

## **I Have Changed My Mind: by The Rt. Rev. Mark Sisk**

*The Right Rev. Mark Sean Sisk has been Bishop of the Episcopal Diocese of New York, one of the Episcopal Church's largest dioceses with over 200 congregations since 2001. The City of New York is the only American city straddled by two dioceses, one is ours, the Diocese of Long Island and the other is the Diocese of New York. Brooklyn and Queens are part of the Long Island Diocese. The Diocese of New York covers the boroughs of Manhattan, Staten Island and the Bronx, as well as several northern suburban counties.*

I not only could change my mind, I have. There was a time, a long time, when I did not question the traditional teaching of my Christian faith on the matter of homosexual activity.

However, the time came when my work brought me into close working relationship with a priest I knew to be gay. He was an extraordinary pastor. He cared for the congregation committed to his care with faithful dedication.

His congregation, very much a suburban "family" congregation, flourished. They embodied a spirit of commitment to each other, of welcome to the stranger, and service to their community. At the very heart of their life was a palpable sense of the presence of God at the center of their common worship.

Clearly here was a man who had ministered in such a way that "the reconciling love of Christ (has been) known and received," as our ordination service charges. Further, as witnessed by the community, he had indeed "patterned (his) life in accordance with the teaching of Christ, (in order to be) a wholesome example to his people," as our ordination service also charges.

Here was priestly sanctity of life. Clearly God was doing something in and through the life and ministry of this gay priest. Once my eyes were opened to this possibility, I began to see it in many others.

It was in much the same way that my views on same sex union shifted. I began to notice that there were gay and lesbian couples in committed relationships whose lives bore the fruit that I had prayed for so often with the many heterosexual couples I had married over the years. In their relationship as well one could find that their "life together was a sign of Christ's love to this sinful and broken world, that unity might overcome estrangement, forgiveness heal guilt, and joy conquer despair."

How could all this be? This seemed to me far more than God forgiving the errant sinner. The lives that I saw, priestly as well as those in committed relationships, gave evidence of God's abiding support. They were rich and fruitful not only for the individuals themselves but also for the community of which they were a part.

The contradictions between what I saw and what I had been taught troubled me deeply. Pondering this conundrum I happened to read Matthew 7:15-18:

"Beware of false prophets, who come to you in sheep's clothing but inwardly are ravenous wolves. You will know them by their fruits. Are grapes gathered from thorns, or figs from thistles? In the same way, every good tree bears good fruit, but the bad tree bears bad fruit. A good tree cannot bear bad fruit, nor can a bad tree bear good fruit."

I have simply seen too much good fruit born from the tree of the life of gay and lesbian priests, as well as gay and lesbian couples in committed relationships, to dismiss this as other than God's blessing.

And, conversely, I have seen so much ill fruit born on the tree of life of those whose speech is filled with contempt for those who do not condemn gay and lesbian people, not to have noticed the parallel correspondence.

Within my faith tradition, the decision to be ordained is not solely a private choice. It is one that the community must support. I am glad that the Diocese of New York, which I serve as bishop, has made the decision not to ban gay or lesbian people from consideration. The primary criterion for ordination remains: does this person seem to have the gifts and qualities that will tend to help people comprehend God's love for them?

I do not claim or assert a unilateral right to operate on my personal convictions on these matters. I am a leader in the midst of a community. It is as a community that we must struggle with these issues.

At the end of the day I do not make the slightest claim to understanding the basis of sexual orientation. What I do understand are people who fervently and deeply believe in God as revealed in Jesus-people who have struggled profoundly with their own sense of self and their sense of God's call to them to live with integrity.

It is this witness, the fruit of their lives, and the fundamental convictions that all good comes from God, that has led me to my belief in the potential blessedness of the lives of gay and lesbian people, as they assume their rightful place within the community of faith, which it is my privilege to serve.