



BEARING WITH ONE ANOTHER IN LOVE

A Pastoral Letter to the Teulu Asaph from the Bishop
Holy Cross, 14th September, 2021.

Last week, the Governing Body of the Church in Wales decided by a two thirds majority in each of its houses (laity, clergy, bishops), to permit the bishops, in their dioceses, to authorise a Service of Blessing of Same Sex Civil Unions. This means that couples of the same sex who have contracted marriage or a civil partnership under the law of England and Wales may now be permitted to ask for a Blessing in any of the Churches of our diocese, given that I, in common with my colleague bishops, issued the appropriate letter of authorisation this Monday, with effect from 1st October.

This matter has been under debate for a very long time, and there are those who will both applaud, and those who will be deeply troubled by this decision. For those who welcome this decision, including many gay and lesbian Christian sisters and brothers within our own diocesan family, it is a sign of liberation and joy, as the Church recognises the faithfulness of loving commitment represented by these unions, and allows those living in committed loving relationships to bring their faith and their personal lives together to be publicly acknowledged in the life of the Church.

For others within our family, there will be a real struggle to be at peace with this decision. For them, marriage is between one man and one woman, and the Bible is quite clear in teaching that this is the only context that God permits for sexual relationships. The new canon (Church law) recognises this difference of conviction by giving all clergy a right of conscience: no cleric is to be required to use the service, and if they are approached and feel unable to conduct such a blessing, then I have told our clergy that they ought to refer the couple to me as Chief Pastor of the diocese.

How should Christians conduct themselves when such differences appear in our life? The first must be by being true to our own convictions *in a gracious manner*, which means without passing judgement on the convictions of others. In my mind, there is a big difference between saying “I believe that the Bible teaches this” and “You are being unfaithful to the teaching of the Bible”. It may not sound much different –perhaps even logically the one follows the other - but I think we should confine ourselves to talking about ourselves, and not start labelling others. Why? Because when there is a sharp division of opinion, it is too easy to claim “the higher ground” – rather like the cardinal who was once quoted as saying: “You worship God in your way, and we’ll worship Him in His” – and to appear to be putting others down. We need to remember that God calls us to humility. (*Romans 12.3*)

Secondly, how do we respond to others? We should take the matter to God in prayer, but not think that we can resolve the issue by our own anger. (*James 1.19,20*) Indeed, I believe that we should seek to handle each other kindly, and seek to understand the views of others and where they are coming from – to bear with one another in love (*Ephesians 4.2*) and ascribing the best, not the worst, motives to one another. It doesn’t help to accuse one side of bigotry and the other side of merely giving in to the spirit of the age. Both sides are actually trying to discern what Christ is asking of us in terms of faithful obedience when it comes to life partnership and desire.

Thirdly, I think we have to recognise that so many faithful Christians are coming to deeply different views as they have prayed about and discussed these matters. It is not just a case of dissent: many of the most faithful Christians I know find that compassion drives them to be inclusive, even as others feel obedience commands them to withhold approval. Ultimately, I personally hope that Christians will learn to live with difference on this matter as we have learned to live with difference on so many other matters. We should remember that those who find this development difficult believe that the Bible is so clear on this matter that it means twisting the scriptures to read them in any other way. On the other hand, those who welcome this change (and you’ll already know that I am among them) simply cannot believe that verses which we understand to condemn promiscuity can be used to condemn couples who in every way demonstrate commitment, faithful discipleship and who bear the fruits of the Spirit’s work over decades in their lives.

I can see that for some, my response will be flabby, that they will be disappointed that as bishop I’m not defending the traditional position. However, as I said at Governing Body, if my gay and lesbian sisters and brothers, in whom I find only integrity, love and faithfulness, want to seek God’s blessing on their lives together, I cannot and will not forbid them. I feel this so deeply and so strongly that I would not be true to my own faith, and to my own integrity, if I was expected to maintain an injustice, and to heap obloquies on the heads of people I know to be seeking holy living.

