

Text for 2023

“And I pray that you, being rooted and established in love, may have power, together with all the Lord’s holy people, to grasp how wide and long and high and deep is the love of Christ.”

(Ephesians 3:17-18)

Dear Friends,

Bishops leading our Church into a mess of contradictions.

The vote in General Synod to welcome the Bishops’ plans to commend prayers written for the blessing of same-sex unions was widely reported in the media in February. Sadly, but not surprisingly, there was an overwhelming majority in favour of the proposals in the House of Bishops, but it should be noted that the majorities in the Houses of Clergy and Laity were small.

But something that wasn’t widely reported is that Synod’s approval came with the following amendment: “That this synod... endorse the decision of the College and House of Bishops not to propose any change to the doctrine of marriage, and their intention that the final version of the Prayers of Love and Faith should not be contrary to or indicative of a departure from the doctrine of the Church of England”.

On the face of it this is a reassuring statement for clergy like me who continue to teach what the Bible says concerning marriage: that it must be the union “of one man with one woman.” (Canon B30 of the Church of England.) But the amendment has left the Bishops with a flummoxing contradiction of expectations to try and reconcile.

If they insist on commanding a final version of their prayers at the next Synod then it’s obvious to those of us who think in a straightforward way that the Bishops will effectively be indicating a departure from the doctrine of the Church of England when it comes to marriage. In fact, as a result of the Synod vote, the watching world thinks that our denomination has already changed its mind and now approves of and intends to bless same-sex marriages; the only thing that puzzles non-Christians is why we don’t go the whole hog and actually solemnise the unions in our churches.

So what do the Bishops do? In the light of the amendment they ought to announce that they now feel bound to withdraw the prayers. It would be the right thing to do but we know that they’re unlikely to contemplate such a massive loss of face, and leading revisionists such as the Archbishop of York and the Bishops of London and Oxford are clearly determined to press on.

The alternative is that they commend the prayers and so effectively ignore the amendment. In which case the ball is very much back in our court; what do we do in order to maintain a clear orthodox biblical witness? The Church of England Evangelical Council, whose president is Julian Henderson our former Bishop, is already proposing that we will need a new structure that will enable us to be ‘visibly different’. This would be at a provincial level; in other words we would seek an archbishop other than York or Canterbury. If you have access to the internet you can

find out more by watching a 15 minute film on the CEEC website: "We Love The Church of England".

Another factor in all of this is the reaction of other provinces in the world-wide communion of Anglicans. The vast majority remain orthodox in their teaching on marriage and are dismayed that their "mother church" has fallen into such error. As someone who served for two years as a Mission Partner in the Anglican Church in Kenya in the 1980s it's painful to think that as a Church of England clergyman I could soon be out of communion with Anglicans in that country. It's clear that the implications for global Anglicanism also weigh heavily on the Archbishop of Canterbury; he must fear that his legacy will be to trigger the break-up of the Anglican Communion.

I encourage you to engage seriously with this whole matter. Please don't be complacent and think that it will be possible to rub along with the developments and that they won't have implications for our parish and diocese. Above all I urge you to pray.

Yours in Christ

Mark

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