

Address given by Dr Peter Stuart, the Anglican Assistant Bishop of Newcastle as part of an Ecumenical Conversation with the Catholic Bishop of Broken Bay, Dr David Walker, on 31 October 2012.

When this topic was first suggested I was reluctant given the ongoing controversy across the Anglican communion about issues of human sexuality especially relationships between people of the same gender. However, on reflection I thought it would be inappropriate not to engage in that conversation having been asked to do so. Yet, I do so with some reticence. Amongst Anglicans there is a tendency for some with the most polarised positions to review what bishops say on these matters in a harsh forensic manner which discourages openness and exploration.

In the context of an ecumenical dialogue it is reasonable to note that the Anglican Communion and the Roman Catholic Church have, over the last 80 years, adopted different stances on some matters related to marriage, relationship and sexuality. At the Lambeth Conference of bishops held in 1930 the majority of those present overturned their decision a decade earlier and affirmed the use of contraception in marriage in restricted circumstances (Resolution 15: 1930 see also resolutions 9 - 20). The Anglicans were the first to move in this and were condemned by the Pope within months (*Casti Connubi* promulgated by Pope Pius XI on December 31, 1930). The Anglican stance was embraced over the succeeding decades by Protestant churches. In the 1970s a number of Anglican Churches, as pastoral measure, adopted canon law that would allow a person who has been divorced to be married in Church even if their former spouse was still alive (the final version is the Marriage of Divorced Persons Canon 1981). Again, this position is accepted by a number of Protestant churches. Since what we call the Reformation, Anglicans have affirmed that deacons, priests and bishops can be married. This can bring a different dimension to parish ministry. Both of our churches are committed, while recognising these differences, to offer teaching and guidance to the faithful on these matters of morality, ethics, faithfulness and piety.

This teaching is an important part of our work. The people of God through the centuries have been taught in scripture and tradition that what we do with our bodies both affects our relationship with God and reflects something of our relationship with God. This is evident in the recollections of the exodus community and the letters of St Paul. As people who are called to love God with our entire being the nature of our embodied living can be of grace or of sin to others and to ourselves. Rightly, the church wishes to assist people move from sin to grace.

In seeking to live as the people of the resurrection the Church through the ordering of ministry has identified those in holy orders as signs and animators of the kingdom community. Consequentially those who minister in holy orders and those who join them in public and representative lay ministry will find their conduct and speech observed more closely by other people, some who are looking to them for guidance in their life and some who are wanting to see them stumble.

There is and often has been a gulf between the highest ideals of personal holiness reflected in the teachings of Jesus and the lived experience within the Church and the broader communities in which the Church may seek to be yeast, salt and light. There can be sin within marriages and sin for those not married.

Our encounter with the Gospels tells us that Jesus condemned in the strongest terms the leering eyes of the men around him. He spoke with compassion to the woman caught in adultery and made the men who gathered to stone her look at their own conduct. He drew people to the complexity of meaning within the inherited law and the words of the prophets. He engaged, with words of grace, the possibly flirtatious woman who'd had many lovers that his friends wanted to ignore at the well in Samaria.

Our call as a Church is to bear witness in the Holy Spirit to Jesus as the Risen Lord inviting men, women and children to be his disciples. Our call is to undertake this in Australia today.

As I reflect on our society it seems to me that the western cultural process of human sexual expression has changed for the majority to one of a sequence of serial monogamy. Thus it is likely that a person will, from some time in their late teenage years, have a sexual dimension to their relationships of depth and meaning. Each relationship will have value but there may be a movement from one relationship to another over time. Alongside this sequence of serial monogamy there is also a group of Australians who have a commodified or casual approach to sexual expression in which they seek pleasure without entering into a relationship of depth and meaning. There is a third group of people who for cultural and/or religious reasons adopt a strict approach to their sexuality accepting that intimacy occurs only within the confines of heterosexual marriage. There is a fourth group who choose to abstain from any sexual intimacy and who battle with a culture that once looked on their stance as an acceptable and welcome norm but who sometimes now encounter invasive questioning or parody.

The third and fourth groups I have spoken about are well understood within the Church so I needn't say more about them.

I haven't heard any commentator seek to integrate the position of the group who commodify humanity within any interpretation of Christian living. Rather, they express concern about this approach to life and relationship. I think Australian society witnesses all too often the anguish, grief and regret associated with dehumanising people.

However, the first group is the subject of debate and conversation. It is a group who think and feel that their values and ethics are not out of keeping with other Australians including their parents and grandparents. My missional concern is that many of them have what are seen as stable relationships in the broader community but find that in entering into conversation with Christians or entering a Christian community they face unwelcoming condemnation which takes many forms including exclusion from table fellowship. My concern for these people is that rather than becoming excited by an engagement with the Lord in which they discover that He has the words of eternal life they are stopped in their tracks. Rather than inviting friends to come and see they will urge them to stay away. This concern is not a plea for syncretism or relativism. It is a call for a pastorally sensitive engagement recognising that each of us is shaped in some way by sin or living outside the wider Christian ideal.

The debate now before our community is one which is examining whether the community norms for those who experience serially monogamous relationships should see both opposite gender and same gender relationships treated equally in every domain. We are being asked to extend beyond the

existing measures that promote the protection of people's economic well being and the measures that protect people from diminution harassment and violence.

In 1998, when the bishops gathered at the Lambeth Conference they considered the Anglican response to people in same gender relationships including those seeking ordination. The bishops at that time upheld the view of that sexuality should be expressed in marriage between a man and a woman in lifelong union, and that abstinence was right for those who are not called to marriage. They went on to commit the Anglican Church to a process of listening to the experience of homosexual persons. The Lambeth advised against legitimising or blessing of same sex unions nor ordaining those involved in same gender unions. That stance is reflected in the decisions of the Anglican General Synod and the Conference of Australian Bishops.

This conversation is not concluded for the Anglican Church and it has not finished for our community. As a person who seeks what God wants I will continue to explore these significant matters in the Christian scriptures, which guide my life, to think theologically, to listen and to pray. As a pastor, relative and friend I have been touched by people from all walks of life who live within and outside of conventional Christian expectations. I experience the human tension that the formal position of this church and their life experience brings. This conversation must be conducted with grace and compassion.

In this conversation I am a bishop and, as a representative of the universal church in the local, it is for me to speak and act only in the manner that represents the fullness of the current Anglican position as understood by the Newcastle Synod and the college of Bishops. I do this as one who is committed to study, listen and learn so that God's will may be done on earth as in heaven.