

Just Good Friends: Towards a Lesbian and Gay Theology of Relationships, Elizabeth Stuart (Mowbray 1995), 261 pp, £12.99 pbk

An older wise priest, commenting on recent public pronouncements of the Church of England on homosexuality said to me that we have always taken a long, tortured and costly route to the obvious! The truth of this assertion is tested and proved through an examination of the changes in official teaching on contraception and the accommodation of the remarried in church life. It is especially shown in the way the Established Church provided the intellectual and theological justification for hanging, thus preserving this public act for decades. It is to be hoped that in due time our Churches will move to a place where gay and lesbian Christians are affirmed and have a respected voice in theological and ecclesiastical discourse. This point, somewhere in the future, has to be worked for through intellectual and emotional honesty, social and political change, or just perhaps the Churches hem- prepared to be open to what others (often outside their walls) have to teach them. As we move to this place, the work of Elizabeth Stuart will have played a significant part in the process.

This book provides a convincing study of what lesbian anti gay people have to share through their experience of love, relationships, sex and learning from failure and the joy of mutuality and friendship.

'We are called to be passionate friends to each other and to God who is Passionate Friend' (p. 246) captures the thesis which is articulated with rigour, breadth and insight. Stuart shows that experience teaches us that the dynamics of sexuality and passion are present in all relationships and therefore we need to go beyond our present models of sexuality, marriage and celibacy to include these dynamics. One of the models that Stuart challenges is the social conditioning that lesbian and gay relationships undergo. Drawing on the work of Freud, she understands it to be the case that we are all initially bisexual and are shaped by a variety of factors both within and beyond our control. The central theme is our understanding of friendship as intimate, mutual and loving, an experience of connection and truth, and the basis for an inclusive theology of relationships. A wide variety of material is used in this book to illuminate and develop this theology; Scripture, history, experience, the social sciences and contemporary feminist theology. There is a sustained attack on marriage 'an institution born, formed and structured for and by patriarchy' (p. 174); the articulation of explicit sexual fantasy and practice; and the sensual use of images, feelings and reflections on what it means to be human. It interprets and explores Scripture to lead the reader into a deeper appreciation of the complexities of relating and articulates many of the dilemmas of ethics in discussion of boundaries, desire, and physical expression within friendship.

Any work of this kind will have its limitations. There is an unhelpful tendency to generalization and perhaps a liberation from the book's rather academic style would have produced a text with more freedom and accessibility. The thesis needs further testing: for

example, the category of relationships of radical vulnerability needs exploring and illuminating. Above all, one wonders who will read this work and how seriously Stuart should include other views, so that within the process of movement within the Churches there might be a place where dialogue can happen and hearts change, to bring about a structure where varieties of experience are contained and affirmed. Nevertheless this is an excellent book which deserves both thought and action.

James Woodward

Queen Elizabeth Hospital, Birmingham