

My Story

In case the trading standards people come knocking, I should start with a disclaimer: This isn't really a sermon (hurrah!). It's a story; it's my story. And I should begin by saying that I have the full blessing of my family and the Diocese to tell it.

I believe it now needs telling because many of you have understandably been confused and troubled by the recent news that Rachel and I are to divorce. When we first shared that news, I didn't have the strength or the courage to share the deeper story of 'why?'. Over the past weeks, however, the courage has been rising, and there's been a whole lotta love surrounding me. So, deep breath, and here goes.

It begins in small-town Ireland where, from an early age, I knew I was different. I tried my best to ignore it, deny it, conceal who I was, but deep down, I guess, I always knew I was gay.

And when I sought refuge within the Church, I quickly learnt not to speak of this because it was not and could never be God's perfect plan for my life. I came to believe that in God's eyes, I was wired imperfectly, that what I was feeling, that who I was, was 'wrong'. So again, I hid, and I prayed that God would fix me, and I learnt quickly the definition and the power of shame.

Aged 19, I swapped village life for the fast pace of Big City London, where I studied fashion design... (hello!! the clues were

there, folks). At college, I was surrounded by people like me, and yet I still didn't fit. The ingrained shame was just too powerful and my inherited theology made no room for anything other than a 'straight' or celibate life. And every church I was part of made that very clear. Yes, God loves people like me, He really does. But he absolutely hates it if we express that love to someone of the same sex. In fact, he has his own special word for that; 'abomination'.

Fast forward ten years, and I found myself at Bible College, where on the first day I bumped into 'the girl with the sparkly eyes', or Rachel as I soon discovered her name to be. And, immediately, against all the odds, I fell in love. It was a new feeling full of wild hope. And I dared to believe that God was mending me, that actually I was on my way finally to fulfilling my destiny as the straight man I really was.

We both believed, then and still, that God brought us together, that he wove our lives together for the healing of each other. Hope as I did, however, and as in love as I was, even this couldn't 'heal' the same-sex attraction within me. In those early days, I revealed my secret to Rachel, who instinctively already knew. But love had grown so quickly and so deeply, and we believed, naively perhaps, that we could make this work, and a few months later, I proposed. And 18 months later, we were married.

At the recommendation of our vicar at the time, I signed up for a course in conversion therapy, or as it's sometimes called 'pray the gay away'. I went willingly and desperately, but of course it didn't work. It just left me believing that I didn't have enough faith or self-discipline, and it managed, if that was even possible, to rub

the shame in deeper. I've since come to believe that something that tells you that *you*, your essence, is 'wrong' is as close to evil as I know. And in these past weeks of slowly coming out to friends and family, I've realised that the trauma of that process is still with me, still in need of the touch of grace.

A few weeks ago, completely by chance, I discovered an old exercise book of journal entries and poems written during those years. And I wept because every page was full of self-loathing. I wept for the young man who believed lies about himself. I wept for the Good Fridays Rachel and I walked through independently and together. I wept because I am now, at last, finally free of that shame. I wept because I can now look at myself in the mirror and see that I am and always have been what God created me to be. I'm proud finally to say I am a gay man.

And that, my friends, is a work of grace. At last, I know what Jesus meant when he talked about life in all its fullness. It was never about aspiring to some impossible ideal that required me to deny my very nature. Always, it's been about coming home to our true self. And, in coming out, I have finally come home.

Let me be clear, my marriage of 24 years to this incredible woman is not a failure. It's actually a love story. It has been, and post divorce will continue to be, kind and respectful and tender and loving. We will forever be indebted to each other for the gift of each other. And we have brought into this world two of the most magnificent humans I have ever met. But it's been lonely for us both, and at times painful. So, please, please believe us when we

say that our unbinding is our ultimate gift to each other, because when you love something, you set it free.

Why have I never shared this with you before? Two reasons. First, I wanted to protect myself and my family. Myself, because the world and certainly the Church (capital C) is still not a safe place for the likes of me. My family; because I didn't want anyone looking in and saying, 'Well, how does that work?', and I certainly didn't want the world to know before my children were ready to know. And, secondly, I didn't want anyone in our churches to feel conflicted, to feel they had to leave because of me.

We have a little blackboard which hangs just inside our front door, where we write inspirational quotes. All year, it's contained only one word; 'braver'. This week, Rachel changed it to 'fearless'... or 'fear less'. Hard and heartbreaking as these past weeks have been, Rachel and I have also known a freedom like we've never felt before, and a deep and holding joy in finally stepping bravely into a world with less fear.

I wanted you to hear my story from me, rather than second or third hand. Because my family and I are more than a soundbite; 'the vicar's gay!'. I wanted you to hear my story because if your theology can't agree with mine then at least look into my eyes and see a fellow human being just trying to live as authentically and fully and freely as I can, who no longer has anything to prove or protect, to hide or to fear.

You will, I imagine, need some time to process this. It's taken me 54 years, so take your time! But I hope I continue to have your support. I hope you know that I am still the Alan you've always known. You just know me a little better now! And I want to reassure you that my plan is to remain your vicar until God calls me elsewhere.

I said this wasn't a sermon, but maybe it is. Maybe there's something in this story that's for you. Maybe there's some deep-rooted shame that needs to be brought into the tender and kind light of our God. Maybe we need to be braver, or just fear less. Maybe there's some dormant or unfulfilled part of us that needs finally to be awakened. Maybe, there's one thing we can do today, to bring a greater fullness to this one fleeting life. Amen and amen.