

Comments made by Dr Peter Stuart
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One of the realities of my upbringing was a lot of unhelpful “isms” – racism, sexism and the like. I am so grateful for those who in my twenties guided me to communities of faith that helped me see the world differently. I am forever grateful to faithful people who pointed me to God and helped me know that all is special to God. They set me on the path of learning the gracious loving nature of God. They let me know to expect that God will encounter us in Christ in unexpected places like burning bushes, quiet winds and in people who there may be a first impulse to reject. They helped me know that in the vast expanse of the Universe we are more than a collation of cosmic dust existing by chance. Rather, we are called purposefully to life.

One of the legacies or gifts of my family journey is a suspicion of and deep desire to work against behaviours, philosophies, and practices that exclude or deny people their fundamental dignity. You will see it in my commitment to the ministry of women and in my commitment to enabling the full citizenship of people with lived experience of disability. In a vivid sense my experience of God’s call or claim on my life is in this journey of inclusivity.

You will understand then that Galatians 3:28 is a pivotal text for me. “There is neither Jew nor Greek, there is no longer slave or free, there is no longer male or female for all of you are one in Christ Jesus.” Saint Paul takes us to the radical inclusion of all people in the life of the Kingdom of God. The more I have read about the life and communities in the Roman world – especially the vulnerability of slaves and non-citizens – the more the radical nature of Paul’s teaching and its rich inclusivity becomes. As you listen to me you will probably recognise texts that are the key to the door of your theological world.

One of the jobs or vocations of a bishop is to ‘guard [the church’s] faith, unity and discipline. Its something we all have a stake in but we’ve said to bishops they must lead in this.

Part of this work is to be conscious of the theological world that forms us as bishops but another part of this work is become aware of the theological world of others – most especially those committed to their care. In the Anglican Church this becomes a complex task because we affirm as a way of being the possibility of theological variety away from the teaching that is essential to salvation.

With this comes the responsibility of gracious listening, one of the key themes of our convention today. We seek to be attentive to the insights, perspectives, learning and wisdom of others in order that we might together discern truth – the loving purposes of God. This becomes especially frustrating when it takes beyond our lifetime for some things to be worked out.

Yet, we have done this. We grew to understand that people are not called to be the property of other people – that women and children are not the property of me. We reject the framework of people owning people that lead to power, control, abuse and violence. Even if we see it accepted, unchallenged or condoned in the scriptures we decry it. Using other parts of scripture and our theological sensibility we comfortably and strongly at other positions. We effectively say that not every theological door – not every theological view is one we are able to accept or endorse.

As a nation and as a church we are entering into the sharply contested space of competing worldviews, theologies and philosophies about marriage. It stretches us because we wonder whether it is a matter or which there can be theological variety or whether it is a salvation issue. Those who argue about it are arguing from a variety of perspectives with vigour.

As your Bishop Administrator I have a guardianship role to hold the life of the Diocese, its spiritualities and practices, until a person takes their seat in the Cathedral as Diocesan Bishop. One of the challenges facing any bishop is know when to tenderly hold space for competing views and when to set a direction or tone.

With a keen sense of the welfare of people I was simply appalled by the decision coming from Canberra this week for a postal vote on marriage. I felt there were significant risks about using plebiscites to decide complex questions. This version is particularly troubling. There will be campaigns to get people to vote and campaigns about how people should vote which, I fear, will objectify people and lead to them being treated poorly. I fear that for some this experience will be beyond what they can bear. The experience of being objectified by GLBTIQ+ people most especially but is also being felt by people of genuine faith who feel ridiculed.

My plea to clergy and people of the Diocese is that at all times and in all ways through this national journey we will model the very best of gracious engagement. We will model who we are as followers of the Lord of Love and Prince of Peace.

Our Diocesan family is the spiritual home for gay and lesbian people who take their place in our parishes week by week. It is also the home to parents, grand parents and friends of gay and lesbian people who are angry, frightened and apprehensive about the next weeks. They fear for the wellbeing of the people they love. They need our special care and support. I see this as a season of being especially gracious to one another.

I wondered about ending my remarks at this point but there is more to ponder.

Over the last twenty years I have read quite a bit about human sexuality and the spectrum of human attraction. I have been moved by the trust placed in me by Lesbian and Gay people who have shared their experience with me.

I know that my wife and I would be mortified if our love, our common life, our shared faith, our joys and our questions were to end up in a simple categorisation based on our gender and sexual activity.

I know that no one really wakes up and says, “today I’m going to be straight” or “today I’m going to be gay”. We live in a heteronormative society. Nobody has to come out straight. Those who know themselves to be GLBQTI face a world in which they have often to explain themselves and their self-understanding.

I know that people in love with Christ and who faithfully read the scriptures come to different conclusions about how they are to be read and interpreted.

I know that people fear for our community and the changes that emerge as we seem to be less religious as a society.

As I think about marriage, I remain deeply moved by the idea that two human beings are going to stare down the corridor of time and make a promise and vow – “I take you – to have and to hold, from this day forward – for long as we both shall live – no matter what joys and problems we encounter – most of which we haven’t yet imagined. I get moved that two human beings promise to love, cherish, comfort, honour and protect to the exclusion of all others all of their of their remaining days.’

Marriage is such a serious undertaking.

What people who know themselves to be lesbian or gay are saying is that they want to have such a way of life. They want the opportunity to embrace married life.

We are a diverse diocese and like the wider community there is within in a wide range of views.

We have a specific capacity to remind people by our words and actions that all people are precious to God.

My plea to our Diocesan family is that we model deep graciousness and care in the coming weeks.

My own journey will remain set on paths that enable the inclusion rather than the exclusion of people.