

Presentation from Bishop Jonathan Baker on current issues of interest and concern in the Church of England

For six years now, the Church of England has been engaged in the Living in Love and Faith (LLF) process. These reports, debates and discussions on human sexuality have a long history. ‘LLF’ has generated a report, book, films, podcasts, a Lent course and a vast online library of research papers on a range of subjects all relating to marriage, relationships and sexuality and including history, canon law, liturgy, doctrine, physical and social sciences.

The touchstone for us concerns the sacraments. There is, at present, no proposal before the House of Bishops or General Synod or anywhere else in the governance structures of the Church of England, that same sex marriage should be celebrated in church, nor that the canons or liturgies relating to Holy Matrimony should be changed to accommodate marriage between two people of the same sex. Given the very strong lobbying which exists in favour of this from many within as well as outside the Church, this is very good news, and something we should not lose sight of. The conservation of our doctrine of marriage as being between one man and one woman did not come about by accident – many people, bishops, clergy, lay people have worked hard to secure the maintenance of the inherited view. Of course, nothing can be taken for granted as being ‘forever’ when it comes to Church of England teaching and practice, but it seems that it will be many years before a serious proposal for the Church to formally redefine marriage and to offer a same-sex liturgy is on the table.

Other aspects to the LLF process prompt questions. Our parishes need to continue being the inclusive communities they have always been, where all are welcome and where intrusive questioning is not part of our DNA. The 17 bishops – the Bishop of Chichester and I among them – who published a theological paper in defence of the received doctrine of marriage signed up to a document which warmly endorsed the goods which God gives through faithful, committed, loving, stable same sex partnerships. This should be uncontroversial for anyone who belongs to Forward in Faith or who worships in a Society parish.

But there are challenges, among them the occasions and context of the proposed ‘Prayers of Love and Faith’, evolving teaching about the relationship between physical, sexual intimacy and marriage, whether clergy may enter into a civil same-sex marriage, and so on. A further question is, what will happen to the structures and ecclesiology of the Church of England? What might further ‘differentiation’ look like? How can we live in disagreement on these issues? And for we who claim the name of Catholic in the Church of England, what will be the consequences for the life of the Anglican Communion and crucially for our relationships with the Roman Catholic Church, with Orthodoxy, and indeed with many of the new and Pentecostal churches?

It is vital that we continue to take a calm, mature and measured approach at this time, and remind our-selves of two facts. First, there is no change proposed to the canons or liturgies of Holy Matrimony. Second, all the proposed liturgical material is to be used entirely at the minister’s discretion: no priest can be compelled to use prayers which they cannot in conscience use. If nothing else, that should bring comfort and a sense of stability as this process continues to unfold.

Meanwhile, in the wake of the IICSA final report, the spotlight continues to fall on the ‘seal of the confessional’ in the light of that report’s recommendation that disclosures of child sexual abuse - whether by victim/survivor or perpetrator – should be subject to mandatory reporting, even when made to a priest in the context of sacramental confession.

I also want to acknowledge the terrible trauma of the abuse of children and vulnerable adults. This is a matter once again which has very much been at the centre of attention for us a Church in recent days and weeks. My remarks are in recognition of the Church’s failures and of the harm done to the vulnerable by ministers of the Gospel.

Catholic sacramental theology holds, straightforwardly and unambiguously, that the sacramental confession of sins to a priest is ‘sealed’ by the nature of the sacrament itself, and that there are no circumstances in which the seal can be broken by the confessor; though the penitent of course is entirely free to repeat what they have said. As priests and people of Forward in Faith and The Society, we stand unequivocally with that teaching, shared by the great Churches of East and West.

However, we would argue that the ‘safe space’ which absolute confidentiality preserves is not a problem to be solved but a blessing to be embraced: a safe space in which survivors can speak freely and in which perpetrators can be accompanied into making a disclosure outside the confessional. Better training and a system of authorisation for priests who have been properly trained and licensed for this ministry are changes we can welcome and embrace, and indeed we can lead the way in delivering that training. With Walsingham and other places of pilgrimage and healing at the heart of our movement we can offer this as a gift to the rest of the Church of England. But we know where we cannot, in conscience, ever go – and we know from history what the cost of conscience has been on this issue at different times and in the lives of specific individuals now numbered among the saints. We must pray that if the law of the land changes we will be given strength and wisdom as to how to live and minister this sacrament in those circumstances: but that the Church herself will not change her laws, her canons, her teaching in this matter which touches on the very essence of the Gospel.