its own walls; it is about discovering the helplessness of the ego, and being pulled out of being centred entirely on myself. And at that same time it is about discovering ourselves as desired, as desirable, as loved and held – and as being given the gift of another person’s vulnerability, another person’s exposure, so that we have that other person’s vulnerability in our hands. [142]

#### **5-F**

It is only once Williams believes he has at least a provisional account of how sexual relationships can be an aspect of our humanity which can be made to speak of Christ that he can go on to start talking about what can be bad about sex, how sexual relationships might fail to speak of Christ, or might speak of Christ untruthfully. It is precisely because he has an account of sexual intimacy’s tremendous power for good that he can begin to think what the distortion and misuse of that power might look like – and so begin to speak about ‘failure’, ‘immaturity’, and ‘perversion’. [143]

#### **5-G**

The heart of Williams’ argument about homosexuality is an attempt to look at sex in the light of the Gospel, and to understand how sexual relationships might be part of lives being caught up by the Spirit into God’s life. That provides him with a biblical and theological basis on which to begin asking what kinds of sexual practices are in line with the Gospel, and what kind of sexual practices are wrong. Most of his conclusions are fully in line with traditional teaching, but he acknowledges

that on homosexuality his attempts to understand the implications of the Gospel do not lead him to 'affirm the Church's historical position' – but rather push him towards understanding the relevant biblical texts not as blanket condemnations of everything which we would think of as homosexual practice, but as making the Gospel sense only when they are seen as condemnations of certain kinds of 'rapacious' homosexual behaviour. The weight of the argument does not fall on his analysis of Romans 1 or of texts like it: he undertakes that analysis only in the wake of his attempt to bring the *core* of the biblical witness – the Gospel of God's disarming acceptance – to bear on his understanding of sex. So, his reading of Romans 1 and similar texts is not unimportant, but it is secondary – and has to be seen in the light of his commitment to a Gospel-centred or Christ-centred reading of Scripture in general. [147]

## Litany

*Used at the beginning of each session...*

Among family and friends and before God we are aware of the work-stale glances of those we encounter, of the quickly averted eyes of strangers, of the anticipated scrutiny of those we have yet to meet, of the assessing gaze of our employers carried around in our head, and of our own anxious self-regard. Let us pray to the Lord, saying... ***Lord, as you look on us as you looked on Peter, have mercy.***

What difference would it have made if we had let ourselves believe that, beyond all these, we are held in a wholly loving gaze?

***Lord, as you look on us as you looked on Peter, have mercy.***

What difference would it have made if we believed ourselves subject to a gaze which saw all our surface accidents and arrangements, all our inner habits and inheritances, all our anxieties and arrogances, all our history -- and yet a gaze which nevertheless loved that whole tangled bundle which makes us the self we are, with an utterly free, utterly selfless love?

***Lord, as you look on us as you looked on Peter, have mercy.***

What difference would it have made if we let ourselves believe that we were held in a loving gaze that saw all the twists and distortions of our messy selves, all the harm that we can do and have done, but also saw all that we could become, all that we could give to others, and all that we could receive?

***Lord, as you look on us as you looked on Peter, have mercy.***

What difference would it have made if we had seen each face around us in the week we have just lived -- cleaners, businessmen, emigrants and immigrants, waitresses, nurses and teachers, those aged and alone and those unemployed and retired -- as individually held in the same overwhelming, loving gaze?

***Lord, as you look on us as you looked on Peter, have mercy.***

What difference would it have made if we believed each person around us to be loved with the same focus, by a love which saw each person's unique history, unique problems, unique capacity, unique gift?

***Lord, as you look on us as you looked on Peter, have mercy.***

What difference would it have made if we believed that this love nevertheless made no distinctions between people more worthy and people less worthy of love, no distinctions of race, religion, age, innocence, strength, or beauty: a lavish and indiscriminate love?

***Lord, as you look on us as you looked on Peter, have mercy.***

Such unfettered acceptance would be utterly disarming; to believe such good news, such a Gospel, would have been very, very difficult.

***Lord, as you look on us as you looked on Peter, have mercy.***