Presidential Address, Chichester Diocesan Synod, 20 May 2023

People often ask me what the collective noun is for various ecclesiastical groups, like bishops, deans, the parochial clergy and even vergers. In most cases the collective noun is a college. But I was reminded recently that the collective noun for peacocks is an ostentation and some might think that is a better way of describing the clergy, given the range of fantastical outfits that they sometimes wear.

However, I also wonder whether it would be ungracious to refer collectively to synods as an ostentation. Just occasionally there is a bit of ostentation going on at the General Synod. It can be humorous. But it can also run the risk of blurring the focus.

As we embark on this Diocesan Synod, I remind myself that we seek to honour God and to respect each other, in preference to any display of our own plumage.

When we speak about marriage and and the purposes of sex as God’s gifts to us in creation we are touching on the intimate details of what constitutes personhood and dignity. It is essential that this Synod feels like a safe space in which to share our understanding of this aspect of the Christian faith. We need to recognise that human relationships are not an exact science. They can open the way to profound fulfilment and happiness. They can happen in many different ways and they can go tragically wrong for serious and unforeseen reasons. And yet we are dependent upon our relationships with God our creator and with each other for learning how to be more fully ourselves.

It is our conviction that the Holy Scriptures reveal to us the truth about God and creation, and the means by which we are offered the hope of salvation from death and futility. One of the profound lessons of Holy Scripture is the delight that God takes in difference. Indeed, the Christian tradition indicates how the gift of difference is intrinsic to the very nature of God. ‘We worship one God in Trinity, and Trinity in Unity, neither confounding the Persons: nor dividing the Substance’ in the words of the Athanasian Creed.

It might well be that our discomfort with difference flows from the realisation that we have indeed discriminated against those who are different from us. We see this to our shame in the experience of the Windrush generation who came to this land with the high expectations of a nation they respected, only to discover that we too often exploited and demeaned them.

Many members of the LGBTQI+ community will say the same about their experience of the Church. This is a tragedy, when we recall that the Church was instrumental in calling for the decriminalisation of homosexuality in this land and prior to that many congregations had often provided safe space for ‘something understood’ – a phrase that George Herbert uses to describe the intangible mystery of prayer but which could also describe how partial and tentative our self-knowledge can be in terms of sexual orientation.

The Holy Scriptures are derived from a variety of contexts over several millennia. They form a library of revelatory statements that can at times appear to be contradictory and incoherent. Acceptance of slavery would seem to be one obvious example of this. But this does not permit us to overlook the patterns of truth that emerge with unmistakable consistency.

The language and imagery of marriage is one of those patterns. It emerges from an apparent acceptance of polygamy into a statement about the very nature of the relationship between God and creation, articulated when the Word is made flesh in Jesus Christ and the divine and the human are fused together, and exemplified by Jesus as the bridegroom who lays down his life for the Church, which is his bride.

The implications of this deep pattern of truth set before us an astonishing aspiration for human beings to attain to in the definition of Holy Matrimony, if that is their vocation. One of the reasons why I believe that the Church must confidently and distinctively continue in its commitment to our understanding of Holy Matrimony as we have received it is that we flourish when we have a vision of what is good and true and every encouragement to believe that the realisation of that vision is possible.

What we also see, with unmistakable clarity, is the love of God for those who do not know how to attain what will give life and joy. This is the love that so many parents retain for their children, the compassion that is intrinsic to parenthood, blending also with pride and joy when you do see your children grow and flourish.

At present, I believe we are in danger of being heard to say that sex is always and only sinful outside marriage. Whereas the more complex truth is that the sinful dimension of sex, in greed, power and lust, can exist within marriage as well as outside it.

We must not attempt to make marriage carry a weight it cannot bear. I believe that we have not spoken convincingly enough about marriage as God’s astonishingly wonderful gift, an icon of the unity between God and Creation, Christ and the Church. But, equally, we must not present marriage as a sinless zone of perfection, adding a burden of heavy expectation to those who joyfully embark on this life together, sustaining its demands and enjoying its blessings.

By the same token, marriage should not become the oppressive standard of life for those whom God has made to be otherwise, to be gloriously different. We have paid little or no attention to what it means to be a eunuch by birth or by choice that Jesus speaks about in that curious passage recorded by St Matthew (19:12). We have paid little or no attention to the damage that the priority of marriage does to those whose marriages have failed, to those who describe themselves as same-sex attracted or in some other way, and who are not able to marry in Church – for a wide range of reasons.

History teaches us that the Church has always struggled to find a wise and sustainable balance in its appreciation of the body. While the body of Christ is revered spiritually and materially (as the institution of the Church, in the Eucharist, and in multiple forms of art and devotional language) attitudes to our own bodies have been ambiguous. Hermits in desert places write alarmingly about conquering the passions of the body. For 1500 years celibacy was promoted as the only way of life for the serious Christian. More recently, in the 19th century, Florence Nightingale writes of the oppressive expectation on a woman to marry, and the liberation she saw in Roman Catholic religious sisterhoods which enabled some women to determine their life and work without reference to a husband.

The danger for us today is that we live in a culture which is obsessed with the appearance of the body and with sex as the defining aspects of our identity. This fuels an economy that is exploitative and demeans human dignity. More frighteningly, its dominance in our culture invades childhood in its formative stages and corrodes forms of relational dependency that are crucial for future stability.

Christian wisdom should offer a larger vision of human identity and flourishing that might liberate us from the limiting dominance of sexual definition. It can speak of fulfilment through relationships that are constantly expanding an introspective focus, opening up a social view that generates generosity, diverse social inter-dependency, and learning the autonomy of self-restraint as a form of freedom.

It is worth noting that the recently published report, *Love Matters*, from the Archbishops’ Commission on Families and Households states, ‘Pressure, especially on young people, to engage in sexual intercourse before either partner has considered the implications, has encouraged a belief that sex is simply a leisure activity, rather than an expression of a committed relationship.’ Unrealistic expectations about sex often prove to destabilise relationships rather than building the capacity to make them deep and lasting.

It is entirely legitimate to enquire about what constitutes a damaging and sinful pattern of life, because we encounter its victims in many forms of abuse: physical, mental, emotional, sexual, economic and spiritual. As Christians, and especially as Christian ministers to whom the Lord’s work of reconciliation is entrusted, (by Jesus Christ himself in John 20:23,24, and noted by St Paul in 2 Corinthians 5:18, 19) it is right that we should be concerned with what encourages and sustains freedom from sin, in order to live a life that is orientated towards the freedom of the children of God, grounded in the confidence of God who sees us as we really are, and judges us with mercy and compassion.

So let us seek to speak truthfully about the demands and the grace that come from faith in Jesus Christ in a way that does no damage or harm to a brother or sister, whose Christian faith and discipline is, in good conscience, built differently from our own but on the same foundations.

Let us also remember that whatever judgements we make, we shall ourselves be judged for our treatment of others, and into this consideration we should add the injunction that St Paul makes about the strong and the weak in Romans 14:13-23 together with Paul’s repeated insistence that God’s grace revealed in weakness not in any boasting about our own strength.

Where the Church of England goes with all this is still unclear. There are three working groups that are considering what and how LLF proposals can be implement. Those groups are the considering the LLF Prayers, Pastoral Guidance and Pastoral Reassurance. An update is promised for the General Synod in July. There is nothing further that can be reported on those groups at this stage.

We are not alone in the Church of England in facing the demanding challenges that the present age puts to us. I was recently encouraged by a pastoral letter issued by the Roman Catholic Bishops of Scandinavia and I will end with words from their Statement. Writing to the Christians in a very liberal culture they said this: ‘Consider the limitations of a purely secular discourse on sexuality. It needs to be enriched. We need adequate terms to speak of these important things. We shall have a precious contribution to make if we recover the sacramental nature of sexuality in God’s plan…The point of the Church’s teaching is not to curtail love but to enable it [repeating a passage from the Catechism of 1566]: ‘The whole concern of doctrine and its teaching must be directed to the love that never ends. Whether something is proposed for belief, for hope or for action, the love of our Lord must always be made accessible, so that anyone can see that all the works of perfect Christian virtue spring from love and have no other objective that to arrive at love.’

May the Holy Spirit, whose promised gift we celebrate at Pentecost, inspire us to bear witness to this love in our diocese, Church and nation today.

+Martin Cicestr: