

Dear Church Family,

Developments in the Church of England and our Church Weekend Away

The last few weeks have been tumultuous in the life of the Church of England. Many of you will have been following it in the media, others will be unaware of recent events. We thought it would be helpful to update you on where things now stand and how it affects the life of St Michael's.

Before we do that we want to draw upon our vision statement - ***Every life following Jesus*** - to emphasise two vitally important points for our life together as a church family. The first is that everyone is welcome here. Whatever your background, ethnicity, beliefs, sexuality, gender, whether single or married, old or young - every life is welcome to join with us at St Michael's and to know that there is a spiritual home here for you. The call of the gospel is, in this sense, gloriously inclusive. Jesus invites us all, 'Come!'

He also goes on to say, 'Come, *follow me!*' (Mark 1:17). Following Jesus is what it means to be a Christian - to turn to Him in repentance and faith, to know His forgiveness and grace, to follow His ways empowered by His Spirit, to obey His teaching and to trust Him in all things. Sometimes that can feel confronting and uncomfortable. But we are not at liberty to change Jesus' message or His teaching. Nor would we want to. To do so would be to create a god in our own image which would be no god at all (the Bible has a word for this - idolatry). Much better to follow His call which is the way to life and life in all its fullness (John 10:10).

Recent developments in the Church of England are in danger of undermining this invitation by suggesting it's ok not to follow Jesus in some areas of life. Six years ago a process called *Living in Love and Faith* was launched with the aim of exploring the themes of identity, sexuality, relationships and marriage in the wake of the very significant cultural changes that have taken place in western society in these areas. In January the bishops reached their conclusions and proposed public prayers of blessing for those who are in same-sex relationships. In fact, these prayers could be used to bless opposite-sex relationships outside of marriage too. Whilst claiming not to change the church's formal doctrine of marriage as being between a man and a woman, these prayers in their current format will, in effect, do that. Last week these proposals were put to General Synod (the Church of England's ruling body) where they were narrowly supported. We now await the next General Synod (in July) to see what precise shape the prayers and accompanying guidance will have before their formal adoption later in the summer.

We are deeply saddened and troubled by these developments. First and foremost, they represent a rejection of God's Word and His ways. The Bible presents a clear and compelling vision for human relationships which states that sexual intimacy is for marriage and marriage is to be between one man and one woman. For the bishops to set a direction of travel that takes the church away from the Bible by calling 'good' something that God's Word clearly calls sin is a tremendous failure of godly leadership. It is a huge and historic moment with far reaching implications.

We lament the way in which it says to those we know and love who are single and chaste (whether they are same-sex attracted or not), that their obedience to the Lord in this area is unnecessary. We lament, too, the way in which this is already causing a deep fracture across the

worldwide Anglican communion where the overwhelming majority of churches remain orthodox and look on bemused at how 'the mother church' has felt it right to depart from 2000 years of Christian teaching. We also lament the deep and enduring division this will create in the Church of England itself. We have written to the Bishop of London twice now to express our concerns and we anticipate that further action will need to be taken in the coming weeks.

However, we are not without hope. At least 41% of General Synod voted against the proposals and remain orthodox. There are many brothers and sisters in Christ, along with a handful of orthodox bishops, working incredibly hard to find a way forward for orthodox ministry to continue with integrity within the Church of England. We will have to see what emerges in the months ahead. Whatever happens, we can all be confident of this, that the Lord Jesus will continue to build His church and nothing will overcome it.

We recognise that it's vitally important for us to talk about these issues and to teach on them. It's why the Church Weekend Away has come at just the right time. Over the course of the weekend we will be exploring the theme of *Being Human*. In the main sessions we will see what the Bible says about our humanity: created, fallen, and redeemed in Christ. In seminars we will explore in more detail what this means for our identity as being created male and female; we will ask the question, 'why does God care who I sleep with?'; and we will think about what difference God's love makes to our lives.

Whilst we will be doing most of the teaching, we are delighted that we will be joined over the weekend by Felix and Ellie Stevenson along with their son Alfie. Many of you will remember them with much love for the integral part they played in our early days as a church. Felix and Ellie left St Michael's in 2019 to train for ordained ministry at Oak Hill. They are now based at Holy Trinity Clapham where Felix is a curate, he will be speaking in our main session on the Sunday morning. It will be a joy to have them with us. There will be the usual mix of interviews too, some from amongst our number, others from guests who will join us via Zoom. Alongside this, we will be spending time in prayer - praying for one another, praying for our church, praying for our country at this vital time.

And, of course, over the weekend, there will be much else to get involved in as well. It's always a precious time for being together, making new friendships and deepening old ones. There will be time for relaxing, too, with swimming, fresh air, evening entertainment, good food and much else besides. We're thrilled that so many in the church are able to make it - just over 180 at the last count - and still room for day visitors if you would like to sign up.

We are well aware that these issues we write about are not light. For many, they will be acutely personal, impacting our life, day in, day out. They are highly sensitive matters which can affect our sense of identity in the deepest way. We also do not presume that everyone shares our convictions. Whatever your situation or thoughts, please do always feel welcome to speak to us about them at any time. Equally, you might like to speak to a member of the staff team or your small group leader. Above all, we hope and pray that we might all know the overwhelming love, goodness and grace of our God who, '*so loved the world that He sent His one and only Son, that whoever believes in Him shall not perish but have eternal life*' (John 3:16).

With much love in Him,

Ed and Simon

Revd Ed Kendall, Vicar
Revd Simon Pedley, Associate Vicar