

Address to the Members of Synod on “Liturgies and Blessings”

by F. Dean Mercer

Consultations on Same-sex relationships, Diocese of Toronto, Winter and Spring, 2004

Introduction

As serious as the questions are, and as serious as the outcome may be, it is a privilege to be invited to speak and to serve the Diocese of Toronto in this great debate.

And on a question of this nature, when, for many, it is the personal question that matters most - the question about my friend, my brother, my granddaughter, myself - I aspire to two things: generosity that rises directly from the Good News in Jesus Christ; clarity that bears witness to the truth with as much precision as possible. In other words, when distinguishing differences and points of disagreement on a matter as intimate as this, we do not reach for a hammer, but rather for a scalpel, to cut away at what is seen to be in error, to leave in tact the body of what we would agree to be good and true.

The starting point in the church in a discussion of ‘blessing’ and ‘liturgy’ and its bearing on ‘same-sex unions’ is the church’s teaching about sexual relations found in its doctrine of marriage. The doctrines and the tradition at stake were summarized recently and succinctly in last year’s Report of the Theology Committee of the House of Bishops of the Episcopal Church. That report was a particularly generous one, seeking balance in its presentation, with members assuming the best of one another, whether liberal or conservative on the question of same-sex relations. And yet, together, they clearly stated the challenge that the blessing of same-sex relations presents to the doctrine and discipline of the church:

Holy Scripture nowhere condones homosexual practice; in fact, a few passages of Hebrew Scripture and of letters of Paul explicitly proscribe homosexual acts; marriage is defined as

the joining together of a man and a woman; marriage is the only appropriate setting for genital sexual intimacy; the norm for singleness, as for marriage, is chastity; but in the case of singleness that norm means abstinence. (“The Gift of Sexuality: A Theological Perspective”, *Report of the Theology Committee of the House of Bishops of the Episcopal Church*, adopted March 18, 2003, 4.9, p. 5.)

That said, what strikes me right away are two points where it appears that John Hill and I are agreed. First, much of the most relevant discussion must first occur and be settled elsewhere. The fundamental questions I would propose are these: Does this proposal accord with Scripture, with church doctrine and discipline, with a clear discernment of the church’s mind, what’s known as the ‘common faith’ of the communion? Such questions involve, without question, any rite for same-sex marriage, and, as I will argue, they also involve any rite of blessing of a same-sex union. And not to miss the obvious, while these questions ought to be settled first before creating the rite, the church in Canada has been trying to do the opposite - to place the burden of this matter on the creation of a rite before tackling the challenges to its doctrine and discipline which a same-sex rite presents.

It is also the fatal flaw in the motion coming before General Synod. Rather than squarely face the doctrinal controversy, the motion is framed as a debate over church order. One of the basic principles of liturgy is that form follows function which follows faith. This is an example of putting form first before settling the substantive issue about whether or not doctrine is implicated. But if the place of discussion is moved from General Synod to Diocesan Synod, the church will have already declared that these questions are of secondary and incidental importance and, in so doing, will distort the function of the church’s doctrine of marriage and the Christian faith from

which it rises.

Secondly, on the nature of blessing - we would agree that a blessing in the church must be of that which is blessed of God. This is what makes the process of discernment so important. It is why the appeal to personal experience alone does not settle the matter. Our lives as Christians are lived before God for the purposes of God revealed in Jesus Christ, in a sinful and fallen world where our own vision is often blurred and obstructed.

The one quibble I have with some of the recent accounts of blessing is that they can be a bit cheery. Recent accounts of blessing often assume a benevolent and innocent view of the world, as well as the innocence and goodness of sexual relations. Consequently, the church is viewed as characteristically judgmental and interfering. The responsibility of the church's teaching, however, is first and foremost to point to God and our life in service to God. Sexual relations can turn us away from God. They are also, more darkly, the arena in which fierce jealousies and violent conflicts are played out. In a fallen world, human sexuality is too often exploited for inhuman purposes with terrible suffering for those involved. The church must witness to the good which can be accomplished, the terrible harm which must be warned against, and the purposes in Christ to which our lives must ever and always seek to bear witness.

Consequently, as a conservative voice in this particular discussion, I believe that to construct a rite of blessing of a same-sex union is premature until the church has faced plainly a new and novel understanding of sexual relations assumed in such rites, their challenge to the church's doctrine of marriage, and the revision that would be required of the church's doctrine and its authorized liturgies.

Focus and Clarification

That said, I am assuming that we are here in order to address the argument of one particular party in this debate who clearly seek a distinctive rite of blessing for a same-sex union which is not a rite of same-sex marriage and is distinct from marriage.¹

There is considerable confusion on this point. Many observing this debate think that it centres around the creation of a rite for same-sex marriage or its equivalent. That is true of some. To do so, however, necessarily draws the church into a debate over its doctrine of marriage and its authorized liturgy. As our chancellor has ruled recently, a discussion of same-sex marriage is not something which our Diocese can decide on its own. It requires the participation and discernment of the national and international church.

There is also a proposal, as I've just mentioned, for the creation of a distinctive rite of blessing for a same-sex union. Some see in this, and in the so-called 'local option', the pragmatic advantage of proceeding without having to draw in the larger questions around Scripture and doctrine. Others recommend this route on principle. They recognize and willingly admit the wider implications of a same-sex rite. If necessary, they are prepared for the long hard task of doctrinal and liturgical revision. They are proponents of a rite of blessing of same-sex unions precisely because of what they believe about sexual relations.

¹ **"A blessing, celebration, recognition, and/or affirmation of such a relationship is sought by some couples, on an equal ethical footing to traditional marriage. Others eschew the concept of marriage altogether, and seek to define their relationship in other forms."** *Permanent Sexual Commitments: The Development of Anglican Tradition*, Part II (now in revision), Chapter 4, p. 55.

Let me be clear. Some of the interest in rites of blessing is pragmatic. It is founded on the view that such rites are of secondary importance and can be introduced without undertaking the very large tasks of doctrinal and prayerbook revision. That line of reasoning was stated in the report of the Legal and Canonical Commission in the Diocese of New Westminster.²

Some, however, are interested in rites of blessing because they believe that same-sex unions are indeed distinctive and that a revolution in the church's understanding of sexual relations is required. There's some overlap here, but the second group are quicker to admit the challenge before them and whatever labour and work is required in order to do what's good and true.

My remarks today, therefore, are relatively simple, and they are intended to point out what I believe to be at stake in the development of such rites.

Permit me to address these two proposals in order.

1) *Pragmatic*

The first is the proposal that a rite for the blessing of same-sex unions be constructed that would not bear on the doctrine of marriage, the discipline of the church, or the authorized liturgies of the church.

There are three concerns.

First, such rites face the challenge of guilt by association. If you are creating a rite for the union of two people, exchanging life-long vows, with sexual relations assumed between the two, how would you construct such a rite that does not look like marriage or bear on marriage? The rite

²“The Commission is of the opinion that the Bishop of New Westminster is not precluded by the Canons or Constitution of any one of the General Synod, the Ecclesiastical Province or the Diocese from authorizing the use of a rite for the blessing of covenanted same-sex unions.” Found in “Summary of Conclusions”, Diocese of New Westminster, Dialogue on Same-Sex Unions,

in use in New Westminster shares the form of marriage, the life-long vows of marriage, and it assumes the sexual intimacy of the partners involved.

Secondly, and as was made clear in a document entitled *True Union in the Body?*, prepared for the Primates at their meeting in May, 2003, ‘ceremonies and rites’ are discretionary only when they relate, as expressed in Article 34 of the 39 articles, to ‘ceremonies or rites of the Church ordained only by man’s authority’.³

This is a critical point. Many in favour of a distinct rite of blessing of same-sex unions believe that rites related to marriage and sexual relations are of secondary importance, that they are culturally relative and specific, and that variations should be permitted at the discretion of local churches, dioceses and diocesan bishops. This is, in part, the reasoning behind the request for a ‘local option’. However, as it is put in *True Union*:

The universal witness of Scripture and Christian tradition . . . is that marriage between a man and a woman is ordained by *divine* authority in creation and revelation. The majority of the Communion views any rites to bless same-sex unions as effectively undermining this divinely ordained institution and thus see same-sex unions as ‘ordained against God’s Word.’ (True Union, p. 41)

Thirdly, when the church, through her clergy, pronounce a blessing, they are declaring matters of first-order importance. They are declaring what is blessed of God. As Edith Humphries (professor in New Testament at Pittsburgh Theological Seminary, made clear in her response to the

³*True Union in the Body: a Contribution to the Discussion Within the Anglican Communion Concerning the Public Blessing of Same-sex Unions*, commissioned by Drexel Gomez for the Primates of the Anglican Communion. Available for viewing and downloading at: www.anglicancommunioninstitute.org/trueunionhome.htm

New Westminster rite, for the church to bless the union of a same-sex couples would be to declare that the union is a picture or icon of God's love, a display of "the salvation story", a "fruitful part in creation", symbols of God's inbreaking and coming rule. It would be to declare such unions a "condition in which the way of the cross and the way of new life come together . . . conducive of repentance, healing, growth and glorification for the two men or the two women involved."

Precisely here, the Church would be saying, you can see the love of God in human form, and the glory of humanity. Here would be a sacrament, or at least something like the Roman "sacramental" ("sacred signs which bear a resemblance to the sacraments . . . [and in which] various occasions in life are rendered holy") - an occasion where God meets us.

(Paper Number 4 in the Service of New Westminster Diocese: On "the blessing of same-sex unions", Edith M. Humphrey, February, 2001 - available on the web at:

<http://prayerbook.ca/cann0217.htm>)

She goes on to say that it is precisely for these reasons the church cannot treat the rite as a matter of secondary importance, as a matter of discretion for a single Bishop and Diocese, and it cannot, under these circumstances, offer the blessing or the rite as it is presently being asked to do. For the purposes of this discussion, I only wish to illustrate the clear doctrinal and sacramental issues at stake when a blessing is pronounced by a priest.

For what it's worth, I find this more pragmatic proposal for a rite of blessing of same-sex unions, offered as a local option, and which would claim not to bear significantly on the doctrine, discipline and worship of the church, to be the most demoralizing of all - that the wider implications of such an innovation would be over-looked, ignored, or, worse yet, obscured for the sake of expediency.

2) *Substantial*

Secondly, there is also the proposal for a rite of same-sex blessing that is distinct in both name and substance from a rite of same-sex marriage. Proponents here are happy and clear to admit any wider implications that such a rite might have. They do so because, as a matter of principle, they see such rites bearing witness to a new and distinctive understanding of sexual relations which the church must face and be reformed by.

This, I believe, is the central challenge - that a new understanding of sexual relations is being promoted in the church, which directly challenges the church's tradition.

A few years ago, Philip Turner, then Dean of Berkely Divinity School at Yale, tried to lift up this challenge which same-sex rites present. Entitled *Sex and the Single Life*,⁴ it was a sympathetic look at the work of James Nelson, one of the leading advocates. For our purposes, there are three characteristics Turner identifies of the new understanding of sexual relations that I would draw to your attention.

First, in the new understanding, sexual fulfilment is assumed to be all but necessary for personal fulfilment. The tradition is more modest. Sexual relations are a good within marriage. In our time - and every time - the tradition upholds the goodness of sexual relations in service to purposes ordained by God. According to the tradition, sexual relations are **relativized and recentered around Jesus Christ and his body, the church. With respect to our identity or self-worth, nothing supersedes the position we have in the family we enter through baptism and where we are nurtured around the eucharistic table.**

⁴Philip Turner, *Sex and the Single Life*, (c) *First Things Journal*, 33 (May 1993): pp. 15-21.

Secondly, the new understanding separates sexual relations from gender and procreation. This contradicts the church's teaching that the division of humankind into male and female is God's intention, and that the society between husband and wife and the gift of a family within marriage is God's intention.

Thirdly, the new understanding of sexual relations almost always depends on a re-orientation of perspective away from the biblical perspective. In his article, the point for Philip Turner was that for many in modern society, life is viewed from a secular perspective - that our lives are lived without a spiritual purpose. He calls it an orientation to 'everyday life' in which people live as if there is no larger purpose to life than what they give it or what daily circumstances require. He notes, in our time, an unparalleled expectation of what life should provide. I want to be happy, we say, and life owes it to me that I should be happy.

This is quite different from the biblical point of view which treats life more tragically and many times more comically. Yes I'm part of a great drama, but it's by no means a central part, and my part must serve the purposes and glory of God.

What's also to be noticed is the reorientation occurring among those arguing from a religious point of view. For one like James Nelson, it is re-oriented toward a so-called 'pre-' or 'post-biblical world' where, as he says, sexuality and spirituality were not separated. For others, the symbols of the biblical world may be used, but many are spiritualized and emptied of their content. God is presented as the vulnerable lover as if marriage itself is incidental. In fact, the biblical account is of God as the heart-broken father in the Parable of the Prodigal Son and the cheated husband in the Prophet Hosea. As Andrew Goddard puts it, "While 'mutual love' and 'covenantal faithfulness' are commended in Scripture, they are never commended as sufficient to

justify a sexual relationship outside of marriage.”⁵

⁵Andrew Goddard, *Homosexuality and the Church of England: The Position Following ‘Some Issues in Human Sexuality’*, Grove Books Ltd, Cambridge, 2004, p. 13.

More importantly, the problem with the new points of reference are the ways in which they can be so easily moulded to suit to self-interest. By contrast, the church's account of sexual relations anchors our lives in the Biblical narrative which has been perfected in the revelation of God in Christ. Without such an anchor, and leaving ourselves as the final judge - "it can only mean that the most insistent prompting of the self is always taken as definitive of the self's true nature and good".⁶

Is there any prompting more insistent than sexual desire? Is there any prompting like sexual desire that better illustrates the need of a sturdy centre or axil around which its purposes can be realized?

I like the way Rodney Clapp puts it:

As merely discrete selves, we are in fact a cacophonous, barely coherent collection of drives, impulses, whims and ill-formed dreams . . . To become a self of some unity and persistence over time, we need a cause or loyalty bigger than ourselves [which Scripture provides]. With that cause or loyalty we have something to focus half-baked hopes, something to discipline our appetites and judge our competing desires. From it we derive motivation and strength for constancy and steadiness, and through constancy we develop a real self, an identity, a personhood with particular and enduring characteristics. Seen from this perspective, self is not something we create. It is something we discover, and so something that

⁶Philip Turner, *Sex and the Single Life*, (c) *First Things Journal*, 33 (May 1993): pp. 15-21.

has been given. It is, in other words, a calling.⁷

Conclusion

As serious and divisive as these discussions may be, I have a certain optimism about what may come from them. I am ever hopeful, believing that the church is in God's hands, though rarely optimistic, believing that God's creatures can really mess things up when they want to. However, I do see some optimistic signs - principally, from last year's Diocesan synod.

One interpretation of last November would be that leaving synod with the tabling of one motion in favour of the traditional doctrine of marriage and another in support of the blessing of same-sex unions is the characteristically contradictory manner of the modern Anglican Church - and, if unattended, will lead to the anger and division that such contradictions create.

But another interpretation is that the Diocese does not intend to challenge the church's doctrine of marriage or to defy our obligations in the wider communion, yet within those parameters, and in a time of great tumult in the whole area of sexual relations, it wishes to be as generous as possible to its members whose lives are in tension with the standards and ideals of the church. In fact, I suspect that there are many who have little taste for scaling the Mt. Everest of doctrinal and liturgical revision. While I am here to warn against precipitous acts that contradict the church's teaching or defy the unity of the church as expressed in its common and authorized liturgy, I believe it is possible to reach out generously in our pastoral practice and response.

I wish to add my voice in support of a generous pastoral practice and response in search of

⁷Rodney Clapp, *Families at the Crossroads: Beyond Traditional and Modern Options*, p. 103.

that place where the righteousness and mercy of God meet.