

Presidential Address Synod March 2010

The Equality Bill which is before Parliament has raised again the issue about how the Church engages in the debate on sexual ethics.

In my Presidential Address today I want therefore to return to the debate on human sexuality. The thought of it may make your heart grow heavy because many feel that this issue has consumed too much of our time and energy and even deflected us from other equally important areas in the mission of God.

You may think that with a General Election coming up I should be addressing some of the major political issues of our time. I did this in a lecture in Ripon Cathedral three weeks ago and have made copies available to you today. You may think that I should direct attention to Jesus and address the matter of faith. I am doing this each Wednesday evening in our own Cathedral during Lent.

However, for some in the church homosexuality has become the defining issue of orthodoxy; it has become the benchmark on how you interpret Scripture and apply it authoritatively to the modern world. For others in the church, especially but not exclusively for those who are gay, homosexuality and the church's attitude have become the touchstone of the church's seriousness in wanting to include in the Kingdom all God's children.

Put like that this summary of the two positions sounds perfectly reasonable and irenic. But we all know that the division of opinion has caused much bitterness and enmity and continues to aggravate the worsening relations within the Anglican Communion. The question which exercises me and which I wish to address today is whether we in the church can have a division of opinion without bitterness and a diversity of conviction without enmity.

Of all the ethical dilemmas that face human society the most basic and fundamental questions centre on the taking of human life. Beginning and end of life issues are at the forefront of our moral debates today and come to a head in legislation that permits abortion and in proposed legislation about assisted suicide and euthanasia. Synod will recall that to the latter subject I devoted a Presidential Address in June 2006. At the time of the Iraq War there was also animated debate about whether or not that military engagement fulfilled the criteria of a just war. Historically the famous five principles of a just war probably go back to 4th and 5th Centuries with the writings of Ambrose of Milan and Augustine of Hippo although it was Thomas Aquinas who gave the theory definition in the Middle Ages.

A cursory glance at the history of the just war theory and the ethics of pacifism show that for the last two thousand years the church has been exercised about whether or not it is ever right for a Christian to take up arms and to take the life of another human being. Although it has been agreed that the early church (from the period of persecution within the Roman Empire until the conversion of Constantine) was the age of pacifism, since then the church has not only allowed but embraced a breadth of ethical opinion on the taking of life.

Augustine made the point that Jesus ruled out *Malitia* (hatred) not *Militia* (military service) and the church, without compromising the principle of the sanctity of human life, has made space within the Body of Christ for a variety of ethical positions.

I suspect that within our Synod there is a similar spectrum of moral conviction about whether or not it is ever justified to take the life of another. No doubt should our nation ever find itself in another period of compulsory conscription to military service we would have lively debates on the floor of this Synod to argue the case and to discern the truth. Meanwhile, on this the most fundamental of all ethical issues in spite of any divergent views, we sit comfortably with each other, recognise each other's integrity, respect one another's faith and moral judgement and enjoy communion in Christ with one another.

I have to say that I am not fazed by this for with you I recognise that in a complex world of absolute moral principles the application of them is rarely a straightforward process. That is why our courts are presided over by people and not computers.

Even though we live in a society tempted to reduce every decision to a box-ticking exercise that can be processed through a computer, when it comes to making moral judgements about a person's behaviour we have to hear the human story and form a moral judgement with regard not only to the nature of the action but also to the intent and the consequences. And although I am not a lawyer I know enough to see that context frames a deed and can either mitigate or aggravate the seriousness of an action.

The histories of the First and Second World Wars when conscription was in force show how many wrestled with their conscience as they sought to apply moral principles to their own particular context. As we look back, our society and the church both approve and salute the courage shown by both pacifists and conscripts even though at the time there were passionate debates, fierce division of opinion and great hostility shown to conscientious objectors.

The fact that conscripts and pacifists divided along one moral line does not detract from our admiration now nor deflect us from acknowledging now the moral courage of both. We may sympathise with the soldier yet we can salute the pacifist; we may identify fully with the pacifist yet admire the sacrifice of the soldier.

In other words, we can now stand on either side of the moral argument and still be in fellowship despite disagreeing on this the most fundamental ethical issue, the sixth of the Ten Commandments.

I know that especially for those who are gay this is not an exact moral parallel for our sexuality like ethnicity is not a matter of choice. It is a given. In Christian terms a grace. Yet, conceding that important distinction, here is an area of ethical dispute where the church has contained disagreement.

Just as the church over the last 2000 years has come to allow a variety of ethical conviction about the taking of life and the application of the sixth Commandment so I believe that in this period it is also moving towards allowing a variety of ethical conviction about people of the same gender loving each other fully. Just as Christian pacifists and Christian soldiers profoundly disagree with one another yet in their disagreement continue to drink from the same cup because they share in the one body so too I believe the day is coming when Christians who equally profoundly disagree about the consonancy of same gender love with the discipleship of Christ will in spite of their disagreement drink openly from the same cup of salvation.

This is I believe the next chapter to be written in the Church of England and the Anglican

Communion. It is the chapter that is already being written in our Partnership in Mission with the Diocese of Virginia and with the Diocese of Akure in Nigeria. At our last Synod we renewed and approved the continuation of our partnership with the Diocese of Akure. In the appendix of the report considered by the Synod was the exchange of letters between me and my brother Bishop Michael Ipinmoye of Akure. I will include them as an enclosure to this address and draw attention to the paragraph where I set out how I see the debate on sexual ethics in the Diocese of Liverpool.

“Furthermore, I was able to explain to you that I thought that the Diocese of Liverpool was on the way to achieving a position similar to the church’s attitude to pacifism in matters of homosexuality. In other words, there will be people of equal sincerity and equal conviction who believe and do not believe that homosexuality within a stable and faithful relationship is consistent with Christian discipleship. Again, I was encouraged that you seemed able to respect this likelihood even though I know that you were at pains to demonstrate to me that the Church of Nigeria could never countenance something which was against the law of the country. “

The point of significance in this is the response of Bishop Michael. He restates his own position and that of the Diocese of Akure and of the Church of Nigeria and calls on us to continue to reflect on the Biblical material. Having done this he reiterated what he said to me personally in our private meeting that he and the Diocese of Akure wish to continue the Partnership in Mission. This is a partnership between an African Diocese taking a traditional stance on gay relationships and a Church of England Diocese which is moving toward embracing a range of ethical convictions on this issue and which is also in partnership with a Diocese in the Episcopal Church of America.

In the Diocese of Liverpool there are churches and individuals who identify with the traditional stance on gay relationships held by the African Church, although I know of no one who shares the homophobic hatred expressed in the proposed legislation that has been before the Ugandan Parliament which I take this opportunity to criticise and abhor. To our shame in Liverpool we have seen outbursts of homophobic violence which the Church Leaders have unanimously condemned in the following statement:

“The Leaders of the churches in Liverpool believe that it is wrong for anyone in the community of which we are all part to be victimised, or threatened with victimisation, on account of their race, creed, colour or sexual orientation. We affirm our commitment to work with others to build a community where all can have their place of belonging, feel welcome and live in safety. As Church Leaders, we represent a rich variety of Christian traditions, with different perspectives on some issues, but we stand together in condemning the use of violence and other forms of intimidation against minority groups which are especially vulnerable. The City of Liverpool has a long history of welcoming people of difference. In the past we have discovered, sometimes painfully, the importance of learning to live peacefully together. This lesson we must never forget.”

In his most recent Presidential Address to the General Synod of the Church of England the Archbishop of Canterbury said, “The rights and dignities of gay and lesbian people are a matter of proper concern for all of us, and we assume with good reason, even, I should say, with good Christian reason, that the securing of these rights is obviously a mark of civilised

and humane society. When those rights are threatened – as in the infamous legislation that was being discussed in Uganda – we quite rightly express repugnance.” If from a Christian point of view we can advocate this breadth of moral conviction for society at large I believe it is consistent theologically and ethically to allow the same diversity of moral conviction within the Church herself.

And, just as the rights and dignities of gay and lesbian people are a matter for proper concern for both church and society so are the rights and dignities of those who out of theological and moral conviction believe that the gift of full sexual expression is given only to those in marriage. This is one of the reasons why I voted for the amendment to the Equality Bill which allows the Church to continue to appoint people who uphold their historic stance on moral and doctrinal issues. It is why I also spoke in the debate in defence of the right of the church to appoint Head Teachers who can uphold the Christian ethos of church schools. Although I do find myself in sympathy with Lord Ali’s amendment which allows other religious organisations to conduct civil partnerships on the grounds that other people should also be free to follow their own conscience and theological and moral convictions.

The heartache for those who take the traditional stance is that it can be used to fuel homophobic attitudes. This is particularly painful for Christians who are homosexual and who accept the traditional ethic for themselves; they feel the negativity personally. It is an agonising cross. As you can imagine, they do not come lightly to the interpretation that their homosexual condition is a call to celibacy. In my view, the debate over the last twenty years has not given sufficient attention to their situation or to their theological, ethical and spiritual insights.

In the Diocese of Liverpool there are also churches and individuals who identify with the stance on gay relationships held by the American Episcopal Church. In my essay and previous Presidential Address “Making Space for Truth and Grace” I have sought to understand some of the dynamics at work in American culture. I will not rehearse them here except to say that any church, ours included, that has been so implicated in the slave trade, slavery and racism will understandably want to go to all lengths to demonstrate unequivocally their stance on human rights, civil rights and equal rights for all groups in society. Furthermore, we cannot disentangle easily our reactions to the American Church from our reaction to the dominance of America in the world today. There are many dynamics at work in international relationships. This is one of the reasons that I have consistently argued both to you and the wider church that it is far better to locate ethical and doctrinal debates in the context of established and proven relationships within the Anglican Communion rather than through megaphones across oceans and continents. It is why I am so committed to our relationship with Virginia and Akure. What this partnership recognises, indeed it is predicated upon this principle, is that the diversity of ethical opinion is in itself legitimate.

Over the years as your Bishop I have shared with you my thinking especially on this subject, always promising that as my own understanding developed I would share it with the Synod and the Diocese. I laid this address before the Bishop’s Council in January.

I bring it to you today to say that this is where I now am, and where I believe the Diocese of Liverpool now is and where I hope that the Church of England and the Anglican Communion might also move.

Over the last twelve years we have gone forward in mission with a remarkable degree of unity. This was very much in evidence at the great Clergy Conference last June; it was there again in the recent excellent conference of Church Wardens. By God's grace we seem able to contain our differences as we rise to the opportunities for mission that come from being the Church of England; we also delight in the unique opportunities for mission that come to our brothers and sisters of other traditions, most notably the Catholic Church. Like the rest of England ours is a culture of diversity. One of the positive aspects of a rich ecumenical landscape is that we have a variety of doors through which different people might enter into the Christian faith.

I think this appreciation of diversity has helped us to accept each other and to work together as a Diocese refusing to allow anything to undermine our oneness in Christ.

That which I have stated explicitly in this address I believe we are already living out implicitly, namely that we do already as a Diocese accept a diversity of ethical convictions about human sexuality in the same way that the church has always allowed a diversity of ethical opinion on taking human life. Within our own fellowship we are brothers and sisters in Christ holding a variety of views on a number of major theological and moral issues and we are members of a church that characteristically allows a large space for a variety of nuances, interpretations, applications and disagreement. I know that sometimes it stretches us, but never to breaking point, for it seems to me that there is a generosity of grace that holds us all together.

If on this subject of sexuality the traditionalists are ultimately right and those who advocate the acceptance of stable and faithful gay relationships are wrong what will their sin be? That in a world of such little love two people sought to express a love that no other relationship could offer them? And if those advocating the acceptance of gay relationship are right and the traditionalists are wrong what will their sin be? That in a church that has forever wrestled with interpreting and applying Scripture they missed the principle in the application of the literal text?

Do these two thoughts not of themselves enlarge the arena in which to do our ethical exploration?

This address has been about how we handle disagreements about ethical principles within the Body of Christ. It is also about how we promote a Christian humanism whereby we discover before God both how to flourish as human beings in Christ and how to treat each other humanely in the process of that discovery. It is my plea that the Church of England and the Anglican Communion must allow a variety of ethical views on the subject as in this Diocese we do and that to do so finds a parallel in the space it offers for a diversity of moral positions on the taking of life. Although it will doubtless remain a disputed question for some time in the wider church I hope this approach will continue to allow for the development of a humane pastoral theology here in the Diocese of Liverpool.

I have not addressed today the implications of this position for the ordering and governance of the church but I wish you to know that in due course we will discuss these in parishes, deaneries and in the Diocesan Synod as we continue to do together our pastoral theology on this subject recognising that decisions belong ultimately to the General Synod and to the House of Bishops.

As Bishop called to “maintain the spirit of unity in the bond of peace” in the Diocese of Liverpool where we have the full spectrum of moral opinion on human sexuality I believe that to have “diversity without enmity”, as the Dean put it at the Bishop’s Council, provides a safe and a spiritually and emotionally healthy place for Christians of differing convictions to discern the will of God for our lives. To know and to do God’s will is our calling. The place for that discernment is the Body of Christ where the different members, differentiated by the diversity of our graces, gifts and experiences, are called to be in harmony and love with one another. It is to that end that I offer you this Address. It is also offered in the hope that we will let nothing deflect us from mission, the sending out of us all to embrace the world in the love of God.

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