

Saturday 22 April 2023

Dear brothers and sisters,

At Easter we celebrate the victory of goodness and life over evil and death, the glorious exchange where Jesus takes our brokenness, sin and shame, and in return gives us new life. Paul writes:

*Because of his great love for us, God, who is rich in mercy, made us alive with Christ even when we were dead in transgressions... it is by grace you have been saved, through faith – and this is not from yourselves, it is the gift of God.*

*Ephesians 2.4-5, 8 (NIV)*

Ephesians 2 is close to the beating heart of my faith as a disciple of Jesus. In it Paul describes how we go from being ‘dead in transgressions’ to being made ‘alive with Christ’ (2.5). **As if that were not enough**, God has plans for his people – ‘good works’ that he has ‘prepared in advance’ for us to do (2.10). **As if that were not enough**, God isn’t only interested in us as individuals: his purpose is to create a ‘new humanity’ even out of enemies, reconciled to one another and to God ‘through the cross’ (2.15-16). **As if that were not enough**, this new humanity has ‘access to the Father’, the creator and sustainer of the world (2.18) as ‘members of his household’, children together of God (2.19). **As if that were not enough**, God is still at work building us up, on the ‘foundation of the apostles and prophets’ (i.e. their work and writings in Scripture) with Jesus himself as ‘the chief cornerstone’: the stone which determines the position of the building (2.20). **As if that were not enough**, this is no ordinary building but a ‘holy temple’, ‘in which God lives by his Spirit’ (2.21-22).

This is the ‘mystery’ of the ages (Ephesians 3.6, 9) – once hidden but now made known – and it is the Church, which spans the world and world history. This is the gospel, the story of all stories, the outworking of God’s great love lavished upon a world of rebellious and broken people: God is making a new family of forgiven, holy and beloved children, and he is calling it ‘the Church’.

All this is cosmic and mind-blowing stuff, especially when we look at our day-to-day life which often feels very far from glorious! No wonder Paul prays God would open their (and our) eyes, hearts and minds to see beyond the struggle to the deep truth and reality of God at work in history:

*I keep asking that the God of our Lord Jesus Christ, the glorious Father, may give you the Spirit of wisdom and revelation, so that you may know him better. I pray that the eyes of your heart may be enlightened in order that you may know the hope to which he has called you, the riches of his glorious inheritance in his holy people, and his incomparably great power for us who believe. That power is the same as the mighty strength he exerted when he raised Christ from the dead and seated him at his right hand in the heavenly realms, far above all rule and authority, power and dominion, and every name that is invoked, not only in the present age but also in the one to come.*

*Ephesians 1.17-21 (NIV)*

Friends I echo this prayer with all my heart, for us and for all those who haven't met Jesus – yet.

**I echo Paul's prayer as we wrestle with questions of sexuality and marriage, that through all this we may 'know him better', and know the hope to which we are called: the 'glorious inheritance' of God's 'holy people', and his 'incomparably great power for us who believe' (Ephesians 1.18-20) – the power of Jesus' resurrection, of life through death.**

That is my prayer as a fellow disciple of Jesus Christ. For my first calling is to be a faithful disciple of Jesus, an adopted child of God, to take my place within God's family and to live 'a life worthy of the calling [we] have received' (Ephesians 4.1).

This is why I often think of and describe my vicar role as 'leading by following-with'. Ultimately Jesus is the leader of our church as he is 'the head' of *the Church* (Ephesians 4.15-16). Therefore I am first a fellow disciple of Jesus, living alongside you as we do our best to love and follow him with all our hearts. Yet there is more to my calling and role at Christ Church than this – and it is in that role that I am writing this letter.

In Ephesians 4 Paul says:

*Christ himself gave the apostles, the prophets, the evangelists, the pastors and teachers, to equip his people for works of service, so that the body of Christ may be built up until we all reach unity in the faith and in the knowledge of the Son of God and become mature, attaining to the whole measure of the fullness of Christ.*

*Then we will no longer be infants, tossed back and forth by the waves, and blown here and there by every wind of teaching and by the cunning and craftiness of people in their deceitful scheming. Instead, speaking the truth in love, we will grow to become in every respect the mature body of him who is the head, that is, Christ. From him the whole body, joined and held together by every supporting ligament, grows and builds itself up in love, as each part does its work.*

*Ephesians 4.11-16 (NIV)*

I believe this is a good summary of the work of those involved in 'leading' churches – the word 'leader' is often loaded with all sorts of unhelpful baggage, and is rarely used in the Bible except of God. Church 'leaders' are really 'servants' of Jesus, who is our true leader. More than that, in Christ Church I am not the only 'leader': I am not the only pastor, evangelist or teacher (nor am I actually the only 'priest' – see e.g. 1 Peter 2.9 and Revelation 1.6!). Yet my calling (and the gift of my salary or stipend) is to be set aside specifically to be those things, with the help of God's Spirit.

When I first read your parish profile I wept when I reached the person specification; when the Holy Spirit moves powerfully within me he often moves me to tears. It took a while for me to do something about it (sorry!) and almost a year before I was finally licensed, but that was the moment God called me to be the vicar of Christ Church. In what follows some of you agree with what I say wholeheartedly; some of you may disagree strongly; some of you will be somewhere in the middle; and others may well be simply confused – but wherever you are on that spectrum I am still the vicar of *everyone* in this church so I want to love and support *you* even if we disagree.

I began my application for the role of vicar of Christ Church with these words:

Jesus is my passion: following him, serving him faithfully, introducing people to him, seeing people changed by him; the ups and downs of my life have above all shown me the truth of his promise, 'I will be with you always.' Therefore what really matters to me is not the end result – that's up to God – but the *journey*: living for Jesus in holiness and love. I long for the church family to become ever more like Jesus.

My prayer is that in this letter I communicate something of that as I try to hold Paul's description of 'leadership' in mind – which bears repeating:

*Christ himself gave the apostles, the prophets, the evangelists, the pastors and teachers, to equip his people for works of service, so that the body of Christ may be built up until we all reach unity in the faith and in the knowledge of the Son of God and become mature, attaining to the whole measure of the fullness of Christ.*

*Ephesians 4.11-13 (NIV)*

**I will write first as a pastor, then as an evangelist, then as a teacher – my aim and hope being to equip and build us up together, so we might serve God faithfully, ever more united in him, growing in knowledge and maturity as the body of Christ. Then I will look at 'speaking the truth in love' and what truly unites us. Finally I will detail some of the next steps as we seek to love and listen to one another in the area of sexuality and marriage, while navigating the somewhat confusing situation the wider Church of England is now in.**

## **As a pastor**

I write first as a pastor. My heart breaks for those who experience pain when it comes to their sexuality, marriage or lack thereof. Some may be single and long for a marriage partner and a family of their own. Some may have had a marriage partner but the relationship has been broken, perhaps by death or divorce. Some may be married but feel a lack of love from their partner – some may be responsible for that lack. Some may suffer emotional or physical abuse (please tell someone you trust). Some may have a promiscuous past (or present), and feel trapped by shame. Some may be addicted to the world of impossible fantasy or pornography. Some may feel rejected by the church because they are attracted to people of the same sex.

I could go on – the list is as long as there are people in the church.

My heart breaks, because – especially when it comes to sexuality, especially in these times – the world is broken and God's heart breaks for it too. My heart breaks because of the ways I have been complicit in hurting others, through things I have said or done thoughtlessly or even deliberately, though silence and fear – I repent of all that. My heart breaks because of the hypocrisy the church has shown by singling out homosexuality for special (mis)treatment, while overlooking other things the Bible warns about (like our attitude to money). My heart breaks for all those who are trying to find who they are yet are looking in all the wrong places: within themselves, in the approval or validation of others, in their sexuality or in the countless other ways that humans look for meaning other than in God. My heart breaks because I know personally the pain of divorce, and my own shortcomings and temptations in this and many other areas of life.

But broken hearts do not have to be the end of the story; they can be the beginning of a new story with God. When we meet people, most of the time we have no idea what's going on in their lives, what kinds of brokenness, pain, joys and challenges they are going through. But God does. And God's response to *all* of us, however we come, is the gift of his one and only Son, who in turn gave himself freely for us and invites us to new life. God knows how we feel; the greatest pain of the cross was not the physical torture but the spiritual and relational separation suffered by Father and Son, as Jesus took all our shame, bearing in himself the penalty for our sin. He willingly died that death so we might have life: the cross tells us our deepest pain does not have to be the end.

**I will not and do not want us ever to turn anyone away. Instead I want us to walk alongside one another, starting a new journey of love and care, a journey through and shaped by the cross of Jesus Christ. I want us to show love without boundary and love without limit to everyone we meet. This is incredibly hard (look what it cost God), but it is the example set for us by Jesus who gave us and loved us with everything he had – even his life. Our love can only ever be a pale reflection of such love, but it must reflect it nonetheless.**

## As an evangelist

Secondly, I write as an evangelist. When people walk through our doors I pray they don't get stuck on or offended by us, but find Jesus for themselves and become part of his family. For the most important question anyone can answer is a variation of this: 'have you accepted God's invitation to join his family?' I long for people to answer 'yes' to that question: to receive the forgiveness and life that come only through Jesus; to know the love our Father lavishes upon his people; to trust that one day God will wipe away all our tears; to see the world (and ourselves) as God sees; to know the fullness of all God gives us in Jesus; to be able to say together with us,

*See what great love the Father has lavished on us, that we should be called children of God!  
And that is what we are!*

1 John 3.1 (NIV)

That is the grounding, the foundation of the life of God's people: we are his children. Our journey begins at the cross as we repent; as Jesus said, 'I have not come to call the righteous, but sinners to repentance' (Luke 5.32). That is the message the apostles took across the world – 'repent and believe!' – following Jesus' command to 'go and make disciples of all nations' (Matthew 28.19). God promises that all who repent receive the gift of the empty tomb: adoption into God's family and new life that is stronger than death. Then, as God's children we begin to learn how to live every day as a disciple of Jesus, by the power of his Spirit.

But we do not only need to repent once; the call to 'repent and believe' is one we *all* need to hear and respond to *every day* – the way Jesus dealt with Peter (so gentle yet firm) when he washed his disciples' feet helps explain what I mean by that.

*Jesus knew that the Father had put all things under his power, and that he had come from God and was returning to God; so he got up from the meal, took off his outer clothing, and wrapped a towel round his waist. After that, he poured water into a basin and began to wash his disciples' feet, drying them with the towel that was wrapped round him.*

*He came to Simon Peter, who said to him, 'Lord, are you going to wash my feet?' Jesus replied, 'You do not realise now what I am doing, but later you will understand.'*

*'No,' said Peter, 'you shall never wash my feet.' Jesus answered, 'Unless I wash you, you have no part with me.'*

*'Then, Lord,' Simon Peter replied, 'not just my feet but my hands and my head as well!' Jesus answered, 'Those who have had a bath need only to wash their feet.'*

*John 13.3-10 (NIV)*

When we turn to God and repent for the first time we are forgiven; to use the language of Jesus in John 13, we are washed clean as if we've had a long bath: our sin and imperfections are exchanged for the holiness and purity of Jesus. But the world is muddy and mucky, so as we journey through life we don't stay clean; to use the language of Jesus in John 13, our feet are dirty.

This means the daily life of a disciple should involve *continuous* repentance and forgiveness: not wallowing in self-pity (we've already been washed clean by Jesus!) but being honest about our daily need to be forgiven (we aren't yet perfectly holy, we 'need... to wash [our] feet'). This means holiness is not a standard we have to meet to join Jesus' family but the life-long journey he invites us on: learning to live and mature as a member of Jesus' family. Sometimes we'll do well in the battle with sin and temptation, and we'll overcome them... and sometimes we won't. We aren't helpless – God gives his Spirit to help us grow in holiness – but all too often we ignore or turn away from the help God offers and rely on ourselves or slip back into old ways and old habits.

**The gospel call to 'repent and believe', to receive God's forgiveness and new life is not made only to those *outside* the church family but to *everyone*, whether we know Jesus or not (yet). As children of God we do not need a 'bath' every day, but we all need to 'wash our feet', to come to Jesus daily in repentance and receive afresh his love, forgiveness and life.**

## **As a teacher**

Thirdly, I write as a teacher. I am not a teacher like Jesus, who taught with his own authority; when I teach my authority comes only from teaching the Bible, ideally with my own honesty and vulnerability as a fellow and imperfect disciple. I can only teach what I first read – and despite several years of reading, listening and studying, despite much wrestling and praying and wishing it otherwise, nothing has convinced me that we can change the historic understanding of the Bible's teaching on sexuality and marriage, summarised in the Church of England's Canon Law:

B 30.1. The Church of England affirms, according to our Lord's teaching, that marriage is in its nature a union permanent and lifelong, for better for worse, till death them do part, of one man with one woman, to the exclusion of all others on either side, for the procreation and nurture of children, for the hallowing and right direction of the natural instincts and affections, and for the mutual society, help and comfort which the one ought to have of the other, both in prosperity and adversity.<sup>1</sup>

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<sup>1</sup> Canon B 30 – 'Of Holy Matrimony'. See <https://www.churchofengland.org/about/leadership-and-governance/legal-services/canons-church-england/section-b#b44>.

There is of course more to say here. Much has been written on these matters, particularly in recent times. I'm happy to look through or discuss this theology in more detail with anyone who wants to. But at this stage my point is this: Canon Law in general and Canon B 30 in particular is not where the story ends (thank goodness!). It is not God's final word for those who do not or cannot have a marriage partner, for whatever reason; single people (not least Jesus!) can be fulfilled too.

Think back to Ephesians 2 and 3: God's purpose is not to couple everyone off, but to create a 'new humanity' – called 'the Church' – a new family where everyone – married or single – can belong, where our deepest longings can be met, where we know in full the love of which in this world we only get glimpses, where our right desire for intimacy can be directed in the right way: to God and one another in sacrificial love and the bond of friendship.

We crave intimacy, because we were made for it. Human beings were not created to be isolated individuals, we were created to be *with* others. But ultimately nothing in this world, not even the closest most intimate human relationships, can fulfil the longing in our hearts. Only God can meet that need, only God is enough to fulfil *all* the desires of our hearts, only in God can we find final fulfilment and who we really are, only in God can we discover what it means to be truly human.

At their best, marriage points (now) to that future fulfilment and singleness to the need to wait (not yet). This is a hard teaching for all those who are desperate to be married but are not, for whatever reason. But self-denial and sacrifice are not limited to sexuality and marriage:

*Then Jesus said to them all [i.e. not only 'The Twelve']: 'Whoever wants to be my disciple must deny themselves and take up their cross daily and follow me. For whoever wants to save their life will lose it, but whoever loses their life for me will save it.'*

*Luke 9.23-24 (NIV)*

Following Jesus is and should be costly for *all* Christians; Jesus' call to deny ourselves is made not to a small minority but to *all* would-be disciples. Our sexuality can come between us and God, and so can many other things: money, power, approval of others, work, family, the list is endless. Even good things can become sinful if they take priority above God in our lives; the Bible calls this idolatry, worshipping something created rather than the Creator (Romans 1.25). Each of us who wants to be a disciple of Jesus needs to take this seriously, and identify the ways in which we need to deny ourselves, so we can put God first and follow Jesus wholeheartedly.

We turn again to Ephesians and God's plan for 'the Church' to be a new *family* centred on Jesus. The Christian faith is not *only* about 'my relationship with Jesus' but the creation of a *people* in right relationship with God, one another and creation. This is critical, especially here; it would be cruel to deny some people marriage on biblical grounds, but insist they go it alone without the love and support they will need from their church family to help them live a celibate life.

This is hard. Jesus does not expect us to get this right all the time or all at once; he calls us to a journey, a 'daily' journey of cross-carrying and self-denial. Following Jesus is and should be costly for *all* Christians. That cost will be different for different people, and the cost will vary over the course of a lifetime, but it is perhaps greatest for those who are called to deny aspects of sexuality. What matters most is that we support one another on the narrow road that is hard to find but 'leads to life' (Matthew 7.13-14) – i.e. with and towards Jesus.

**I do not expect us all to agree with the teaching that God made marriage for one man and one woman only, and calls those not married to a life of celibacy. (Nor will I expect those who disagree to leave – as if that needed saying!) But that understanding of marriage and singleness is what I will teach and ask others to teach, within the context of our own need for repentance, and the awareness that I could be wrong – though I lovingly disagree with those who think that. And I will challenge us to be a real family of love for *all*. Mercifully, love does not require total affirmation or complete agreement (if it did, God could not love us!); I pray we can show it is possible to disagree but still worship with and love one another.**

## **Speaking the truth in love**

Earlier I quoted Ephesians 4, showing how Jesus himself gives various ministries to ‘equip’ and build up the Church for ‘works of service’ and ‘unity in the faith and in the knowledge of the Son’ so we might together ‘become mature’. As we saw, Paul carries on:

*Then we will no longer be infants, tossed back and forth by the waves, and blown here and there by every wind of teaching and by the cunning and craftiness of people in their deceitful scheming. Instead, speaking the truth in love, we will grow to become in every respect the mature body of him who is the head, that is, Christ. From him the whole body, joined and held together by every supporting ligament, grows and builds itself up in love, as each part does its work.*

*Ephesians 4.14-16 (NIV)*

This is where good pastoral care, evangelism and teaching all connect. God has revealed himself in the Scriptures so we can know him, turn to him, and become the people he is calling and making us to be: the mature body of Christ. The world needs to know *both* the truth *and* love of God – and it is the Church’s calling to hold out both. In his commentary on these verses John Stott wrote:

Thank God there are those in the contemporary church who are determined at all costs to defend and uphold God’s revealed truth. But sometimes they are conspicuously lacking in love. When they think they smell heresy, their nose begins to twitch, their muscles ripple, and the light of battle enters the eye. They seem to enjoy nothing more than a fight. Others make the opposite mistake. They are determined at all costs to maintain and exhibit brotherly love, but in order to do so are prepared even to sacrifice the central truths of revelation. Both these tendencies are unbalanced and unbiblical. **Truth becomes hard if it is not softened by love; love becomes soft if it is not strengthened by truth.** The apostle calls us to hold the two together, which should not be difficult for Spirit-filled believers, since the Holy Spirit is himself ‘the Spirit of truth’, and his firstfruit is ‘love’ (e.g. John 15.26, 16.13 and Galatians 5.22). **There is no other route than this to a fully mature Christian unity.**

*John Stott, The Message of Ephesians, 172 (emphasis added)*

I don’t want a battle, I’m not itching for a fight, I don’t want our church family to split. But nor am I prepared to set aside what God teaches us in Scripture. Sexuality and marriage might not be a ‘central truth’ but it’s close – otherwise we would not care so much nor feel the pain as deeply.

If you feel strongly about this in any way, whether you agree with me, disagree with me, or feel caught in the middle – please come to me and let's have a conversation. My promise is that I will listen to you and love you, whatever you say. Though it's possible I probably won't change my mind on this because of my conviction and understanding of what God has told us in Scripture – but I will make every effort to listen first, speak second, and do both with grace.

**Central to my thinking about church life in general and these questions in particular is this from John Stott: 'truth becomes hard if it is not softened by love; love becomes soft if it is not strengthened by truth.' I long for Christ Church to be place full of softened truth and strengthened love, a place where all are welcome and where Jesus may be found, a place full of people committed to radical holiness and boundless compassion. It is so hard to get right that I know I (and all of us) will get it wrong at times. Our own brokenness will get in the way sometimes, or even often – but that mustn't stop us trying. We must persevere. This is the example set for us first by Jesus and then by godly believers through the ages.**

The writer to the Hebrews put it like this:

*Therefore, since we are surrounded by such a great cloud of witnesses, let us throw off everything that hinders and the sin that so easily entangles. And let us run with perseverance the race marked out for us, fixing our eyes on Jesus, the pioneer and perfecter of faith. For the joy that was set before him he endured the cross, scorning its shame, and sat down at the right hand of the throne of God. Consider him who endured such opposition from sinners, so that you will not grow weary and lose heart.*

*Hebrews 12.1-3 (NIV)*

## **The unity of the Spirit**

I can't tell you how long this letter has taken to write, how much thought and prayer, how many agonised and sleepless nights have gone into it (though its length – sorry! – gives a hint). You may have noticed my high levels of stress and anxiety and the way they have affected my physical health. I am not after your sympathy – I know I am not alone in how deeply I feel about this – but I do want you all to know how seriously I am taking this. **And yet the difficulty I feel, needing to live not between but with both the rock of biblical faithfulness and the hard place of pastoral care, is nothing compared to those for whom these are deeply personal questions.**

All I have written comes from a place of love, and I pray it is full of grace. If I'm honest it comes with a wish that the Bible didn't say what it does. But it also comes from a desire to be faithful to the God who is creating a new family, the God who longs for his children to be the people he always intended us to be, the God who inspires, unites, transforms and renews us by his Spirit – the Spirit who also groans deep within us at the pain of this world (Romans 8.26).

The desire to 'hold everyone together' has pushed me personally to breaking point, because it seems impossible. What I've shared as a pastor, evangelist and teacher is a call to unity not around me but around our Father and his love for us in Jesus, around the truth, trustworthiness and authority of the Scriptures God has given us 'for teaching, rebuking, correcting and training in righteousness,' so we might be 'thoroughly equipped for every good work' (2 Timothy 3.16).



I would like to return again to Ephesians, for this is how I hope we can engage with one another in all areas of our shared life, and especially when we disagree:

*As a prisoner for the Lord, then, I urge you to live a life worthy of the calling you have received. Be completely humble and gentle; be patient, bearing with one another in love. Make every effort to keep the unity of the Spirit through the bond of peace. There is one body and one Spirit, just as you were called to one hope when you were called; one Lord, one faith, one baptism; one God and Father of all, who is over all and through all and in all.*

*Ephesians 4.1-6 (NIV)*

**What unites us is not the style of our worship, this or that piece of theology, or even the fact we meet in the same building as each other – that stuff is important but it comes *second* (or third, or fourth!). What unites us *first* is God – Father, Son and Holy Spirit – in whom we put our trust, in whose name we are baptised, in whose name we worship. By his Spirit God enables us to believe, starting us on the journey of faith. By his Spirit God unites us ‘through the bond of peace’. By his Spirit God empowers us, giving us gifts and equipping us to serve him wherever he sends us. By his Spirit God transforms and renews us daily to be more like Jesus, to live as he calls us to live. So we must keep on praying ‘Come, Holy Spirit’.**

## **What’s next?**

In a sense what’s next is ‘nothing’, because nothing has changed (yet). The Church of England’s doctrine of marriage is the same (see Canon B 30 on page 5). The ‘Prayers of Love and Faith’ that were drafted by the bishops and welcomed by General Synod in February are not authorised for use (yet). Once finalised by the bishops, there will be a further Synod vote in July (or November).

That said, we cannot and should not do ‘nothing’; the silence has gone on long enough. Therefore I have convened a group (the Wardens, Readers and Clergy) to help me lead Christ Church through the process of listening to one another in this area. That group is the ‘we’ of the next paragraphs. This is hard – we will no doubt make mistakes – but I hope and trust our unity in Christ is stronger.

### **1 The role of the PCC**

This process is *not* going to end with a vote on offering services of blessing for same-sex relationships. If Brexit has taught us anything it is that making difficult decisions in this way is divisive.<sup>2</sup> But most pertinently, the bishops have said that the use of these services (again, proposed but not yet authorised) will be at the discretion and according to the conscience of the incumbent (the vicar) – that includes whether or not visiting clergy may perform such services in the building.

The PCC will be kept informed of the ongoing process. Any pastoral policies would need to be approved by the PCC, but the responsibility for leading this process rests with me, drawing on the advice and support of the steering group.

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<sup>2</sup> Aside from that, PCCs do not have the authority to make declarations on doctrine. This is from the Parochial Church Councils (Powers) Measure 1956 (2)(b), which defines the role of PCCs: ‘[The functions of parochial church councils shall include] the consideration and discussions of matters concerning the Church of England or any other matters of religious or public interest, *but not the declaration of the doctrine of the Church on any question*’ (emphasis added).

## 2 **Shared conversations**

In May we suggest holding a series of open conversations, at various times of the day and week, for people to come and listen to one another. This will be framed carefully, with defined questions, and designed to ensure every voice is heard – which will be hard, especially when we disagree. These conversations will likely draw on some of the *Living in Love and Faith* (LLF) material that the Church of England has prepared for this.

## 3 **One-to-one conversations**

I have deliberately written myself out of the preaching rota for most of April and May to give me space and time to visit individuals and small groups to hear your concerns, and give you the opportunity to ask me any questions. This is a critical part of the process so please make use of it, whether you are hurt, feel strongly about this area of church life, disagree with me entirely, or feel utterly confused.

This is not about changing anyone's mind, but to show we love one another even when we disagree (even strongly). Consensus would be lovely, but I'm not sure it's possible in this area.

## 4 **Additional teaching**

We are exploring how best to look at alternative views on marriage and respond to the questions gathered on 4 March. This will almost certainly not involve a visiting speaker; anything similar to that will be done in-house, and we have some thoughts about what that might look like. This will be disappointing to some – please say and we can have a conversation about it.

**In all these conversations there is no question we are seeking to answer or 'goal', except that we understand one another more by listening; we need to listen not only to *what* others think but *why* they think it, why something is important to them: the aim is to *understand*. Only then can we grow together in love, stronger and closer – and so, united in Christ, be more effective in mission. For we must never lose sight of our Great Commission from the Lord Jesus: 'go and make disciples of all nations' (Matthew 28.19).**

I'm going to end where we began: in Ephesians 2. Through the cross we are reconciled to God and to one another, a 'new humanity' is created, bringing peace where before there was enmity, and 'access to the Father by one Spirit' (Ephesians 2.14-18). Paul ends the section with these words:

*Consequently, you are no longer foreigners and strangers, but fellow citizens with God's people and also members of his household, built on the foundation of the apostles and prophets, with Christ Jesus himself as the chief cornerstone. **In him** the whole building is joined together and rises to become a holy temple in the Lord. And **in him** you too are being built together to become a dwelling in which God lives by his Spirit.*

*Ephesians 2.19-22 (NIV)*

Yours **in him**,

