

## **Diocese of Sydney Standing Committee – 23 November 2020**

### **References to the Appellate Tribunal (Same Sex Blessing) – Wangaratta and Newcastle**

#### **Motion moved by The Rev Dr Mark Thompson and passed unanimously:**

Standing Committee of the Diocese of Sydney entirely rejects the recently released majority opinion of the General Synod Appellate Tribunal. We stand with brothers and sisters all over the world who have resisted the attempt to bless what God does not bless and to ignore the teaching of Scripture on the extreme danger of the behaviour endorsed by the proposed services of blessing. We are deeply saddened that the delivery of this opinion further disturbs the hard-won unity of the church.

#### **Moving speech (The Rev Dr Mark Thompson)**

As we've heard, on Remembrance Day this year the Appellate Tribunal published its opinions, both a majority opinion and a minority opinion. The bottom line was a majority decision that the Diocese of Wangaratta's proposed service for the blessing of same sex unions is authorised by the *Canon Concerning Services* and is **not** inconsistent with the Fundamental Declarations and Ruling Principles of the Constitution of the Anglican Church of Australia. This despite the fact that the Fundamental Declarations make clear that the canonical scriptures of the Old and New Testaments remain 'the ultimate rule and standard of faith, given by inspiration of God and containing all things necessary for salvation'.

The long document which unfolds the reasons for this opinion makes very disappointing reading. That's a mild way of saying it really. The handling of the Bible is irresponsible, regularly throwing dust in the air and suggesting either that the key biblical passages do not say what they appear to say, or that there is diverse and equally weighty opinion about the meaning of key terms or the passage as a whole, so we can't be sure. That is just not true — on either count. As I've said in another place, the tactic of casting doubt on the meaning of a word or a statement in order to persuade a person to reject it, is an old debating tactic. It goes back to the Garden of Eden: 'did God really say?'

The majority opinion cannot seem to grasp that the seriousness of this matter, which takes it beyond previous disagreements between us, is indicated by Scripture itself: 'those who do these things will not inherit the kingdom of God'. That is actually said twice in 1 Corinthians 6:9–10. Not inheriting the kingdom of God — that makes it a salvation issue. And yes, that is true of sexual immorality, idolatry, adultery, theft, greed, drunkenness, reviling and swindling too — and we need to beef up our warnings about those things too if we take this passage seriously — but that list does include 'anyone practicing homosexuality' as the Holman Christian Standard Bible puts it, or 'men who have sex with men' as the NIV (2011) puts it.

It is an extremely serious matter, which is why we consider the embrace of this behaviour, or the attempt to pronounce God's blessing on behaviour that is spoken about in these terms in 1 Corinthians 6, as a line in the sand that we must not cross. We cannot bless what God refuses to bless but instead warns us to avoid at all costs.

The other Bible passage that is mishandled is Matthew 19, where in answer to the Pharisees' question about divorce, Jesus appeals to God's creational intention: 'Have you not read that he who created them from the beginning made them male and female, and said, "Therefore a man shall leave his father and mother and hold fast to his wife, and the two shall become one flesh".' The reason why Jesus answers the Pharisees on divorce the way he does, is because this creational purpose of God, bringing a man and a woman together as one flesh, as a new family unit, still stands. But the Opinion dismisses this as 'an inference not a command'.

There is more that could be said at this point, including the way an illustrative legal maxim is misquoted in order to make it say the very opposite of what it means in the general construction of legal statutes. The principle that 'the expression of one is the exclusion of the other' points to the significance of Jesus speaking first of male and female (echoing Genesis 1:27) and then of 'a man and his wife' (quoting Genesis 2:24) and not of any other kind of 'marriage'. However, once again attempts are made to avoid the straightforward reading of the biblical text in the service of a predetermined conclusion.

But not only is the Bible irresponsibly handled, a series of theological assertions are made which are simply insupportable. First, the constituent elements of marriage as understood in Scripture and in the Anglican formularies are listed as 'maturity, an intention of permanency,

and consent', neatly ignoring the biblical and BCP language of 'man and woman' and 'forsaking all others'. Second, when the Book of Common Prayer is cited, and its three purposes of marriage quoted — the procreation of children, living a chaste and holy life, and mutual companionship — it is asserted that same sex marriages are capable of meeting all these three desiderata and the scriptural teaching on which they are based. The procreation of children, though, is not the natural outcome of a same sex sexual union. It requires *of necessity*—in every case—intervention from outside of the marriage, which is a massive difference to the conception of a child through the sexual union of a man and a woman in marriage. Third, an almost absurdly narrow definition of 'doctrine', itself a minority opinion of a previous iteration of the Tribunal, allows this Opinion to insist that the statements of Scripture and the Prayer Book about marriage do not fit the definition and so the proposed service and all that is involved in it, does not constitute a breach of doctrine.

There is a great deal of intricate legal argument in the majority opinion which is neatly and persuasively unravelled in the minority opinion of Ms Gillian Davidson. In many ways, given the gravity of the situation and the potential consequences of their decision, the majority opinion really reads like shoddy work at points. It is very obviously a preconceived conclusion in search of an argument, which it attempts, unsuccessfully, to manufacture. It reveals a fundamentally different doctrine of Scripture and of Christian discipleship.

For these reasons we need to voice the strongest possible rejection of this majority opinion of the Appellate Tribunal. Already, as we have seen, some of the Australian bishops are preparing to act upon it. We need to make clear that we have not moved from where we have always stood. We stand on the authority of Scripture and the teaching of Christ, given to us during his earthly ministry, and through the subsequent ministry of his commissioned spokesmen, the apostles. We are not moving away from the rest of the Anglican church. We haven't moved at all. Instead, this opinion and the actions proposed to be taken on the basis of it, constitute a walking away *from us* and the majority of Anglicans worldwide who have risked everything to take their stand on the teaching of Scripture on this issue.

Brothers and sisters, many of our brothers and sisters, Anglicans in other parts of the world, are looking to see how we will respond to what has been done and is about to be done as a result of this Appellate Tribunal opinion. David Short, who, with the congregation of St John's

Shaugnessy, lost their church campus and the house he and his family lived in, who had his license to minister withdrawn — we made him an honorary canon of St Andrews Cathedral in the wake of it all — David is watching. And we want to be able to look David in the eye and say ‘we are with you, we stand with you’. Jay Behan, David Clancey and hundreds of others in Christchurch New Zealand, were compelled to leave their church buildings behind and eventually to form a new diocese because they could not turn a blind eye to their General Synod’s decision to bless same sex unions. Jay, David, Costa and all the rest — they are watching too. And we need to be able to look them in the eyes and say: ‘the test came, and we stood firm with you’.

So I am asking you to pass this motion. It needs to be strong and it needs to be clear.

But one last thing: it is important, as a friend reminded me last night, that we distinguish between those in responsible positions of authority who teach and promote these things, and those who are broken and hurting and need to hear of the possibility of forgiveness, restoration and new life. To those who teach these things and overturn the teaching of Scripture in doing so, we need to speak in the strongest possible terms, as this motion does, as Jesus did to the religious leaders of his day. But without ever backing away from that, we need to keep reaching out in love, compassion and grace to those trapped by the devil’s lies and who live in the midst of a broken world. To people like that Jesus came — to call them to faith and repentance, but also to healing and new life. So remember to whom this motion is addressed: those who published this Opinion and synods of the Anglican Church who will respond to it. For that reason it needs to be strong and clear.

Once again, I commend this motion to you.