

*'A simple positive statement from religious leaders could make a huge difference to someone like me, who may believe God hates them because of what a few preachers said.'*

This is the story of a lesbian woman who grew up in Eastern Africa. She has since gained asylum in the UK and helps other lesbian women, who are trying to do the same.

I grew up in a small African town and our home was a mixture of Christian and cultural beliefs. To a young person it could get confusing as to where one belief ended and another one began. But we were predominantly Christian.

It's illegal to be gay in the country in which I was born and raised, and there are harsh punishments. So I knew early on in coming to terms with my sexuality that who I am as a person was going to be a struggle in a church setting. Homophobic preaching was the norm, both in my local church and at my Catholic boarding school. And then there were the Evangelicals from the United Kingdom and America, who filled stadia to re-emphasise to thousands of people that being gay is the worst thing there ever was. It felt like a juggling act trying to reassure myself that God loved me no matter what and trying not to believe their preaching – that I was going to go to hell for just being me.

My partner and I were arrested and imprisoned because of our relationship. In the prison, gay people were treated worse than murderers. I finally succumbed to the preaching I'd received for so many years from church and school, and I came to believe that indeed God did hate me. And I must say, the feeling was mutual. I told myself that if He loved me, none of the things that were happening to me would be happening. Who loves someone and lets such things happen to them?

I wasn't on good terms with God for a long time. I couldn't understand why, if God talks through people to talk to us, the preachers and Evangelicals were spewing so much hate. I went through a phase of thinking 'What's the point?', because there wasn't anybody, among those who were supposed to be the voice of God, saying anything nice or good. I thought: 'Who can I look up to, to listen to God? If God wants me to hear something, surely He would send someone to give me His word, and if He is not doing that, then what's the point?'

There was and there remains so much hatred from people who are supposed to be Christians, who are supposed to preach the word of 'Love thy neighbour', but instead preach 'God hates you' and 'God hates this, God hates that'. I have struggled to see how they can reconcile the message of 'Don't judge others and let God do the judging' to them being the judge and jury. Their preachings would focus on one message from the Bible but ignore others. I found it so confusing and I thought: 'If they are choosing to ignore certain parts of scripture in favour of other parts, then what exactly am I supposed to believe?'

I've since learned not to listen to what the popular preachers, and those on television, say. I create my own relationship with God about what I believe and I focus on the good in people and how they act. For me, everyone reads the Bible in their own way. It's like a piece of art or a book; everybody will interpret it slightly differently than the next person. My interpretation is that we are supposed to love everybody, to not judge others and most definitely to not hate. So I choose to believe the good and I choose to be the good. I create my own relationship with God and His message and I relate to that, rather than to the human beings who preach it.

Eventually I was able to come to Britain to seek asylum. The journey was not the easiest or most straightforward, but on the way I met many people who didn't know me, but opened their arms and homes to me. They showed me that being a Christian goes far beyond just going to church and what you hear in church. It's how you conduct yourself as a person. And their behaviour is what I took on board more than the hate preaching I'd heard in the past. It's motivated me to try to live as a Christian example, and to be part of setting up an organisation to help other lesbian women, who have arrived in the country seeking asylum and probably feel like I felt back then: that everybody hates them.

Cliché as it may sound, I believe things happen for a reason and I'm now in a position to help other people that I would never have been able to help if I was still in Africa. I love making people feel like someone is in their corner, no matter what some others say. God has a purpose for me and I try to make a difference in my own way.

My hope is that we will see an increase in vocal, positive support for LGBT people from churches. While some churches might feel it's ok just to say nothing negative about gay people to their congregation, saying nothing at all is just as bad at a time when influential people like pastors, reverends and bishops are looked to for guidance. Many people struggle to reconcile their religion with their sexuality and go through life believing God hates them. They think their sexuality cannot co-exist with their faith. A simple positive statement from religious leaders could make a huge difference to someone like me, who may believe God hates them because of what a few preachers said.