

OXFORD DIOCESAN SYNOD

MARCH 2014 PRESIDENTIAL ADDRESS

I like the story of a vet who married a taxidermist. They decided to put their two businesses together and they wanted a strap line to go with it. Eventually they came up with the answer: 'Either way, you get the dog back.'

I feel a bit like that today. I'd like to speak about the clergy conference starting on Monday with 350 of us going off to Swanwick to explore how the imagination engages with faith. Or I'd like to tell you about my holiday last week in the Canaries, and show you some pictures. But it seems that, either way, I have to talk about sex. When I say I'm bored with sex I hope you won't misunderstand me. But in another part of the forest, wearing my lead bishop on education hat, I'm being deluged at present with a campaign of emails on homophobic bullying in schools and Stonewall's offer of free materials to help counter it. And I wrote recently to the clergy of the diocese on the House of Bishops' Pastoral letter on same sex marriage – and that letter seems to have gone viral (as they say) – I've been getting emails of support from all over the country, indeed the world. The first same sex marriages will happen next week.

So, either way, I have to talk about sex. But fairly briefly. The House of Bishops didn't excel itself in our Pastoral Letter on how to handle the phenomenon of same sex marriage. The tone had the awkward sound of scratching a blackboard. It was written by committee and no-one at the meeting of the House would have produced it, if they were writing alone. But we had to live in two time-frames – the longer one of considered conversation around the Pilling report, and the much shorter one of the very imminent arrival of a quite new phenomenon, same-sex marriage.

We were never likely to try and change two thousand years of belief and practice about marriage in a day in February at Church House Westminster. What the Pilling report, the wider Church and society as a whole are asking us to do is to listen and talk, to pray and to study, over a two year period about the biblical, theological, ethical, missiological and ecclesiological implications of what's happening around us. That seems reasonable. The Church has to be in dialogue with its context in every age. If it isn't, it becomes a defensive ghetto. And we believe we have good news for every generation and for all people. But is it good news of holy welcome or of holy resistance? The views of members of Synod here today will be very different, and not just in a binary way; there'll be a whole spectrum of opinion here, and every opinion held vehemently, I guess!

But there are a couple of underlying realities we have to acknowledge. First, as I wrote in my letter to clergy, I hope it's common ground that we're part of a Church that's called to real repentance for the lack of welcome and acceptance extended to gay and lesbian people as children of God. We haven't listened well to the quiet, hurting voices, nor to those called to celibacy, nor to clergy who have lovingly and sensitively ministered to gay couples through the years.

The second thing we need to acknowledge is that we're part of a culture that's chaotically confused about sex. Sex has been outrageously commodified, pornography is ordinary viewing for teenagers and an addiction for very many adults, trafficking is a global business, prostitution is commonplace, sexually explicit films and TV are far beyond anything Mary Whitehouse could have

imagined in her wildest nightmare. Multiple sexual partners are wreaking havoc on relational stability, sexual infections are massively increasing, hardly anyone is a virgin on their wedding night, and so on. And in the middle of all that we're trying steadily to work out a theologically coherent approach to same sex marriage.

But I think in a sense, we're doing this on behalf of the nation. We're trying to be responsible. We're trying to grapple with a serious moral issue in a way that models openness and respect. OK, we're messing up – badly. But we're trying to discover how much we can agree on, and to learn how to 'disagree well' on what we can't agree on. And then to decide how we can, or can't, live with that spectrum of honest belief. The rest of society doesn't do its moral reasoning like that. It prefers soundbites, three minutes of furious argument, and a YouGov poll.

In the meantime, the practice of the Church of England doesn't change. We won't legally be conducting same sex marriages in our churches. General Synod would have to agree to that being possible, and there is, you'll remember, a quadruple lock in the legislation which protects the position of the CofE, to the gratitude of some and the shame of others. But lay people who enter into same sex marriages will continue to be welcome in our churches, to have full access to the sacraments, have children baptised and so on. Clergy, however, are not in the same position and are urged to honour their ordination promise to accept the discipline of the Church. But I've promised there will be no witch hunts in this diocese – we have a serious conversation about to begin and it's no help to rush to judgement.

In the next couple of months David Porter, the Archbishop of Canterbury's Advisor on Reconciliation who helped General Synod so much in tackling the issue of women bishops, will be offering the dioceses material and methods for our longer conversation. As I said in my letter to clergy I don't actually expect very many people to change their views fundamentally through this biblical and ethical study, although I hope we'll always be open to the high call of truth. But I do very much hope we can get to the point where *we respect the integrity of the biblical interpretation of those we disagree with*. None of us is taking a cavalier attitude to the Bible and its authority; but thoughtful, honest people can thoughtfully and honestly disagree.

We're not in a good place on all this but it's hard to move around much when you're stuck in a cupboard. I'm sorry the House of Bishops statement was clumsy and hurtful. But we must continue to try and live as God's people in God's world in God's way. And in that loyalty Christ must be glorified.

So there you go – either way, you got the dog back!

+John