

Good morning Synod.

I want to begin by speaking to you about events in our Church over the past week:

The process of encounter and discussion which is 'Living in Love and Faith' as you will all be aware, seeks to explore issues of identity, sexuality, relationships and marriage. A key emphasis has been on encountering one another in these conversations, seeking understanding of one another, of scripture, of our faith tradition, in a spirit of openness and deep mutual respect.

As Bishop Sarah, the Bishop of London, said in her response to the debate in General Synod this week:

'Encountering the other - if it is to be an encounter which honours God who made us and love us all, will always be a two way exchange. It isn't an academic learning experience where we gather information about something or somebody so that we can be better informed. It is a relationship.

And in a relationship our boundaries are permeable. We let the other in.

This is hard work and it requires courage, but to hold the other at arms length is not really to encounter them as a person at all, but to observe them as an object.

Our challenge as a Synod, understanding that we do not agree, is to ask ourselves how do we live as children of God, made in his image, in the midst of disagreement, resisting the polarisation which seems to be increasing in the world and in the Church.

The motion agreed in February 2023 was a result of listening - to God, to scripture and to one another. It was about finding that place where we can continue to live together, focussing on the mission of the Church.'

At the General Synod this week this amended motion was carried:

‘That this Synod, conscious that the Church is not of one mind on the issues raised by Living in Love and Faith, that we are in a period of uncertainty, and that many in the Church on all sides are being deeply hurt at this time, recognises the progress made by the House of Bishops towards implementing the motion on *Living in Love and Faith* passed by this Synod in February 2023, (as reported in GS 2328,) and encourages the House to continue its work of implementation, and asks the House to consider whether some standalone services for same-sex couples could be made available for use, possibly on a trial basis, on the timescale envisaged by the motion passed by the Synod in February 2023.’

Bishop Matthew, Bishop Jonathan and I wholeheartedly welcome this decision. We obviously do not speak for Bishop Michael, as he is currently on sabbatical.

We also recognise that for many it has caused deep pain.

For some, you have felt this decision is an assault on biblical authority, the nature of marriage and the proper expression of sexual intimacy.

In some cases, it has caused you to question your future in the Church of England and wonder whether the tradition that has nurtured you in the faith is still welcomed or honoured amongst us.

As bishops, we want to assure you that it is, and that we are always open to a pastoral conversation with any for whom the Synod decision has caused distress in this way.

For some in the LGBTQ+ community, the recent debate in Synod has caused hurt for different reasons. You have felt that you have been considered by some to be a “problem” or an “issue” and not as a child of God, seeking to live out a faithful Christian life. The outcome of the Synod debate might feel like “crumbs from the table.”

As bishops, we want to offer you the same opportunity to meet with us for a pastoral conversation, if this would be helpful to you.

As bishops, we too have felt the pain of disunity. Like many of you, we have endured sleepless nights and wondered what the future has in store for the Church.

But we have more in common than our hurt and pain. We have in common a love for Jesus and a desire to serve him in the world.

We turn to face the cross and look upon the one who bore the sin of the world to set us free. Christ on the cross who sees us and breaks down the barriers between us.

And we turn to our community of the beloved in Christ and ask that we may have the grace to see Christ in the face of one another. We cannot say that we don't need each other - it will be together, with our differences, that we will be the body of Christ, his Church.

And we turn again to face outwards to the world for which Jesus died and for which there is a pressing need for a Church that is committed to sharing the good news of God's love in Christ.

In recognition of our call, as individuals and as a Church to share the good news of God's love shown to us in Jesus Christ in all our words and actions, we come now to the business of this gathering.

+ Sarah Shrewsbury

18.11.2023.