

Finding the Wisdom of Solomon

It may come as a surprise to readers of the *Yorkshire Post* that I agree with most of what the Archbishop of York said in his article (Saturday 25/02/17). The Bishop of Burnley is a fine person.

But he should decline to be the next Bishop of Sheffield, and here is why. He cannot, in his conscience recognize, value and affirm the sacramental integrity of one third of his clergy.

Such a position has no integrity. He will be the cause of division, and cannot bring unity. His views on women clergy mean that he is instrument of partition and pain. He cannot bring healing.

On the one hand, Bishop Philip says he is committed to women in leadership. But on the other hand, he clearly believes that these same women - his own clergy - are not true priests. And so he undermines them. His apparent affirmation does not compensate for his subversion.

My essay in *Modern Church* did not call for Bishop North to resign. It asked him to either fully and unequivocally affirm **all** his clergy - and so distance himself from the position of the Society he helps to lead. And if he can't or won't do this, he is not the right person to lead and unite the Diocese of Sheffield. Simple.

Philip North's commitment to a society that does not accept female clergy as true, full and equal alongside male clergy is a form of gender-based discrimination. It has no other name.

I don't think we can trust Bishop North's affirmation of women in leadership either. He is part of a catholic society that believes only men can truly be priests and bishops, and that this same society is to be led by bishops, who in turn lead the church. What leadership roles, exactly, are left for the women, in a church run by such men?

At this, there have been some howls of protest from conservative catholic groups in the Church of England. The logic is very odd. Namely, they should be allowed to be intolerant of women. But it is apparently intolerant of me to object to this. I would simply argue that tolerating intolerance is not an especially virtuous practice!

To try and appease those who objected to women priests and women bishops, the Church of England adopted the (so-called) 'Five Guiding Principles' to help maintain unity. The first principle is crucial. It shapes how the remaining four are read.

The First Principle states: “the Church of England is fully and unequivocally committed to all orders of ministry being open equally to all, without reference to gender, and holds that those whom it has duly ordained and appointed to office are true and lawful holders of the office which they occupy and thus deserve due respect and canonical obedience”.

Let us dwell on those words: ‘fully’, ‘unequivocally’, ‘equally open to all’, ‘without reference to gender’. That those so ordained are ‘true’ and ‘lawful’. True means true. Not half true. The society that Philip North belongs to does not believe one third of his clergy are ‘true’ clergy. (But he does admit they are ‘lawfully’ ordained).

The faithfulness of the church, and its public witness, is neither affirmed nor rewarded by finding some fudged middle ground between sexism and equality. Any more than it is between racism and impartiality, or any kind of exclusion based on a person’s identity, and their inclusion.

The Five Guiding Principles seek a middle-way between inclusion and exclusion. They are muddled. We would not tolerate, quite rightly, a post-apartheid South Africa that still gave honoured places in government to those who held racially-segregationist views.

At the same time, we would not dispute that South Africans holding such segregationist views - not all of whom were white, incidentally - were also loyal and good South Africans. We would not drive them away. We’d seek reconciliation with those fellow-citizens.

But we would seek truth too. We would not honour their views, giving them a place in governance, or be seeking to protect or enshrine such views as equally valuable, credible or laudable. Such views do not lead to ‘mutual flourishing’.

The Church of England would not dream of tolerating views on race that spoke of difference and diversity, and then re-licensing these terms as leverage for the means of further discrimination. Why does it allow this on gender?

For a passionate-moderate like myself, let me state clearly that not all views are of equal worth on race or gender. Some are wrong and harmful. Being tolerant - and I do believe in a tolerant, mild, open church - also means that, sometimes, views that are manifestly intolerant have to be named and resisted.

Moderates have backbones too.

The story of the wisdom of Solomon, and found in the Old Testament (1 Kings 3), is well known. Two women gave birth together. One baby dies, and so the bereaved mother steals the other child. In the cold light of day, both are left to dispute who the remaining baby belongs to. The mothers tell conflicting stories.

Solomon's wisdom was to call the mothers together, and offer to divide the surviving child in two: have half each. One mother expresses contentment with this result. She gets half. Both will now share in pain and grief. It keeps things balanced. But the real mother says to the one who has lost her baby, 'take the child'. Solomon awards the child to mother who would give up her baby, in order to spare its life.

What has this story got to do with Sheffield Diocese? Everything. The catholic group that felt they have lost their beloved Church of England have filched something of it back. Their Sheffield dispute is about entitlement. But the women clergy, and male clergy ordained by women bishops, will not let their diocese be divided in two. Their ministry, morale and integrity now have to be forfeited for the good of the whole. Their self-sacrifice will be enormous.

Alas, we have no Solomon leading the Church of England. So our goodly moderates will be constantly compelled to accede to small pressure groups, who keep threatening to take 'their' half-share of the child away.

I know that Bishop Philip North is a loyal Anglican. But his appointment does not represent a triumph for a broad church that can now showcase its diversity, and a capacity to live with differences and disagreements.

It sends a completely different message to the world. Namely, that we tolerate exclusion and discrimination at the highest levels. And that our Church leaders support such discrimination, in the name of inclusion and 'mutual flourishing'.

The Church of England has to find better ways forward with its complex balancing act: between managed diversity and integrated unity. We cannot be seen, as a public, national church, to be sanctioning and sacralising such sexism.

Philip North's appointment to the See of Sheffield, whilst he is still a card-carrying member of a group that doesn't believe women can be 'truly' clergy, is not a step forward for the church. It's a step backwards into dense fog, and greater darkness.

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