



Archbishop Stephen, alongside the Archbishop of Canterbury, delivered the Presidential address to the meeting of the General Synod in London today. This follows in full.

Dear friends, we now turn from the unbearable sadness of all that is happening in our world, particularly in Israel and Gaza, to the reason we are holding this November General Synod: our continuing discussion on Living in Love and Faith (LLF).

The task of this part of the Presidential address, my task as Archbishop, is to seek to draw us together across our differences, reminding us of who we are in Christ.

This is why we are here this week. We are looking for ways to enact the decisions we made in February that will honour God, uphold the unity and doctrine of the Church, offer care, kindness, and compassion in our communities, serve our nation and most of all - for me, always most of all - make Jesus known.

This is the question I keep coming back to: how can we know and see Jesus in the discussions of this Synod, knowing there are heavy disagreements between us?

First, it will be about how we disagree and how we express our deeply held convictions. How we live, in the powerful phrase that Timothy Radcliffe used in the retreat before the recent meeting of the Roman Catholic Synod, how we live with contradictory hopes.

Right now, those contradictory hopes, those disagreements appear to be stretching us to breaking point. In different ways, and for different reasons, and to different degrees, many of us have arrived at this Synod feeling weary, fearful, confused, even angry about it all.

There are those voices that I respect, who tell me that in trying to find a way of living with our disagreement, we are not only bound to fail, but will further hurt those who've already been hurt so much by the Church, and further alienate those who've lost confidence in the Church. I get that. But I'm not sure we have a choice.

As I've said before, I dare to hope that if we can tell a story of love and commitment to each other with our contradictory hopes, then that is a story our world desperately needs to hear.

So, dear sisters and brothers, dear friends, let us strive to see Jesus in each other as we speak to and about each other.

Addressing these issues at last year's Lambeth Conference, Archbishop Justin said this to the assembled bishops: "Let us not treat each other lightly or carelessly. We are deeply divided. That will not end soon. We are called by Christ himself both to truth and unity."

It is the same message for us. We are divided, and yet, at the same time, we are called to truth and unity. We are pulling apart from one another, and yet the reconciling God still draws us together.

So, secondly, might it be helpful to see where we do agree; for we agree that there should be no place for homophobia in our church, that, right across the breadth of our traditions, we want our churches to be places of welcome for everyone.

There is work to do on this, because we disagree on the form that welcome should take. Some want to go much further than LLF proposes, so that same-sex couples can be married in church. Others believe that even commending the prayers for private use is a step too far. But this agreement that we do have is a place to begin.

I don't intend to rehearse the deeply held theological convictions which lie behind our different positions. I accept that faithful, Christian people read and search the Scriptures, seek the guidance of the Spirit and pray earnestly to the Father, but arrive at different conclusions. I don't know why this is. It would be easier and more straightforward if we all came to the same conclusions. But I want to notice what we hold in common because it is so great. And I am thankful for it. I see Jesus in it.

For all of us, there will be lines we cannot cross. Faithfulness to the gospel as we have seen it and received it really matters. Though as William Blake put it in a couplet that Rowan Williams described as 'horrifying'¹ –

'That vision of Christ which thou dost see
Is my vision's greatest enemy'

With such conflict, I stand with Rowan Williams who went on to say in this sermon that in order to see Christ in each other in these situations we have to turn to an authority that we both accept, which is, thirdly, the place where we need to see Jesus more than ever: upon the cross, the place from which he sees us and breaks down the barriers between us.

In this, all of us will find ourselves having to make painful decisions, some compromises, and to love each other with greater fortitude and determination.

Where we are right now, is not where any of us would like to be.

But I continue to believe that we can find a way of living in love and faith.

Furthermore, I stand by the statements I made in February. There will need to be some sort of provision. But just as the way forward that is

being proposed is pastoral, and in my view does not mean a change in the Church of England's doctrine of Holy Matrimony, so I believe the reassurance and provision that we need should be pastoral. This is why I will be supporting the amendment being put forward by the Bishop of Oxford because, as things stand, I am concerned that clergy using the commended prayers might find themselves vulnerable to a legal challenge if their use of the prayers looks to someone else to be a standalone service.

Something that allows standalone services for an experimental period seems to me to be a sensible and pastoral way forward. It gives clergy and parishes who want to use the Prayers of Love and Faith the legal protection they need. And because this will be on an opt-in basis, clergy and parishes who in good conscience won't use the prayers will be under no compunction or compulsion so to do, nor will they be disadvantaged in any way by their decision.

We will, of course, need further discussions about how this provision continues to run through all that we are proposing. I'm sure the Bishop of London will say more about this when we get to that bit of our agenda. I also recognise that the pastoral guidance that is such a key component in this work should not be thought of as a fixed entity but a body of guidance that will evolve.

But my purpose in this address is not to anticipate the debate. Rather, it is to ask us to lift our eyes above the debate to see Jesus.

Though even as I say this, I fear that some may hear it as a misuse of power, talking about 'seeing Jesus in LLF' as a way of monopolising the spiritual high ground. This is not my intention. For the last thing I want to say about seeing Jesus in LLF, is seeing Jesus as Judge, the one to whom we will all render account.

I am really quite an orthodox Christian, who believes unequivocally and unreservedly in the death and resurrection of our Lord Jesus Christ, the need for repentance and amendment of life, who seeks to follow and live by Christ's teaching, and who believes that Christ will come again.

Therefore, I know that one day I will have to give an account for my stewardship of God's Church.

In my leading of the Church, where there is conscientious and godly disagreement, I choose to err on the side of generosity. To err on the side of mercy.

When I am in doubt, I seek to judge the tree by its fruits. And it is the fruit and the goodness and the faithfulness that I have seen in so many gay and lesbian Christian couples, not least so many faithful clergy, as I have also seen it in those who lead celibate lives and those who are married, that has led me to support the direction of travel that we, the whole Synod, supported in February.

For me, this must never be about winners and losers. I am committed to the flourishing of the whole Church, but it will be together, with our differences, that we will be the body of Christ. Therefore, we are not afforded the luxury of saying we don't need each other, and I, for one, long

to reach out to those who have been alienated and excluded from Christ's body, the Church. I want them to see Jesus. And I not only believe we can walk together, I believe that by walking together people will see Jesus better.

Therefore, I believe we will be a richer and better Church for living in love and faith and with those provisions that will hold us together.

By 'richer', of course I mean 'poorer in spirit', less reliant on ourselves, more generous towards each other, richer in the mercy and goodness of God who invites us all to come to him; who prays that his Church will be one, so that the world believes. And dear friends, as we look to Jesus in each other, may we see what he requires of us, from the cross itself, which is to go on loving.

My time is nearly up, but there is one last important word to say and it is a personal word to Bishop Sarah, who, along with others and most recently, the new Bishop of Winchester, Bishop Philip, has devoted herself to the work of LLF over these past few years. I know how difficult this has been and the toll it has taken. Her so often costly willingness to continue having difficult conversations in order to help us continue walking together, and seeking above all to discern the will of God, has been, and is, an inspirational example of humble and persevering servant leadership. We thank you, Sarah, for showing us what living in love and faith looks like.

You can also read the address from Justin Welby, Archbishop of Canterbury at the opening session of General Synod today????? [here](#)

[Watch Synod proceedings online](#)

- 1Rowan Williams, Different Christs?, sermon in Open to Judgement, Sermons & Addresses, DLT, 1994, Pg. 105.

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