

Archbishop Stephen's remarks at the Families and Households Commission report launch

26 April 2023

No disrespect to the Commissioners, but I think that the voices from young people that we've heard this morning have been so very inspiring, so I think I'll just finish with a story.

When I was a little boy, when my Mum put me to bed, she used to say to me: 'Stephen, if I lined up all the little boys in all the world, and I walked along the line, guess which one I would choose? I would choose you.'

I can still remember my Mum saying this to me, and I felt and received what I believe is the greatest gift that one human being can give to another human being: the gift and knowledge that you are loved; that you matter; and that you love and matter not because of what you've achieved, but just because you *are*.

I'm a dad and I've got three sons – they're all kind of big and horrible now, but I've got three sons – and when they were little I used to say it to them, only I'd have to be careful about the age categories, so I'd say, 'if I lined up all the four-year-olds' or 'if I lined up all the six-year-olds, guess which one I would choose? I would choose you.'

I think I must have said a bit too much and debased the currency, because after a while they'd start saying it back to me. They would say to me, 'well Dad, if I lined up all the dads in the world, guess which dad I would choose? I would choose you.'

The thing is, when they said it to me, it still worked. In fact, in some ways, it worked better, because I know that I am not the best dad in all the world. I, like many dads and mums, am painfully aware of my failures and shortcomings as a parent. But that's not the point. The point is, they're my kids, I'm their dad, and what I want to give them more than anything else is the knowledge that they are loved, and what a blessing it is when they give that back to me. I stand before you as one so truly and richly blessed that I grew up not doubting that I was loved. But we know there are so many thousands of people who do not have that.

There's lots more we could say about this report, and I've been so inspired by it that I would like to say more but, you'll be relieved to hear there isn't time, I'm going to have to sit down. But it does occur to me, listening to all the voices we've heard, that if family is more than mum and dad and 2.2 children, if it is about that intentionality of living together with commitment to each other – in all the different configurations of our families and households – then surely we can commit to be family to each other by giving to each other that great gift of affirmation.

I want to say to the Commission: if I lined up all the Commissions in the world... I would choose you!

And to the young people who've contributed: blimey, you've done a good job. You've spoken to our hearts today and shown us that love and affirmation, they don't just matter, they make a difference and can help us build that kinder, fairer, more loving society we long for.

One last theological point. When Jesus was baptised, the heavens opened and God spoke, which doesn't happen even in the Bible that often. God speaks, notebooks at the ready, this is going to be interesting! But what does God say to Jesus at his baptism? (By the way, it does prove that God does come from Essex. Perhaps language has changed a bit, but when my kids were little, instead of saying that something was very good or very bad, they would say it was well good or well bad, and I would try to correct them to speak the King's English: 'you must say very good, not well good'. But then it occurred to me that, as Jesus's baptism, God speaks and what God says to Jesus is: this is my son, the beloved, in whom I am well pleased'. God does come from Essex! In fact, the Holy Spirit only speaks local dialects.

When God speaks to Jesus, he says to Jesus perhaps the only thing he needs to know, out of which he can live his whole life: I love you; you matter; I am on your side. Let us, through this report, make sure that giving and receiving the affirmation of love is at the heart of our pastoral practice as a Church, the policy of our nation, and all the many good things we are all involved in. It has been a privilege to be here this morning and receive this report. Thank you everyone else for being here as well.