

I am torn very much today by what the readings invite me to speak about. On the one hand there is the Gospel, which focuses mainly on conflict resolution between an individual who feels hurt by what another person has said or done, and how one or more mediators may be needed to bring the disagreeing parties together again.

On the other hand, we have our first reading, where God calls on the Prophet Ezekiel to be like a sentry or a watchman watching over the spiritual welfare of Israel, like a watchman in former times kept watch over the safety and physical welfare of the town or stronghold he was employed to protect.

In a way the task of spiritual watchman falls to all of us as we care about the spiritual welfare of our fellow-parishioners, fellow-citizens, and public in general. At one level it falls to parents and teachers in particular as they guide their children and students in the right way of living, - but it also applies to the rest of us, in that together we are responsible for the good of our communities and for society as a whole.

That's very relevant to all of us as we are invited to participate in the plebiscite on same-sex marriage. Without trying to take sides, I think that in a recent Pastoral Letter our Archbishop put forward a very balanced view of what is at stake in this plebiscite, and it is worth taking notice of the points he makes, so if you don't mind, I'd like to repeat part of that letter.

The Catholic Church, along with other faith traditions, teaches that marriage is a natural institution established by God to be a permanent union between one man and one woman, intended towards the formation of a family in which children are born and nurtured.

Any legislation that changes that definition of marriage recognised by all major cultures of the world demands careful consideration by all Australians. It is vital that we Catholics vote, so that our viewpoint can be heard on this vital public issue. Its outcome will affect our society and families profoundly in the future.

We understand that ours is not the only viewpoint in our diverse society. Many do not agree with it. Many people see this as an issue about ensuring equality for every and all relationships. Yes, human rights are

important, but so are human responsibilities. We are responsible for the impact of our decisions on future generations.

Therefore, we ask all to consider the profound implications of possible legislation that will imbed this desire for equality of relationships in our laws. This debate about same-sex marriage raises profound questions about who we are. Fundamental issues are at stake. Why do humans exist as male and female? Is this distinction simply marginal? Is it simply a social construct?

Do our children also have rights? We are all children of a male and a female. Should not this be a central consideration in our decisions about the way children should be ideally nurtured and educated in our society.

We understand that these are complex issues. But certainly, no legislation should be enacted without a deep public conversation in which we all engage about such issues that goes beyond slogans and soundbites.

In a pluralist community, we maintain that respect for *difference* should be as important as a demand for *equality*. Things can be equal in all respects without having to be uniformly the same.

We believe that there is a core and fundamental wisdom and truth in the traditional definition and understanding of marriage that should not be ignored, and is worth keeping for the health and future of our society.

As Pope Francis has pointed out: "The family is threatened by growing efforts on the part of some to redefine the very institution of marriage, by relativism, by the culture of the ephemeral, by a lack of openness to life."

Some will naturally be disappointed in our stance. Some even question our right to speak and follow our consciences. It is entirely possible that future legislation about same-sex marriage could infringe fundamental human rights of freedom of religion and conscience. It could result in restrictions on the rights of ministers of religion and religious bodies and organisations having the freedom to teach, preach and speak about marriage between persons of the of the same sex being contrary to their religious and conscientious beliefs.

We, as a church, affirm the dignity of all those who identify as having a same sex orientation. Like all human beings, they are created in the image and likeness of God. They have a right to expect to be loved and welcomed and not subject to unjust discrimination.

So, where do we go from here?

In all our conversations and encounters, let us imitate Pope Francis, who asks us to be humble and never judgemental.

In that spirit, the Catholic Church will continue to teach and preach the truth that marriage is a union of one man and one woman and encourage all people of good will to embrace the fullness of that truth.

We will also work to promote and strengthen marriage and families.

We will strive to uphold the dignity of every human person, including persons who experience same-sex attraction, welcoming them as our brothers and sisters.

As Catholics concerned for the common good, may we join all our fellow citizens of Australia in an active and respectful engagement in this critical conversation.