

A Response to the House of Bishops Guidance on Same-Sex Marriage

As is usual these days, there has been quite a lot of instant comment on the House of Bishops Pastoral Guidance on Same-Sex Marriage. There has been both unnecessary pessimism and optimistic wishful thinking, even from seasoned commentators.

Having given some thought to the issues raised by the Bishops' statement, the following observations may be in order:-

- i) We should be fully aware that this statement is about same-sex marriage not about same-sex relationships as such. On the latter, in the light of the Pilling Report, the Bishops may well end up taking a different line.
- ii) The Bishops are to be commended for quoting extensively from the Book of Common Prayer and the Canons of the Church of England which reflect, of course, the teaching of the Bible and of the Church down the generations. They refer also to the Lambeth Conference Resolution 1:10, albeit selectively. They quote its teaching on marriage and on the need to listen to the experience of homosexual persons but say nothing about the resolution also stating that homosexual practice is incompatible with Scripture and that the Conference refused either to bless same-sex unions (not just marriage) or to permit the ordination of those in such unions.
- iii) It is quite remarkable that what is still the official teaching of the Church of England ie.the 1987 Resolution of General Synod is not mentioned at all. The Pilling Report had already thrown doubt upon it and the Bishops' silence now reinforces the perception that this is no longer viewed as normative, even though there has been no further resolution of Synod.
- iv) Instead, the Bishops' Statement chooses to focus on the more ambiguous 1991 statement of theirs, Issues in Human Sexuality. This stated that the Church does not 'reject' those who choose conscientiously to live in what it calls an active homophile relationship. It speaks also of an 'open and welcoming' place in the Christian community for such persons. Those of us who believe that the Church should not reject anyone who comes for ministry and worship and that there should be a welcome for all who come, were just about able to live with the admitted ambiguity of Issues. In the January 2014 College of Bishops statement, this welcome was expanded to welcoming and affirming not only the presence but also the ministry of gay and lesbian people, both lay and ordained. The latest guidance now follows the logic of the Bishops' 2005 Pastoral Statement on Civil Partnerships by declaring that lay people in same-sex marriages are to have full access to the sacraments of the Church, without any question or call for repentance, or the altering of their life-style.

- v) At the same time, and in line with Issues, the Bishops' Statement, commendably, does not extend this liberty to the clergy on the grounds that they are to be 'wholesome examples and patterns to the flock of Christ'. Given, however, that lay people in SSMs must be fully accepted, presumably may hold office and receive the sacraments, to whom are the clergy being examples?
- vi) The consensus of scholarship regarding the Bible's attitude to genital same-sex relationships is well-summed up by the 2003 Bishops' own statement called Some issues in human sexuality. After an exhaustive discussion of the biblical evidence it tells us that "the consensus of biblical scholarship still points us in the direction of the Church's traditional reading of the biblical material". Quite so but some people will not take no for an answer and we are now into another two years of 'facilitated conversations' on the subject!
- vii) Whilst the Bishops tell us that the clergy must frame and fashion their lives in such a way that they are examples and patterns to the flock of Christ, they do not say anything about their duty also to preach and teach accordingly. How does this sit with their point that clergy may argue for a change in the Church's teaching on marriage and sexuality? The charge of hypocrisy may, indeed, be well-founded, if we are asking people to live and teach in one way but to believe and argue (publicly or privately) for something radically different.
- viii) A final point about 'social virtues' mentioned in the Archbishops' accompanying letter, drawing upon the Church's response to the government's consultation on same-sex marriages: The fact that this or that social virtue of caring, service or mutuality may be seen in a relationship says nothing about that relationship, as a whole, being according to God's purposes for human flourishing. We should be very careful about isolating particular features of a relationship from the whole, especially as this may lead to some arguing for recognition and blessing of such elements in a relationship, even if we cannot bless all the elements of a relationship or the relationship as a whole. There is some evidence that this line of thought is being developed in some circles and we ought to be prepared to expose the fallacy involved in it.

+Michael Nazir-Ali,
February, 2014.