**Diocesan Synod**

**24th July 2024**

**Presidential Address**

*Who does he think he is? Who do people say that I am?*

On Sunday I was in Tolpuddle at the Martyrs Festival with Sarah Hillman and her excellent Churchwardens. Sarah had picked a reading from John 6 with some of its last words, when Jesus and the disciples were reflecting back on all that had taken place. I was preaching and I had done my homework referring to the modern catholic theologian Richard Rohr. Of course, you never know who is going to turn up on such a day. Jeremy Corbyn was promised but we didn’t meet him although strangely there were a lot of Jeremy Corbyn look-a-likes. Only when the church wardens were greeting people as they came in for the service did I discover that the President of the Methodist Conference was sitting in the front row. Each year the President is the equivalent for them of the Archbishop of Canterbury. You never know who you are going to meet in our rural communities. By the end of the morning, over sandwiches I was also asked if I would chair a committee in the House of Lords and later reminded of the sermon, I had preached the Sunday before in Burton Bradstock. Other sermons are available.

In John chapter 6, there is a rollercoaster of events for Jesus and the disciples. Firstly, he is rejected in his hometown and then he commissions the 12 disciples and sends them out and by the time the chapter has finished they have returned having been so busy they haven’t even had time to eat. John the Baptist is murdered. Jesus feeds the 5000 and then walks on water. He is getting recognised, followed, heckled, cheered and begged for miraculous healings. In John 6 which our congregations will be reflecting on for the next five weeks with Gospel readings taken from that chapter, Jesus becomes known even to the extent of becoming somewhat of a celebrity, if not a presidential nominee. How we judge those in the limelight depends very much on our own worldview and thankfully not so much on what those with a ‘Messiah’ complex might have to say about themselves on our screens.

Each one of us operates out of an implicit worldview, a set of assumptions that are usually not conscious, and therefore are difficult to observe, much less evaluate. Your worldview is not what you look at It is what you look out from or look through. It is thus taken for granted, largely unconscious, and in great part it determines what you see – and what you don’t see at all. The important thing is that you know what your preferences and biases are, because there is no such thing as an unbiased worldview. When you acknowledge your filters, you can compensate for them.

Richard Rohr *(Rohr, The Universal Christ 2019, SPCK)* has concluded that there are four basic worldviews, though they might be expressed in many ways and are not necessarily completely separate. Some people represent the best of all of them, or combine several somehow, allowing them to cross religious, intellectual and ethnic boundaries. There are good things about all four of them, and none of them is completely wrong or completely right, but one of them is by far the most helpful.

First is the *material worldview*. Those who hold the material worldview believe that the outer, visible universe is the ultimate and ‘real’ world. People of this worldview have given us science, engineering, medicine, and much of what we now call civilisation. The material worldview has obviously produced much good, but in the last couple of centuries it has come to so dominate most developed countries that it is often presumed to be the only possible and fully adequate worldview. A material worldview tends to create the power of consumerism and competitive cultures, which are often preoccupied with scarcity, since material goods are always limited. It is out of the material worldview that populism finds its root.

The second worldview is the *spiritual worldview*. The spiritual worldview characterizes many forms of religion and philosophies that recognise the primary and the finality of spirit, of consciousness, of the invisible world behind all that is seen. This worldview is partially good too, because it maintains the reality of the spiritual world, which many materialists deny. However, the spiritual worldview, taken too seriously, as little concern for the earth, the neighbour, or justice, because it considers this world largely as secondary.

Thirdly, Rohr says there is a *priestly worldview*. Those who hold the priestly worldview are generally sophisticated, trained, and experienced people and traditions that feel their job is to help us to put matter and spirit together. They are the holders of the law, scriptures, traditions, they include ministers, therapists, sacred communities and probably bishops! People of the priestly worldview help us make good connections that are not always obvious between the material and spiritual worlds. The downside is that this view assumes that the two worlds are actually separate and need something to bind them back together which is the meaning of the word religion, re-ligio, or re-alignment. That need to reunite is partially real, of course, but belief in it creates status differences and divisions and people who worship religion rather than sincere seekers. It describes what most of us think of as organised religion rather than faithfulness, which is what I am interested in. It often gets involved with buying and selling in the temple, to use a New Testament picture. At best in the priestly worldview its leaders can be inspirational and at worst false prophets.

The fourth worldview is unique to us. It is the *incarnational worldview.* Here, matter and the spirit are understood to have never been separate. Matter and spirit reveal and show each other. This view relies more on awakening than joining, more on seeing than obeying, more on growth in consciousness and love, rather than experts, morality or rules. In Christian history, you see the incarnational worldview most strongly in the early Eastern Fathers, Celtic spirituality, St Francis and, I would suggest, the rural English church. It is rooted and grounded in love.

Each of the four worldviews holds a piece of the cosmic puzzle of reality, but the incarnational worldview is the only one in which we find the embodied Jesus. The incarnational worldview grounds Christian holiness in objective and ontological reality instead of just moral behaviour. This is the important leap that most have not yet made. This worldview is seeing through the eyes of Jesus himself. Who He was and who He is. What He did. What He said. What He didn’t do or say. Who did He spend time with? Who did He criticise? Who did He love? Who did he forgive or not condemn? For those of us who look to an incarnational worldview, we can feel just as holy alongside a hospital bed or a pub as in a church. Christ can be seen in the disfigured and broken as much as the so called perfect or attractive or worse than that, the successful and powerful. Those with an incarnational worldview can love and forgive themselves and all imperfect things, because all carry the image of God equally. Living as followers of the incarnate Christ will normally move people toward direct social, practical, and immediate actions. It is never an abstraction or a theory. If our faith is truly incarnational, then it is always hands-on religion and not solely a belief system, a club, or something we receive because of the power of others.

In the 2000 year of Christianity it is easy to notice how most of our historic fights and divisions have been about power or semantics. Who holds the symbols or has the right to present the symbols of successful holiness? Who is using the right words? Who is following often arbitrary church protocols based on proof texts? In the incarnational worldview the uniqueness is that it starts before the world itself. The essential Gospel of God’s loving union with all of creation from the beginning is seldom understood and usually ignored. St Bonaventure believed that every creature is a word of God and that this was the ‘first book’ of the ‘Bible’. Creation is the first act of God. Most people do not see creation as the ‘first bible’ but emphasis the much later version, written in the last nanosecond of geological time and then called the ‘only’ word of God. Of course everything necessary for salvation is found in the scriptures but that does not mean it is everything there is from God. Those very scriptures say that the Word was from the beginning, John 1:1 and that word was always identified with Christ which in time became flesh and lived among us. It is in the incarnate word made flesh that the scriptures become holy.

I have said before that we are in a changing time, a change of era. Christendom is gone and a new apostolic season is upon us. In this time we are called to a fully incarnational ministry. We are followers of Jesus Christ, the incarnate word. Our hope is in Him and in Him alone. It changes the way we see the world and everyone in it. *For God so loved the world* ……… well you know how the rest goes.

Who does He think He is? Who do you say that I am? Love is who the word made flesh thinks He is.

**The Rt Revd Stephen Lake**

**Bishop of Salisbury**