

**The Blessing of Civil Unions**  
**Address to the Synod of Wangarratta**  
*31 August 2019*

Mr President and Members of Synod, I have been asked to address you on the subject of the blessing of civil marriages within the liturgical life of the church. So I thought we should begin by looking at blessing in the world of the Bible, then briefly about blessing in our Anglican tradition, and finally about the blessing of civil unions in general from a theological perspective.

**1. Blessing in the biblical world**

Blessing is an important concept in the biblical world. To be blessed by God means to receive God's favour in protection of us and provision for us. At the beginning of creation, living creatures are blessed by God, including human beings, so that they may thrive and flourish (Gen 1:22, 28). By implication, God's favour lies on the whole creation which is declared 'good' and continues its life under that same divine blessing.

In addition, blessing is also associated with the covenant: to be blessed by God means to be in a relationship with God of love and obedience. For Abraham, the blessing resting on him is not just for himself. He is also to be a source of blessing for other people and nations (Gen 22:17-18).

The covenant made with the people of Israel on Mount Sinai brings with it the promise of blessing in response to obedience to the Law of Moses. The Law calls for justice and goodness in Israel's relationships: with one another, with foreigners in their midst, with their animals, and even with the land itself (Exod 23:1-12).

The same notion of blessing is found in the New Testament but with a new dimension. Blessing is still about covenant, relationship and justice but now it is also eschatological, the promise of God's kingdom finally overturning the values of the world. This is exemplified in Jesus' own life as he identifies with the poor, the humble, the peacemakers, and the persecuted who receive God's favour – both now and in the age to come (Matt 5:3-10; Lk 6:20-23).

Across the Bible, the covenant people of God are summoned to bless God in return. 'Bless the Lord, my soul' begins Psalm 103, and goes on to enumerate the reasons for blessing God: forgiveness, healing, mercy, justice, and goodness. Paul speaks in similar terms of rejoicing in the Lord and bringing our thanksgivings (blessings) and our supplications before God (Phil 4:4-8).

For us to bless God means that we acknowledge we are recipients of God's blessing. We praise God for the blessings God has showered upon us, and especially for the joy of salvation.

This sense of joyful praise and blessing is captured in the canticles of Luke's birth story, especially in the Magnificat and Benedictus: 'My soul magnifies the Lord and my spirit rejoices in God my Saviour', sings Mary; 'Blessed be the Lord, the God of Israel who has visited and redeemed his people', proclaims Zechariah (Lk 1:46-55, 68-79).

The divine blessing is not just for the insiders. In the Sermon on the Mount, Jesus says that God's rain and sun fall and shine on the righteous and unrighteous alike. Jesus' disciples are called to love all, even their enemies (Matt 5:43-48). Our blessing, like God's, is to flow to all people and, indeed, to all living creatures.

**2. The place of blessing in the Anglican tradition**

The Anglican tradition, based on Scripture, takes blessing very seriously. Liturgy and worship represent the core of our life together, grounded in God's blessing of us, and all for whom we pray, along with our responsive blessing (praise) of God.

The centre of blessing is the Eucharist, where the bread and wine are blessed to become the body and blood of Christ. Here we share together in his crucified and risen life, and taste something already of the life to come.

We also bless people – that is to say, we believe we are given authority to convey God's blessing to others. This is particularly so for the blessing given by priests but in fact all God's people can bless. We bless people in all the stages of their life: their children, their sick and disabled, their dying.

We bless animals and also inanimate things, like houses, buildings, and sacred objects (crosses and Bibles and candles). We bless food before meals. We even bless ships.

Blessing lies at the heart of our common life as Anglicans and we are to extend it, as the gospel summons us, beyond ourselves to others.

### **3. Civil unions and blessing**

In 2005, the Rt Revd Dr Rowan Williams, then Archbishop of Canterbury, conducted a service of Prayer and Dedication following the civil union of Prince Charles and Camilla Parker-Bowles. This was effectively a blessing on their civil union. At that time, divorced people could not be remarried in the Church of England.

Divorced people in Australia have been able to remarry in many dioceses of the Anglican Church since 1985. Those compelled to marry in civil rather than church unions before that date should indeed be able to request the church's blessing on their marriages, as Archbishop Rowan realised.

There are other reasons too that couples marry in civil ceremonies, who subsequently desire the church's blessing on them and their union.

What of gay and lesbian couples? Currently, they cannot marry in our church. The Bishops have confirmed that current church teaching says that marriage can only be between male-female couples. Recently they have arguably hardened their position against same-sex marriage by stating that such marriages cannot be held on Anglican property and that church 'officials' may even be prohibited from attending a same-sex marriage.

Since Australia legislated for full marriage equality in 2017, the avenue of blessing same-sex unions needs to be seriously considered. Gay and lesbian married couples are like divorced couples before 1985 in need of the church's blessing. We are speaking here of faithful Christians who love Christ and who love their church, and who desire that the relationship that means most to them, in human terms, can receive God's blessing.

It seems a small thing to ask. The question we need to ask this: why should we not grant it as part of our spiritual and pastoral care of them, so that they can be blessed and also be a blessing to others? If we can bless their children, their animals, and their homes, why can we not bless them?

An answer of a sort has been given: that same-sex unions are overtly condemned by Scripture. There are admittedly a handful of texts that, at first glance, seem to rule out same-sex partnerships. Three of these passages occur in the New Testament, within the Pauline body of writings.

Yet this reading of the three texts is open to question. It is not at all clear that what Paul is speaking of is covenant partnerships between same-sex couples. The issue is

complicated by some of our English translations: the NIV, for example, translates 1 Tim 1:10 as ‘those practicing homosexuality’, despite serious reservations about its meaning.

The recent book of the Doctrine Commission, *Marriage, Same-sex Marriage and the Anglican Church of Australia*, presents arguments for and against same-sex covenant unions. A number of these articles argue on biblical grounds that there is no theological objection to same-sex covenant partnerships.<sup>1</sup>

The argument of these essays is that Jesus himself never said a word against homosexuality and that the Bible is addressing very specific kinds of wrong-doing: whether the sexual abuse of minors, sexual violence or, as in Rom 1:26-27, lustful, same-sex acts engaged in by heterosexuals.

One of the words used in the Pauline corpus (*arsenokoitês*) is seriously disputed so that we cannot even be certain of its meaning (1 Cor 6:9; 1 Tim 1:10). It means literally ‘male-bedding’ and may well refer to pederasty: the common practice of older men having sexual relationships with boys.

It is true that the Bible nowhere advocates same-sex unions; but it does not advocate for the union of divorced persons either. There are situations, in other words, that the Bible does not envisage in specific terms. We are called, instead, to draw out biblical principles on which to base pastoral practice in new contexts. Many Anglicans rightly take the view that what is not actually *forbidden* in Scripture can be done with good, theological and biblical reasons.

The ancient contexts of the biblical world always need to be taken into account. There is an array of different marriage practices in the Old Testament, including polygamy. Some New Testament texts appear to condone slavery but a deeper understanding of biblical principles leads us in the opposite direction: to condemn the ownership of one human being by another. The same can be said of those texts where wives are told to obey their husbands; a deeper biblical insight teaches us, however, that men and women are equal in Christ and therefore in marriage (Gal 3:27-28).

In other words, the means of dismantling all structures of oppression and exclusion lies within the pages of the Bible itself when it is understood theologically – rather than by cherry picking occasional verses out of context.

As a previous Bishop of Gippsland said in his presidential address to his Diocese in 2012, if gay and lesbian couples display the fruits of the Spirit, then their lives and relationships should be considered godly and in accord with the Spirit (see Matt 7:16-20; Gal 5:22-23).

There is an irony in the debate around same-sex partnerships. Social conservatives in the church admit that there is no sin in being homosexual, only in homosexual practice. But, if *being* homosexual is not sinful and no single New Testament text forbids loving unions, we need to ask on what actual grounds we refuse to acknowledge and celebrate gay and lesbian relationships.

## Conclusion

The desire of any Christian couple to receive the divine blessing on their life together should be taken seriously in our pastoral ministry. God’s favour and provision for them should be assured. It is not our place to withhold blessing from those whom God has already blessed with the gift of committed, faithful love.

There are no theological grounds for refusing to bless civil unions. On the contrary, faithful and loving Christian couples, whatever their sexual orientation,

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<sup>1</sup> See especially articles by Matthew Anstey, Bp Stephen Pickard, Muriel Porter, Gregory Seach, Meg Warner, and myself.

gender, race or class, should be able to ask for and receive the church's blessing. They belong within the covenant of God's people and therefore stand firmly under the protection and provision of God. They too are called, not only to receive blessing, but also to be a blessing to others.

The practice of blessing is integral to the Bible's profound understanding of the covenant. That rich, divine blessing is to be received with our blessing – our praise and thanksgiving – and to be shared with others. It meets us now in the life of the church, drawing into the centre those pushed to the outside, those who feel like foreigners among their own people.

Blessing is embodied above all in Jesus who, having fulfilled the covenant on our behalf, departs this earth at the Ascension with his hands raised in blessing (Lk 24:50-51). The same blessing will one day be fulfilled in the triune God for the whole creation, and for that blessed day we in the church live and work and pray.

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