

Diocesan Synod 1st March 2014

Same Sex Marriage: House of Bishops Pastoral Letter & Guidance

There we all were, the House of Bishops, including half a dozen of us Commissaries representing vacant dioceses but without a vote, sitting together in Church House, Westminster, the day after General Synod had ended, knowing we had a high impossible task ahead of us: to produce a document that we knew we had to produce, which would inevitably cause a great deal of hurt and anxiety to many of our clergy and lay people. None of us relished the task. We worked hard to improve the tone of the original draft we were presented with and I am not sure we succeeded that well. Such work by committee within the course of one day is not a good way to do it, but there was no other way given the time scale.

The whole matter touches on deeply held, viscerally felt convictions on all sides and we knew we ran the risk of being misunderstood. In the brief covering letter I sent out to the diocese to accompany the official document, I tried to point out that not everything should be seen in a negative light. There is great stress laid on the fact that as a Church we ought to be far more penitent about the lack of welcome and acceptance that LGBT people have experienced. It reminds me of a similar charge that can be laid against us from the 1950s and 60s for not showing a warmer welcome and understanding of the needs of immigrants coming to what for them was seen as the mother Church, and their being profoundly disappointed.

It was always unlikely that one day in CHW was going to see a change in 2000 years of Church teaching on marriage. We were attempting to respond to a new legal situation that was about to happen, whilst already being launched on a process of thinking and discussion about these things. The Gay Marriage proposals were introduced out of the blue (Tory blue at that!) and took the Church by surprise. For the Church this issue isn't only about equality and gay rights but touches on theological, biblical, ethical, missiological and ecclesiological issues as well. That is why the Pilling Report found itself somewhat overwhelmed by the pace of events. When it had begun its work a couple of years ago, gay marriage as a new law in this country was not on the horizon.

As we met that day we were aware that what we might say would have ramifications well beyond the Church of England: ecumenically within other denominations in our own country, at an interfaith level, at an Anglican Communion level. We were being watched. The Abp told us of his recent experiences in Sudan, Congo, Rwanda and Burundi. Even amid the carnage of war in the Sudan and in the Congo, he was constantly questioned about the Pilling Report. Later that day after our meeting he was just about to fly to Egypt to meet the Southern Primates – and he knew he would find a similar experience.

This is a holding statement on the part of the House of Bishops in a new situation. It reflects our history and our teaching. Yet the longer conversation goes on. We were aware that in the past the Church has had to come to terms with understanding changes in society. The Church has made statements in the past about matters which later saw a change or development e.g. divorce in the 19th century and in the 20th century the remarriage of divorcees and their status in the Church (NB the letter from David Martin, Linda Woodhead & Diarmuid McCulloch in The Telegraph this week). We knew this statement would cause hurt and dismay to some. I and my fellow bishops have received emails both from those who felt the bishops had been far too lenient and progressive and from those who understandably felt this was just another kick in the teeth to gays and another example of the Church's homophobia. It is a no-win situation. And that is the point. It is not about one side winning, hence the need for the facilitated conversations which Pilling has recommended and the House of Bishops are committed to.

David Porter, the Archbishop's Adviser on Reconciliation, will be giving us advice in three or four months' time, having worked on the task with a well chosen group, about how to facilitate these talks. Of course some may be unwilling to participate on the grounds that they believe the scriptural position is perfectly clear and facilitated conversations can only mean an intention to change. Others may be wary of sharing in these conversations if they feel they will not lead to any change and they then find themselves vulnerable and exposed. It is not yet clear how these conversations will happen in the dioceses. But we need to enter them with integrity and trust, for we are all searching God's mind and heart on this. All shades of opinion need to be at the table, prepared to be honest with one another, trusting that they are in a safe place, respecting one another.

The Biblical material will be central and issues of exegesis and hermeneutical method will be crucial. People may not necessarily change their minds through the biblical exploration, but I do hope we shall be able to get to the point where we can respect the integrity of the biblical interpretation of others, however hard that may be. We may agree to disagree, but no one will be taking the Bible lightly. Thoughtful and honest people can thoughtfully and honestly disagree, or as Abp Justin is fond of saying, we can learn to disagree well. We are God's people, all of us, and we seek to live and serve God faithfully.

We now stand on the threshold of Lent, when we look to the Cross and see there the body of Jesus torn apart and weighed down by our sins, our failure to live the life of the Kingdom. But beyond that we glimpse the empty tomb and new life in the risen Lord. That's where we are all called to be.

+Ian Dorking
St David's Day 2014