

## **Prayers of Love and Faith**

(Text of words spoken on Epiphany 2 at St Leonard's, SMVB and St Peter's  
and on Epiphany 3 at St John Baptist)

I would fully understand if you do not follow the proceedings of General Synod (the Church of England's legislating assembly) very closely. The long debates in conference halls in distant cities can seem remote from the day-to-day life of our parishes in rural Somerset, and the issues that Synod discusses can seem irrelevant to the local issues that we face.

It may also be that the whole business of Church politics is something you would rather steer well clear of; something that does not help your spiritual growth; something in which you find it hard to see God's Spirit at work. I would not blame you for that either.

But I do need your help in relation to something that has happened at General Synod.

In February and again in November, General Synod considered the question of people living in same-sex relationships. More specifically, the discussion was about how the Church should respond to such people, whether and how the Church should recognise and celebrate their love.

This forms part of a broader discussion about sexual relationships and marriage between people of the same sex, both lay people and ordained people. That broader discussion is called 'Living in Love and Faith' (LLF). For people of the same sex, both those things (sexual relationships and marriage between consenting adults) are now lawful under the general law of England. But within the Church, sexual relationships between people of the same sex remain prohibited for clergy, and same sex marriage remains impossible for everyone under Church of England law.

The debates in General Synod were difficult (to put it mildly) and caused considerable distress all round.

What came out of the meetings of General Synod and the House of Bishops is a set of prayer resources relating to same-sex couples that are now authorised for use in Church services. These new prayers are called 'Prayers of Love and Faith' (PLF). If you would like to read the prayers, they are available on the Church of England's website, as was publicised in the January Benefice Newsletter. I will explain in a minute why I am telling you about the Prayers of Love and Faith today, but first let me stress 3 key points.

The first is that the Church of England has not changed its position on the sacrament of marriage, which remains available only to opposite-sex couples. Gay marriage is still not allowed in church.

The second is that the prayers are at the moment only authorised for use during normal Sunday services: what is not possible at present is to have a special service for the couple (sometimes called a 'standalone' service). Services like that might be trialled, but where we are at the moment is that the new prayers can only be used as part of normal public worship.

The third thing may strike you as the sort of fine distinction that only a lawyer would care about, but it matters very much to some people affected by these matters: the new prayers are not prayers of blessing for the relationship that exists between the couple (whether that is a civil partnership or a civil marriage), but prayers for the individual people themselves; they are prayers for the couple, not their relationship.

The reason that I am taking the time to explain this to you is that we have to decide whether we wish to use these new prayers, the Prayers of Love and Faith, in this parish.

In a recent letter to all parishes in our Diocese, Bishop Michael said this<sup>1</sup>:

*'The [Living in Love and Faith] process has been running for six years. It has painfully revealed that we are together in a church where, using the Anglican resources of scripture, tradition and reason, different church members and parts of our church have come to very different conclusions about how we should best respond to people living in same sex relationships and particularly about the recognition and celebration of such relationships within the life of the Church.*

*Some would like to see the Church offer same sex marriage just as now happens in the civil system. Others view the offering of prayers of blessing for people in same sex relationships as completely incompatible with the teachings of the Church. Most people, I would suggest, sit somewhere on a continuum between these two polarities. What we have learnt is that any amount of argument does not seem to alter people's particular views. Sadly, we have come to realise that we are not going to reach a simple unified position.*

*Into this situation the House of Bishops offered proposed prayers of love and faith, which were debated at February's synod and again [in November]. The prayers seek to find a middle way between our polarities, preserving the Church's teaching that Holy Matrimony is an estate that can only be entered into by a man and a woman, whilst at the same time offering recognition and celebration of those in same sex relationships and asking for God's blessing upon the people involved. As with many compromises in life, the prayers run the extreme risk of pleasing nobody.'*

What has been authorised is a collection of prayers, from which the minister and the couple would choose those that seem most appropriate to the couple. It might help you get a feel for what we are talking about if I read you an example of one of the new prayers. This is a prayer for God's blessing:

*'God of generosity and joy,  
with you is the well of life and in your light, we see light:  
we give you thanks for N and N,  
for the love and friendship they share,  
and for their commitment to one another.  
As they come before you this day,  
trusting you as the giver of all good gifts,  
strengthen their love by your love,  
and gladden their hearts with your joy,  
that their journey through life*

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<sup>1</sup> + Michael's letter to parishes dated 13.12.23

*may become a pilgrimage of grace.  
By your blessing, and with you as their companion and guide,  
may they rejoice in hope and be sustained in love all the days of their life  
and in the age to come,  
through Jesus Christ our Lord. Amen.'*

The Prayers of Love and Faith are available for use now, but no minister can be compelled to use them if they do not wish to do so. If a minister believes that the prayers, and the underlying theology they express, are contrary to God's truth, then that minister is free to decline to use the prayers.

Furthermore, Bishop Michael has said that he wants ministers who are willing to use the prayers only to do so with the agreement of their PCC.

So in other words, before the new prayers, the Prayers of Love and Faith, can be used, our Bishop wants two conditions to be met. The relevant minister has to be willing to use them and the PCC has to give its approval.

I am willing to use these new prayers. I believe that it is right that the Church recognises committed and faithful love between two people to be good, irrespective of the sex of those two people. I believe that all that is good about love can be and is found in relationships between people of the same sex, just as it is between people of different sex. I believe it is right that the Church should recognise the goodness of that love not only in private, but in public, and that the Church should be willing to celebrate such love with the couple.

Given that I am willing to use these new prayers, the question arises whether it would be right to do so in this parish. If a same-sex couple were to contact me and ask whether I would be willing to say some of these new prayers with them during a service, I need to know how to respond.

What I would like to do is to have an initial discussion about this with our PCC at its meeting in [February/March] and then to have this on the agenda for further discussion at the APCM, to give others who are not PCC members the chance to participate or ask questions. Then I would hope that at its first meeting after the APCM the PCC could take a decision whether it wishes the prayers to be used in this parish or not.

So please think and pray about this issue. Please have a look at the prayers – ask me if you cannot find them online and would like a copy printed for you. And, if you wish to do so, please make your views on this topic known, either to me or to a PCC member. Some people may find it easy to speak with me about this and others might find that more difficult, but I would hope that among all our PCC members, there is someone for anyone to speak with. Or you may choose to drop a written note, anonymous or otherwise, to me.

You may think this to be a topic of marginal importance to our life here. But it is a topic that is already causing serious division in the Church of England, with some churches threatening quite drastic action in response to the authorisation of these prayers. And I need to know how I am to respond if I am asked by a couple whether we can use these prayers together. It is not something we can or should ignore.