

## **A submission to the Commission on the Marriage Canon**

“Reason is the natural organ of truth; but imagination is the organ of meaning.” - C.S. Lewis

In practically every sphere of human thought, the last century has seen an explosion in new knowledge and understanding. Thus it is that the Church finds itself once again having to engage in the same kind of critical self-reflection with which it has had to wrestle in every age – for if theology is indeed the quest of 'faith seeking understanding', we may have much to learn from the fresh insights colouring the myriad strands of knowledge out of which we weave our picture of the world.

Recognising that this has been true for every age, the Anglican Church has long affirmed that its most authentic truths emerge out of a shared and discerning reflection on the dynamic interplay between scripture, tradition and reason together. The very concept of Salvation History is predicated upon the understanding that God's revelation is a gradually unfolding story, written generation by generation, rather than a set of dictates recorded with perfect understanding at a fixed moment in time. We comfortably teach the triune nature of God today, for example, in terms which would have been inconceivable to the Christians of the first century, and heresy to the faithful followers of God worshipping in Solomon's temple. Practically the entire recorded account of Jesus interaction with the established religious institutions of his day demonstrates just how ungodly and idolatrous the preservation of historical doctrine and established practice, divorced from the circumstances of those it should serve, for its own sake, can be.

That being the case does not, however, imply that revolutionary new ideas are inherently good simply because they are novel. Jesus own teaching was not that the law be abolished, but rather that it be always measured against its intended purpose: that it facilitate the expression of a life- and world-changing, inextricably bound, love of God and one another.

Thus it is that the plea made for the adoption of gender neutral language into the Marriage Canon finds itself largely built upon arguments which appeal to love as a scriptural principle over heterosexuality as a scriptural norm. And the first question before synod must, I suspect, therefore reduce to exactly this decision: whether the acceptance of homosexual practice is indeed genuinely more loving than its rejection, or not. For the notion that the rejection of homosexual practice can be 'less loving but more scriptural' is simply far too inherently self-contradictory to inform any ethical Christian practice.

Those hoping to make the case do so because they largely hold the following propositions to be true, even though they be radically different assumptions from those held in ages past:

- that it has been sufficiently demonstrated that healthy human sexuality is best described not as an either/or proposition, but as a multi-faceted spectrum incorporating at least one's physical self, one's orientation, one's emotions and one's spirituality;
- that it has been sufficiently demonstrated that any given instances of the sexualities encompassed by this healthy spectrum are the result not of any act of will, but of complex factors largely outside of one's conscious control, again including both one's biology and psychology;
- that the honouring of this 'spectrum of being' thus constitutes a more authentic celebration of God's creativity than any attempt to impose artificial constraints upon it.

If it may be further assumed that the expression of any such sexuality, consistent with the relationality implied by the *imago Dei* common to all people, is best realised within a sacramentally committed, mutually affirming and supportive relationship, then it is difficult to know what that might be other than marriage.

Given all of these assumptions, if by 'marriage' we will mean a relationship as described above between a man and woman only, with some other term to describe an equal but different relationship between same sexed couples, then it will be difficult to understand that distinction as anything other than arbitrarily exclusive – especially given that both common and legal usage of the term have already incorporated the concept of gender neutrality. Such an attempt will clearly run counter to the Kingdom imperative for the radical inclusiveness which no longer allows for Jew and Greek, male and female, slave and free to be differently valued and respected. Neither is it likely that the attempt to preserve the ancient meaning of the term simply on the grounds that it alone is the relationship which is potentially procreative, can bear much lasting fruit. For such an emphasis is already experienced as prejudicial to those heterosexual couples who are unable or unwilling to conceive children – and it is certainly not the Church's practice to arbitrarily revoke the status of marriage from such couples.

How then will we proceed?

Perhaps by deciding that these assumptions are a step too far after all. In the days to come we will likely hear again the many arguments for and against each one of these propositions, and they will likely seem to us to range from the sublime to the ridiculous. To be genuinely discerning we will need to consider them all nonetheless. They will be informative, but not necessarily compelling.

For in the end, I believe that we are being asked to wrestle not with certainties, but with possibilities. We are being asked to consider whether we might now be living in a genuinely liminal moment. We are being asked, in the light of our shared reflections, to imagine a world which we have not seen before, and which will feel foreign to most people. And we are being asked to decide whether that world has the potential to look any more like the Kingdom of God than the world we currently inhabit. It is the same liminal moment in which our spiritual ancestors wrestled with the implications of accepting Gentiles into the family of God; in which they affirmed the full humanity of all the world's races; and in which they realised that men and women, jointly and severally, bear the same divine image. Each of those moments produced a crisis of faith, and yet we find ourselves the richer for having struggled, even yet imperfectly, to embrace their possibilities. We are being asked now to enter that same struggle again, not by those whose desire is for a world in which any and every human urge is legitimised, but by those who have had the courage to wrestle with who they are in an historically hostile space. We are being asked to do this by those who, through this wrestling, have found themselves called to honour the people they have discovered themselves to be, in communion with their Creator, one another, and all people of faith.

With the best knowledge now at our disposal, with the most open and discerning hearts we can muster, and perhaps even with the courage to think a little differently about how we each came to be the person we are, can we imagine a world in which we call such people brother and sister?

I hope that we can.

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