

Address to Diocesan Synod March 2023

It has been a joy so far in this synod to keep our focus firmly on the mission of the church. We have been inspired by the testimony of Bishop Joseph and we have developed our plans for an application for major investment in the mission life of the diocese. In a county in which 93% of the population do not know Jesus in the worship of his Church, that forensic focus on evangelism is critical.

But given its prominence in the life of the Church right now, it would be wrong to let this Synod pass by without some mention of the Living in Love and Faith process. To bring synod up to speed, a motion was passed in General Synod to welcome the House of Bishops proposals to introduce a set of *Prayers of Love and Faith* that can be used with same sex couples and to write new pastoral guidance on marriage, sex and relationships which will replace *Issues in Human Sexuality*. There was an important amendment to the motion affirming the Bishops' undertaking that what they decide or commend should not be 'contrary to or indicative of a departure from the doctrine of the Church of England.'

Since that vote I have heard a huge range of reactions. Some of you are content with this way ahead and are pleased that the Church is seeking a way of affirming the goods that can come from faithful same sex relationships. Others are deeply distressed both by the process and by indications that the Church of England is in effect changing its teaching on sex and marriage and thereby crossing a red line. Some of you see new possibilities for mission opening up. Others of you are dismayed by this apparent departure from the authority of scripture or the sacramental integrity of the Church. For some on both sides of the debate who would identify under the LGBT umbrella this is especially personal and painful.

Whilst the Bishop's proposals were an attempt to find a common way ahead together, it is clear to me that they leave the Church of England dangerously divided. As Diocesan Synod it is only right for you to know that I too am troubled by the current direction of travel and abstained in the final vote, not least because of the impact that the proposals will have on the unity and so on the missional viability of the Church of England.

This means that Bishop Jill and I both find ourselves in one of those situations where the pastoral responsibilities that a Bishop has for every parish and person in a Diocese could be seen by some to clash with personal theological conviction. However – and this is a critical point - love is about more than mere agreement. The Bishop's role is to be pastor to all, and I believe that the wellbeing of the Diocese is best served when that heavy responsibility is lived out in the fullest possible sense.

Perhaps the biggest strength and certainly the greatest joy of this diocese is our relationships, and in the months to come these will be more important than ever. We want to hear people's voices. We need honest conversations. The profound love that Bishop Jill and I have for every single one of you is not at stake here, and it is in the strength of that love that we must perceive together where God is in all this and what he is saying to us.

That love must also inform the tone and tenor of our conversation. We must ensure that our debates and conversations are framed by the pastoral principles agreed by synod five

years ago. We need to lament and repent of homophobia in all its forms. Even in a time of deep disagreement, it is important to bear with one another and see each other as Christ sees us.

However it would be naïve to understate the threats that this debate causes to our common life and so I have asked various bodies in the Diocese to look at mitigations we might put in place. This will include financial planning, the feasibility of clear guidance that will seek to protect the consciences of all clergy and an exploration of the impact of these developments on Vision 2026. It is not the way of the Diocese of Blackburn to sit back and then respond reactively to the decisions of others, and I am grateful for all who are leading on these strands of work.

At the same time the Church of God has never negotiated or compromised its way out of crises. As Bishop Joseph has shown us during his extraordinary visit this past week, the Church evangelises its way out of crises. At this moment more than ever we need to hear afresh the charge given us in the Great Commission to make disciples of all nations. It would be a tragedy beyond imagining if our disputes meant that the Word of God went unproclaimed and souls went unsaved. There can be no pause button on salvation.

The Church of England is very good at arranging its disputes in such a way that everyone feels they have lost and everyone feels afraid. Whatever your theological convictions may be in this area, I would urge you not to fall into fear and not to allow those fears to grow in the darkness. Instead, pray fervently for the gift of the Holy Spirit who burns out fear with his love and power. The Spirit has not abandoned his church. Our unity is not of our own making. It is His gift. In His strength and through His visitation, the mystery of God's loving purposes will be revealed.

+Philip Burnley
March 22nd 2023