

Bishop of Oxford speaks to General Synod on Living in Love & Faith

General Synod Chair:

The Bishop of Oxford, followed by Robert Lawrence for a maiden speech

Bishop Steven:

Steven Croft, Bishop of Oxford 30. Thank you, chair, for calling me.

I speak in favour of the motion.

Jesus says, 'you will know them by their fruits.' There's some comfort there, in that the task of discernment according to Jesus, between right and wrong, is often difficult.

Jesus' own discernment in the Gospels is always surprising. Jesus finds ways of mercy and gentleness in every encounter. And these words on fruitfulness and Jesus' actions are the foundation for a whole Christian tradition of discernment, which stretches through Augustine and Ignatius to the present day.

The scriptures are to be interpreted through the lens of love of God and neighbour.

So now we need to recognise there is so much bad fruit in our present pastoral practise. Rejection, harm, confusion, dishonesty, burdens which are too heavy to bear, long-term fracture between Church and the society we serve.

I've been moved to tears by the personal accounts of this bad fruit which LGBTQIA+ people have sent to me since I published *Together in Love and Faith* in November.

Conversely, it seems to me there is so much good fruit which flows from loving, permanent, stable same-sex relationships. I thank God for the LGBTQIA+ clergy and lay ministers and disciples I've been privileged to know.

I pay tribute to their resilience and dedication and commitment to Christ's call, and the love and care they offer and their fruitful, fruitful ministry. Both the pain and witness of these saints of God have caused me to revisit scripture and tradition and have changed my heart and mind on these issues, and I'm very sorry it took me so long to change.

So I want us to agree and affirm these proposals today. And I pray they will be a stepping stone on the journey, and for me, I hope and pray that will lead to equal marriage in our church.

Through this process and through what I hope is agreed in the coming months, people in same-sex relationships and those relationships will become more visible. That in turn I know, will change other hearts and minds in the months and years to come.

But we will not all change hearts and minds, of course. I also want us to affirm today those who will continue to hold a traditional view of marriage. I believe we will need a careful exploration of a new and imaginative provision which will be needed in the light of these proposals and as we continue to explore equal marriage in the future, a mediated settlement as Vaughan said a few moments ago.

For I see fruitfulness also in those who disagree with me profoundly on this issue. I benefited greatly in recent years through being part of the St Hughs conversation, an informal regular meeting of those in favour and those opposed to change on this issue.

I know that the Church of England will continue to need the conservative reformed tradition moving forward, and that tradition will continue to need the wider church. I'm particularly thankful for Vaughan, who spoke earlier and who published a gracious response to my own essay, and indeed for St Ebbe's in Oxford, where Vaughan is rector and where Anne and I were married almost 45 years ago. (We were very young...)

My vision for the Diocese of Oxford is that we will be a diocese where all are affirmed and cherished, and where same-sex relationships can be cherished, and those who hold the traditional view are honoured, respected and loved.

'By their fruits you will know them,' says Jesus. We need to move forward in this debate, but may love and joy and peace for all flow from the decisions we make today.