

St James' by the Park



February 2023

Dear sisters and brothers,

Many of you will be aware that the Church of England's General Synod (parliament) voted recently to allow blessing of same-sex couples in churches. To some, that is a cause of great celebration; to others, a source of immense consternation. It is one of the most significant votes in Synod in the last 20 years, and as I said in church a few weeks ago, this decision has the potential to cause deep division within our own church, within the Church of England, and within the worldwide family of churches (the 'Anglican Communion') of which we are a part.

In this pastoral letter, I want to give some of the nuance behind the headlines, suggest how we should navigate this debate as a local church, and give my own personal perspective. I know this is a very long letter – but I fear that brevity might be more likely to result in misinterpretation or misunderstanding. I'd be really grateful if you could read it all, but have highlighted some headlines to help those who only have time to skim.

What did Synod actually decide?

The final motion that was passed¹ was a compromise, which has left many people on both sides of the debate deeply saddened. Those who push for same-sex marriage (ie not just 'blessing') to take place in church are disappointed that the final motion affirmed that no change is happening to its doctrine of marriage as being specifically heterosexual. Those who resist the idea of same-sex blessings are equally disappointed that prayers of blessing for same-sex relationships are going to be authorised (although the final texts have not yet been published).

Several key documents are going to be written or revised before the next General Synod meeting (July) which I hope will provide more clarity about what will and won't be allowed.

What is the debate really about?

Supporters of gay blessings and gay marriage in church want to celebrate life-long, committed same-sex relationships, saying that those are not the sort of relationships that Scripture speaks against. Opponents of gay blessings and gay marriage in church say that Scripture speaks against all sexual relationships outside of heterosexual marriage.

Underlying the debate are bigger theological questions: what does it mean for Scripture to be authoritative for us, and how do we avoid using it simply to justify our current worldview? How was the New Testament's teaching understood in its original context and how should we interpret Scripture in our culture? Is it ok for Scripture to be interpreted differently in different cultures? Is God using culture to speak prophetically to the church, or is God calling the church to hold on to traditional teaching and speak prophetically to our culture? What is the gospel message and Jesus' promise of 'life in all its fullness' in relation to sex, marriage and celibacy? These questions aren't all as straight-forward as we might like them to be. Believers on both 'sides' of the debate have wrestled with these (and other) questions prayerfully and come to different conclusions which are seemingly

irreconcilable; hence why the Church of England is deeply divided and there is the real prospect of a split looming on the horizon.

How should we respond as a church?

There have been other topics in recent years where we have found ourselves to have different opinions: creation vs evolution; Brexit vs Remain etc. This issue is far more personal for many of us, meaning that we are more likely to cause unintentional hurt to one another. We will need much grace as we talk about this issue. First and foremost, we need to remember that this isn't a *theoretical* issue; this is about people's lives and lived experience.

Several people commented how the tone of debate in General Synod was much better than in previous gatherings; indeed, the MP tasked with being at Synod said that Parliament had a thing or two to learn about how to debate well across deep divisions! My prayer is that we will draw closer to each other and to the Lord even as we face up to our differences of opinion.

Can I urge us to remember the following?

1. ***Our discussion should be surrounded by prayer.*** Let's be praying for those who are affected by this very personally – including for the younger generation who are navigating their most formative years against a backdrop of an ever-changing narrative around sexuality and identity; and for those whose mental health has suffered greatly because they haven't felt able to 'be themselves'. Pray, too, for those you disagree with; and for Bishops and other leaders and Synod members continuing to discuss these issues.

2. ***Our discussion should be rooted in Scripture.*** Jesus is Lord of his church, so we need to submit ourselves and our doctrine to his teaching. We believe that 'all Scripture is God-breathed and is useful for teaching, rebuking, correcting and training in righteousness, so that the servant of God may be thoroughly equipped for every good work.' (2 Timothy 3.16-17). We will need to make sure we're not just using 'proof texts' but reading individual verses in the light of the whole sweep of the Bible. We will also need to make sure we're understanding the cultural context of the biblical writers as much as possible so that we don't inadvertently twist their meaning to suit our personal preferences.

We must allow Scripture to critique our own culture – affirming what is good and biblical, but speaking out against what is unbiblical. If our views merely echo those of the culture we have been brought up in or live in, that is a warning sign to us that we may not be allowing Scripture to speak prophetically to us. God has blessed us with increasing cultural diversity in our congregation – this is a gift to us, as those who are different to us can often see our cultural blind spots more easily. As we study Scripture together, we should *all* move from our 'home' culture to a more radical 'kingdom' culture.

3. ***We should 'speak the truth in love'*** (Ephesians 4.15). Truth without love is cold and alienates people, exacerbating divisions. Love without truth can leave people in their own echo-chambers, feeling good about themselves but blind to their errors. Truth and love need to be held together. For those who err on the side of stressing the need for truth: what would it look like for us to actually love the sister or brother with whom we disagree? For those who err on the side of stressing the need for love: how could we study the Scriptures with a sister or brother with whom we disagree?

4. ***We should be 'quick to listen, slow to speak'*** and slow to become angry, because human anger does not produce the righteousness God desires' (James 1.19-20). It's all very well getting our own point of view across, but it is so easy to caricature or

misunderstand those with whom we disagree. Let's ask probing questions – not to win points or try to catch each other out – but to better understand where others are coming from and *why* they think differently to us.

5. ***We should be humble, not judgmental.*** Jesus said, 'Do not judge, and you will not be judged' (Luke 6.37). Much as we might like to think that we are right and everyone else is wrong, humility requires us to be open to the possibility that we have much still to learn – even from those we may not expect to be learning from! Being too quick to judge others for their views is neither helpful nor godly.

6. ***'Bear with each other and forgive one another*** if any of you has a grievance against someone. Forgive as the Lord forgave you' (Colossians 3.13). It's easy to like people who agree with us; the mark of a true disciple of Jesus is loving those with whom we disagree, and forgiving those who hurt us (whether unintentionally or deliberately).

7. ***Remember who the real enemy is.*** One of the 'devil's schemes' is to sow seeds of disunity in the church by getting us to think that people on the 'other side' of the debate are the 'enemy'. We need to remember they're our sisters and brothers! – and that 'our struggle is not against flesh and blood, but against the rulers, against the authorities, against the powers of this dark world and against the spiritual forces of evil in the heavenly realms' (Ephesians 6.11-12).

If we can put these things into practice, we will model a distinctively Christ-like approach to difference and disagreement in the church.

I know some people are considering leaving the Church of England about this issue. Whether you're of the view that the Synod decision hasn't gone far enough, or of the view that it has already gone too far, could I urge you not to 'jump ship' from the Church of England just yet!? I'd love us to practise this biblical approach to disagreement for the next 6 months, whilst we wait to see what clarifications the next General Synod brings.

My own personal convictions

General Synod has made it clear that it will be up to each individual clergy-person (not their congregation or PCC) whether they will conduct a blessing of a same-sex relationship, once the prayers are formally published in July. So it is only fair that I 'reveal my hand'! Here are my current convictions:

1. ***I want to echo General Synod's apology to LGBTQ+ people.*** As I said when I preached on sexuality back in 2015, I am ashamed of the way some of my gay friends have been treated by churches. Where I have contributed to that, where we have contributed to that, I am deeply sorry.

2. ***I want to copy the radical inclusiveness that Jesus modelled.*** When women came to Jesus (or were brought to Jesus) who had obviously sinned sexually, Jesus did not turn them away or condemn them (as the religious leaders of the day clearly expected him to). I want us as a church to welcome everyone – whether heterosexual or LGBTQ+ – including all who have sinned sexually. That of course, includes all of us – for which of us, on occasion, has not looked lustfully at another person – which Jesus said was adultery in the heart (Matthew 5.28)? I'm particularly keen we further develop an atmosphere where all people grappling with their own sexuality and identity are able to confide or speak openly, knowing they won't be judged but loved, supported, and helped to work out what faithful discipleship looks like for them.

3. ***I want to follow the radically conservative teaching that Jesus gave.*** He confirmed Jewish teaching on sex and marriage, and made it more demanding. His teaching on remarriage surprised his disciples by its difficult demands. He urged action to avoid sexual sin. Whilst not condemning the woman caught in adultery, he urged her, “leave your life of sin” (John 8.11).

4. ***I will not, in good conscience, be able to bless a same-sex couple or marriage,*** nor allow other clergy to do so in our church building, because I am currently convinced that Scripture teaches that God views any sexual relationship outside of heterosexual marriage as unholy – and it would be completely inappropriate (and ineffectual!) for me (or others) to bless that which God has said is unholy.

Please hear me correctly. I love and care for LGBTQ+ people, including in our congregation and my own extended family. Nor do I doubt that many same-sex relationships are loving and faithful, but I am unpersuaded by the arguments of my Christian brothers and sisters who say that life-long same-sex relationships can be holy in God’s eyes.

I know this view cuts against the grain of our current Western culture, and is therefore deeply unpopular to many. Jesus never said that following him would be easy. In many ways, I wish I could endorse such relationships; it would make my life far easier! But for me, that would be to deny what I see as the clear teaching of God in Scripture.

I know this view on sex and marriage (which has been held by the world-wide church until very recently) raises many pastoral questions: Does this mean that someone who identifies as LGBTQ+ is consigned to a life of singleness? Isn’t it damaging to people to suggest they must repress their sexuality? I think there are biblical, pastorally sensitive answers to such questions – but there isn’t space to explore them here. At some point over the coming months, I hope to collate some resources (books, videos, sermons) which seek to answer some of these important questions carefully, as well as resources aimed at helping us grapple faithfully with the biblical passages on sex and marriage.

I know that some will view such a position as disastrous for evangelism – you don’t feel you could invite an LGBTQ+ friend to this church for fear they would be ostracized. Let me reassure you that in the past, I have welcomed gay couples into our fellowship; I hope we will do so again. And please don’t think that such a radically conservative stance on sexuality is necessarily viewed as repressive. Bishop Jill Duff wrote recently, “Most of my ministry has been served in deprived urban areas. Local women my age were astonished that I believed sex is for marriage. ‘You mean I’m worth it?’ they said.” One church leader recently ran a series on sex and sexuality in his morning services. This included the teaching that sex is for marriage between a man and a woman. Two young women came to faith. They said, “This is weird: we’ve never heard it before, but if that’s what Jesus calls for – then we’re in.” As Bishop Jill commented, “our inherited Christian ethics on sex speak preciously into our culture which is craving intimacy and worth, a culture which can squeeze out the dignity of children and value of families. Yes of course, Christian beliefs looks strange at first glance. Jesus’s death on the cross makes no sense until you realise the universe-shattering power of his death.”

So that is my view. I may be wrong; I am willing to be challenged, and hope (see above!) that God will give me the humility to refine or change my views as God draws me closer to his heart and leads me into a deeper understanding of his words, will and ways.

What next?

The Church Council will be beginning to discuss this issue and we will keep you informed of any developments or structured opportunities for group discussion. Whatever the conclusions of Synod or my own personal convictions, ***St James' by the Park will continue to be a church open to all people*** – whatever their previous life experiences, whatever pain and baggage they carry, whatever labels others have put on them or they have adopted for themselves – as we seek to explore faith, worship God and grow in Christlikeness together. I don't want this to be the defining or even dominant issue in our church. We should be preoccupied with Jesus!

To finish, let me be clear: ***I know that some (many?) in our congregation will not agree with my view, and I don't expect everyone to do so!*** To my mind, a church where everyone agrees on everything isn't a healthy church! I hope and pray that as we explore our differences of opinion together, as we share our stories, as we pray and study together, as we mourn with those who mourn and rejoice with those who rejoice (Romans 12.15), we will come to see our differences as a gift through which the Lord blesses us with deeper, richer fellowship.

To those who've made it this far, thank you for bearing with me! I am very happy to chat personally if you would find that helpful. Just give me a call or drop me an email so we can fix a time.

With my love and prayers in Christ,



Rev'd Dan Clark,
Vicar

¹ See <https://www.churchofengland.org/media-and-news/press-releases/prayers-gods-blessing-same-sex-couples-take-step-forward-after-synod> for the full wording of the motion – or if you are reading a paper copy of this letter, ask me for a printed version of that.