

Thursday 27 July 2023

Dear brothers and sisters,

At the PCC meeting on 18 July I spoke about how, when Peter walked on water, he started to sink when he took his eyes off Jesus and instead focused on the storm. As always, my prayer is that we learn to keep our eyes fixed on Jesus – and of course point others towards him.

In my last pastoral letter I offered to listen to your thoughts and concerns about sexuality and marriage. Thank you to all who have spoken to me, by email, individually in person, informally (e.g. in the church kitchen!) – and at the group conversations in church on 6<sup>th</sup>, 14<sup>th</sup> and 15<sup>th</sup> June. A home group also invited me to visit on 8<sup>th</sup> June. I am grateful to all of you for speaking so carefully, honestly and graciously, even in the middle of serious disagreement. I am also grateful to Allan Bartlam who helped facilitate the first group conversation, where there were so many of us we needed to split into two groups.

As a result of all this, I estimate that I have spoken to upwards of 50 different people from our church family about sexuality and marriage. It is fair to say there is a wide range of views at Christ Church, though many of the hopes and concerns are shared.

During the conversations people asked a number of questions. I answered those relating to the process the Church of England is going through, but many of the questions were hypothetical scenarios, e.g. ‘What would we do if a gay couple arrived at church / one of our young people came out as gay / a gay person wanted to be involved in leadership?’ I cannot possibly answer all of those – nor would it be helpful actually because every situation is different, even those that might appear to be the same from the outside. In general terms, I try to approach every person and situation with love and grace – and then handle any difficulties as they come up. I’ve done my best to handle various pastoral situations in this way throughout my ministry.

However, I will answer some of the questions that I’ve already addressed or faced personally.

**Would I baptise the child of same-sex parents?** Yes I would – I have already done so. I would treat the parents no differently to any parents who request a baptism for their child: we begin by talking about faith, the meaning of baptism, being part of a church family, and so on.

**If someone disagrees with me about sexuality and marriage, can they still hold positions of leadership?** Yes they can – and indeed do. As I said in my pastoral letter in April:

*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.*

**What do we do if a gay couple come to church?** Say, 'Hello,' welcome them to the service, and worship alongside them – as we do for *everyone* who comes through our doors. Then, as in other situations (and as has happened for all sorts of circumstances), any difficult conversations begin on the basis of mutual love, grace and care.

During the group conversations I asked people what would be helpful for us to do next. There was a similarly large range of views, from 'we need to talk in much more depth about this' to 'we need to stop and get on with other things'. Some asked, 'What is the question we need to answer?'

That's the key, and the problem is we don't know because the Church of England is in a place of limbo (see below). We don't know what will be presented by the bishops or agreed by General Synod – or even when that will happen. Therefore at this point we need to press pause until we have more clarity about the wider situation. It is possible that this will come in November 2023, but may be delayed to February 2024 or even later; therefore, although I won't be arranging any more group conversations, please be in touch if you wish to have a chat with me about this.

What I hope is that in the next months we can refocus on the Action Plan – which has been hugely delayed due to all this – particularly looking at and developing our plan for discipleship. Above all, as I said at the beginning of this letter, my prayer is that we might keep our eyes fixed on Jesus.

Yours in him,



## **What is the Church of England doing?**

In February the House of Bishops presented General Synod (a bit like our PCC, but for the whole Church of England) a draft of some 'Prayers of Love and Faith', intended to be used to pray for God's blessing on couples in same-sex marriages. There was an intense debate, not least because many of the prayers were lifted straight out of the marriage service, so some felt they went too far even as others argued they did not go far enough. The bishops stated that the decision whether or not to use the prayers will be the decision of each incumbent.

At the end of the debate General Synod passed a motion in support of the prayers, and which invited the House of Bishops to finalise the prayers, rewrite the Church's official pastoral guidance on sexuality and marriage, and look again at the guidelines for clergy (which prohibit same-sex marriage). The motion also stated 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' – which states that marriage can only be between one man and one woman.

Three implementation groups were set up to do this work but the bishops have now disbanded them, and it is unclear what's next. What *is* clear is how much there is left to do and how many questions need answering (if they can be). Given this I think it highly unlikely that all this will be ready in time for the November meeting of General Synod, postponing the decision into 2024.

We must pray for the House of Bishops and all those involved in these seemingly impossible tasks.