Presidential address: Diocesan Synod, 18 March 2023

How can we respond to all that’s happened, and to the differences we experience as one family here in the Diocese of Bath & Wells. Because through our baptism, that’s what I believe we are. One family. We all know how the saying goes – “You can choose your friends, you can’t choose your family”. And much more importantly, Jesus says to us is this; ‘You did not choose me, but I chose you.’ I’m not here, you’re not here, the people sitting at the next table to you, those who attend the church down the road from you aren’t here because we’ve all exercised our consumer choice to be part of this outfit. We’re here because Jesus has called each one of us.

So as a family, called into being by Jesus, what might be some of the most important things we need to be thinking about as we face the issues generated by LLF in the weeks and months to come.

I invite us to begin by naming the sheer amount of fear that’s being experienced by a number of us as a result of our disagreement. Fear amongst those who are LGBTQI+ that their very being may be rejected. Fear among those who oppose the developments that have taken place that the very basis of their Christian faith may be undermined. I have to own my own fear that this whole disagreement could tear us apart, bringing our ability to be agents of God’s kingdom in our country crashing down. The problem with fear is that when we are afraid we stop listening and we make all kinds of assumptions.

A few years ago I was fortunate to be able to work shadow the chief executive of the organisation Tearfund. I said to him ‘What do you do?’ He said ‘I go around our offices telling people not to be afraid.’ ‘Why’s that?’ I said. ‘Because,’ he replied ‘When we’re afraid we make stupid decisions’. It’s no accident that God’s most common commandment to us in the Bible is ‘Do not be afraid’. The way to address fear is to name it, see it, own it. For then it gives us the power to step back, to see clearly, think carefully, act generously, decide wisely.

Part of the seeing is to recognise that we are not discussing issues. Our disagreement concerns people. People who are members of our family who are LGBTQI+ - brothers, sisters, friends, relations, colleagues, members of our congregations, fellow followers of Christ.

Just as much, people who are members of our family who are concerned that these developments will undermine the authority of scripture as to how we live our lives. All of this is about people, it’s not an academic exercise. Our challenge is how to keep seeing those who stand on the other side of any argument as people. To suspend our judgement about others. To perceive positive intent and to refuse to give in to mistrust and suspicion. No one is taking this lightly. All of us are seeking to hear God’s voice. And we hear that in other. I’m hugely grateful for those who have written to me about the differences we’ve faced. My prayer has often been helped most by those who tell me that the proposals of the bishops are just plain wrong. For they’ve caused me to wrestle with these issues and my conscience. What does God want us to do? Have I got this right? Or am I in error?

What I’m sure God wants is to create a space that is safe for everybody. A space where everyone can experience unconditional positive regard. Where those who are LGBTQI+ can know unquestioningly that this is a family that its safe to be part of. Where those who oppose the developments that have happened can know unquestioningly that their freedom of conscience will not only be protected but also defended. Where different ideas and understandings can be examined and discussed without finger pointing and the attribution of blame.

For almost all of us are going to need such spaces right where we are, because what’s emerged during the weeks since the synod vote is that these questions do not have simple binary answers. There are very few places where a simple alignment of perspective exists between clergy, wardens, PCCs and congregations.

What we’re seeing much more is an array of permutations where clergy may see things one way, PCCs another and with congregations who hold a whole range of views, drawn from families and friendships with a whole variety of experience and perspective. Differences aren’t out there. Among them. With that other lot. They’re here. In this room. Among our family. And our challenge is of how we’re going to manage that well without turning on one another.

For the irony is that this is not the issue upon which almost any of us want to spend their time and energy, let alone fight over. As a bishop I have spent the last eight years assiduously visiting the parishes, schools and chaplaincies in my care – meeting their clergy, leading collective worship, spending time with ministry teams, being wined and dined by wardens, having conversations with PCCs.

And what do people want to talk to me about? They want to talk about how they can work with God to enable the life of the kingdom to take shape where they are and of how they can hand on the faith to the next generation in good nick. Until the last month one PCC in eight years has raised human sexuality as an issue with me. So my brothers and sisters, I raise with you my biggest concern. How can we avoid this issue – as important as it is - from derailing what we are principally about – of winning people and communities for Christ, of transforming the world so that it conforms more and more to his image, of passing on the breadth and depth and height of this extraordinary inheritance of faith that we have given not because we chose Jesus Christ. But because he chose us.

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