

Third Sunday before Lent 2017

A report from the House of Bishops about marriage and same sex relationships has received a significant setback in a vote at the General Synod. It is a significant rejection of the Bishops' report which had stated that there should be no change in the church's teaching while calling for a "fresh tone" on the issues. Speaking before the vote, the Archbishop of Canterbury said he believed passionately that the report that had been worked on and struggled with was a roadmap and he promised the church would find a new "inclusion."

However many speakers in the debate said the report was not clear enough or did not go far enough. After the debate, a "Take Note" vote was held; it's a neutral motion which allows Synod to discuss the content and recommendations of a report without committing the Synod to the formal acceptance of it. However the vote to "take note" was lost, because it needed a majority in all three Houses of the Synod – the Bishops, the Clergy and the Laity and it was defeated in the House of Clergy, which voted NOT to take note by 100 votes to 93.

Responding to the vote, the Rt Revd Graham James, the Bishop of Norwich said: "I can guarantee that the House of Bishops will consider carefully and prayerfully all the contributions made in the debate today...there is no simple and easy answer to this issue beyond committing ourselves to engagement with each other when the views on what we should do are profoundly contested."

Earlier, Bishop Graham had acknowledged "significant differences of opinion within the House of Bishops about same sex relationships" and that the report had not received a "rapturous" reception in all quarters; he expressed regret for any "pain or anger it may have caused." He noted the "tension which can exist between our determination to uphold firmly the teaching on marriage and sexual relationships as currently expressed in our Canons, and the commitment to affirm the place of LGBTI people within the church..... to enable their voices to be heard."

During the debate a number of speakers had called for greater clarity. "Same old, same old" said one speaker. "Deeply flawed" said another and "there's a need for a radical welcome for all." One gay speaker said people wanted the church to go forward faster and called on the Bishops to think again – her words were warmly applauded. The Dean of Southwark, the Revd Andrew Nunn, said to the Bishops: "You talk of a new tone – but I don't like the tone: you can do a lot better. Bishops can we not have a bit of pride in our LGBT members and more recognition of the blessing that gay people bring to our churches?" Again, loud and prolonged applause. However some evangelical members of Synod also expressed concern, fearing that the Bishops' report was a softening of the guidelines on sexual morality.

Responding to all of the comments Archbishop Justin said the Bishops would go on thinking : "we could hardly fail to do so in light of what has been said in the debate."

Earlier in the day Bishop James had charted the recent history of the Church of England on issues of sexuality, saying he had been discussing same sex relationships for over forty years of ordained ministry. He addressed the difficulty of the issues; "I would be misleading you if I did not confess to being conflicted in presenting this report but in that I think I am far from alone among the bishops and in the wider Church of England.....our own history in dealing with these matters also explains why people on all sides of the debate rarely find themselves satisfied." He said on one level nothing much seemed to have changed since he made a presentation on the issue of homosexual relationships in the 1970s but on another level "everything seems to have changed, especially in the wider culture."

The Bishop of Willesden, the Right Reverend Pete Broadbent, said this debate would be "a continuing source of disagreement because we haven't coalesced around an end point. When we legislated for women to be bishops, even those opposed came to the view that the Church of England had to make it possible for women to be bishops in the Church of God according to our canons and formularies. In this debate we haven't even begun to find a place where we can coalesce. The Bishops' Report acknowledges a place of starting. More conversation is needed."

Perhaps we need to think about the people the Church is making bishops. Giles Frazer wrote in the Guardian recently,

"The answer is always the same. The job of the bishops, the current lot insist, is to provide a "focus of unity". That's why when bishops retire, and are freed from the responsibility of keeping their dioceses together, they write letters to the papers saying how much they disagreed with what they used to have to support. The bishops tell themselves that they sacrifice their personal views for the greater good. And they ask us to feel their pain. Responsibility for the way in which this need for corporate double-speak has blunted the prophetic witness of the episcopate is squarely on the shoulders of the secretive process by which bishops are selected. It's a process that promotes the same sort of people – glorified administrators who are good at "tone" and are not given to bursts of independent mindedness. None of which are qualities associated with the prophets of the Bible". Perhaps the all the bishops and not just the Bishop of Coventry need to press the right buttons!

LGBTI people are not going away. They are our friends and family. They always have been and always will be. The only difference now is that we now talk about them more openly.

The church needs to embrace modern culture without diluting its message. The church needs to be more inclusive and caring otherwise we are in danger of alienating people. As one delegate at Synod put it;

"Sexuality is a gift and not a difficulty". Another delegate said that the church was good on refugees and poverty but does not face the questions raised by the LGBT community. That time has come.

Amen.