

THE BISHOP OF ST ALBANS' PRESIDENTIAL ADDRESS
DIOCESAN SYNOD
11 MARCH 2023

We meet against the backdrop of war and suffering in our world. Two weeks ago we marked the first anniversary of the Russian invasion of Ukraine. It is horrifying that in the 21st century over 100 000 Russians and over 100 000 Ukrainians have died on European soil. I was privileged to be in Westminster Hall when President Zelenskyy addressed both Houses of Parliament on 8 February. He spoke of the suffering and determination of his people in the face of an aggressive invasion. Sadly, the war is likely to continue for some time. Meanwhile, we continue to pray for the Ukrainians and for a speedy resolution.

We have also watched with horror at the devastation caused by the earthquake which hit Turkey and Syria on 6 February. We know of a number of people from Bedfordshire and Hertfordshire who flew out to offer help in the rescue mission and I am aware that many churches have also had special collections in response to the appeals for aid. Thank you for your generosity.

I mention these two tragedies because they help us put the other topics of today's synod – and my Presidential address – in context. I want to talk about *Living in Love and Faith* and the Coronation of King Charles III.

The recent meeting of the General Synod of the Church of England debated **Living in Love and Faith**. As you are all aware, this is a process which has been underway for about six years, enabling all of us to reflect on relationships, sexuality, marriage, gender and human identity.

Early on in the process, and in order to equip us in this task, the Pastoral Advisory Group produced six Pastoral Principles for living well together to guide our reflection. These have proved very helpful and Canon Will Gibbs will say more about the principles in a few minutes when we discuss LLF at our tables.

Living in Love and Faith is the most significant process of listening that the Church of England has ever undertaken. Over the past year the bishops have been listening to the responses from every corner of the country and presented some proposals to General Synod in early February this year.

Much has been reported in the media, with various degrees of spin and unfortunately some people have not actually read the motion, so I want to take time to comment on it, so that we are clear both what it says and what it does not say.

Firstly, the preamble acknowledges the huge commitment that people in every part of the church have put into working together:

That this Synod, recognising the commitment to learning and deep listening to God and to each other of the Living in Love and Faith process, and desiring with God's help to journey together while acknowledging the different deeply held convictions within the Church:

The preamble acknowledges that we hold conflicting views on human sexuality in the church, just as wider society does.

Secondly, clauses a and b offer an apology for the way that LGBTI+ people have been treated in the past (and sometimes in the present) and commit us to working with the Pastoral Principles:

(a) lament and repent of the failure of the Church to be welcoming to LGBTQI+ people and the harm that LGBTQI+ people have experienced and continue to experience in the life of the Church;

(b) recommit to our shared witness to God's love for and acceptance of every person by continuing to embed the Pastoral Principles in our life together locally and nationally;

These paragraphs remind us that there is no place for homophobia in the church and that we need to welcome all people, as each one has been created by God.

Thirdly, clauses c and d urge us to continue on the process of learning about human sexuality and ask the House of Bishop to introduce a replacement document to *Issues in Human Sexuality*:

(c) commend the continued learning together enabled by the Living in Love and Faith process and resources in relation to identity, sexuality, relationships and marriage;

(d) welcome the decision of the House of Bishops to replace *Issues in Human Sexuality* with new pastoral guidance;

In other words, we still have much more to learn about human sexuality and flourishing.

This brings us to clauses e and f which are one of the parts of the proposals which raised most concern, namely the draft prayers. These are known as the *Prayers of Love and Faith* which the House of Bishops will commend for use. The prayers are being reviewed in the light of the February General Synod debate and will be returned to the next meeting of Synod in July.

A key factor is that, like the guidance we use for the remarriage of divorcees in church, no minister will be required to act against their conscience and be forced to use these prayers if they do not wish to. It was agreed that their use should be monitored and that General Synod should receive a report in five years' time:

(e) welcome the response from the College of Bishops and look forward to the House of Bishops further refining, commending and issuing the Prayers of Love and Faith described in GS 2289 and its Annexes;

(f) invite the House of Bishops to monitor the Church's use of and response to the Prayers of Love and Faith, once they have been commended and published, and to report back to Synod in five years' time;

Then finally we have a section which was an amendment proposed by the Revd Andrew Cornes:

(g) endorse the decision of the College and House of Bishops not to propose any change to the doctrine of marriage, and their intention that the final version of the Prayers of Love and Faith should not be contrary to or indicative of a departure from the doctrine of the Church of England.'

Just to be clear, there is no proposal to introduce same-sex marriage, nor will anyone have to conduct services for same-sex couples.

During the eight-hour debate, when we considered and voted on 27 amendments, a wide range of views were expressed. Since then, Bishop Richard, Bishop Jane and I have been holding further discussions with people on all sides of this debate in the diocese. There are those who are profoundly disappointed that the proposals are so modest and do little more than to regulate what is already going on. As one person put it to me 'we have waited so long and we had hoped for so much more'. She and many others with her had hoped that we would make provision for same-sex marriage.

We've also met with many of those who feel that the General Synod is caving into the spirit of the age and are not upholding the church's traditional teaching on marriage.

Among my colleagues in the Bishop Staff there is a variety of views. Whatever your position I hope that the motion will signal that as a diocese we want to welcome LGBTI+ people in our churches. It is the earnest hope of the House of Bishops that the wider church will spend time reflecting on the motion and commit ourselves to 'learn to live with difference' or to use an already hackneyed phrase 'to continue to walk together'. We realise that there may be some people who feel they cannot, in all conscience, live with this motion and we will need time to consider if and how provision might be made for such people.

The Agenda Planning Group of this synod and I was very keen that we should have the opportunity to discuss this matter and that will begin in a few minutes. We need to conduct our conversations with gentleness and respect, aware that this topic may be a live one to some of the people sitting at the table or to some members of their families.

The final subject I want to mention is the **Coronation of King Charles III** which will take place on Saturday 6 May. The king wants the theme of the service to be about service.

This will be a great opportunity for churches to serve their parishes by screening the coronation service in our churches on the Saturday and holding our own 'Coronation Big Lunch'. We can also live stream 'The Coronation Concert' at Windsor Castle on the Sunday. The BBC has announced that it is waiving the normal licensing requirements to broadcast the service and concert as long as we are not selling tickets for the event.

There are also plans for 'The Big Help Out' on Monday 8 May 2023, which is a day celebrating volunteering and an opportunity to engage in some volunteer work in our parishes.

A range of special materials will be available:

- Special prayer and liturgical resources, including 'A daily Book of Devotions' to be used in the 28 days leading up to the coronation, starting on Easter Sunday;
- A vigil service the night before the coronation and liturgical material for the Sunday services.

- Collective worship resources for Primary and Secondary schools.
- A Digital Resource Hub, offering links to digital resources and social media content. This will include guidance on the content of the Coronation Service, helping to explain the symbolism of the service to a modern audience, as well as a publicity toolkit that churches and cathedrals can use to promote worship, community and volunteering events.
- National Lottery Funding of up to £10,000 is available for events and activities surrounding the Coronation through the National Lottery 'Awards for All' programme.
- Bell Ringing Guidance has been produced by the Central Council of Church Bell Ringers.
- Flag flying guidance will be given.

We need to start planning now and inviting a wide range of groups from the community to share in this celebration.

So, over the coming months we will continue to reflect, talk, pray and consider the proposals in front of General Synod on *Living in Love and Faith*. We will also share with our nation in the coronation and its associated celebrations. At the same time we need to expand our imaginations and broaden our sympathies as we hold our suffering world in our prayers – including the people of Ukraine and Turkey/Syria – praying with people around the world 'Thy Kingdom come. Thy will be done, on earth as it is in heaven'.

+Alan St Albans