

9th November 2013 Diocesan Synod: Presidential Address

The focus of this Synod and the next is mission.

The Powerstock Nail

In September I went to Powerstock, a village in West Dorset. Two years ago their school was destroyed by fire. All that was left was a shell of a building, now beautifully restored. At the service in church before the school's reopening the Head took an old fire blackened nail from his pocket which he had picked up from the floor the morning after the fire. When everything seemed to be going wrong he would hold the nail. It reminded him of the cross of Christ and the nail gave him the hope that God was still with them and in the end they would be alright. Now their school is rebuilt. So John Paul, the Head, gave me the nail for me to give to someone else who needs their hope renewed. I have decided to keep it until Easter and then give and then will give it away.

Values and Beliefs

We have nearly 200 schools and Academies with 42,000 students. Powerstock was one of five major new school buildings that I opened and blessed early this term. The others were St Edward's Poole, Bishop Aldhelm First School, Verwood School and Community Sports Hall, and Sarum Academy. This week will be Puddletown. A huge building programme is underway.

Almost every school has an explicit values statement. The opening of Sarum Academy was structured around their core values of Respect, Aspiration, Excellence, Service, Tenacity and Partnership. It was a very effective way of presenting and rehearsing their purpose. The Dean, who later will be giving the Annual Report from the cathedral, might tell us that everything they do is achieved through their values of Integrity, Generosity, and Compassion.

What stood out to me in the 'Let Us Talk' exercise to which many of you contributed were the dynamic attitudes of energy, excellence and engagement. The Bishop's Staff thought that as values St Paul's Faith, Hope and Love take some beating. We also thought that what really changes culture is stories. In terms of our core purposes it has led us to think about what we want as a diocese from those coming to minister here. We are developing material that will be used for every appointment in addition to that which is prepared locally by every benefice.

Perhaps what we have come to see is that if what we want for the core purpose of the diocese is to be about renewing hope, it will be stories that renew us.

Ministry and Mission

Last week Helen and I had a short break in Prague. On a walking tour of the city a young guide showed us a twentieth century statue of Jan Huss, the Protestant Reformer who died in 1415. It was inscribed with his saying: "Love each other and speak the truth". Huss helped shape the Czech people so that in the twentieth century through the years of war and then of Communism the spirit survived and led into 'the velvet revolution'. Now 70% of Czechs have no religious affiliation and the Czech Republic is one of the most secular in Europe. They are not all atheists but they have little time for organised religion.

This country has a different history but similar questions are being asked across Europe: can we have the values and strengths of Christianity without personal commitment to God and the practices of the Christian community that shape the character of disciples? It is partly this sort of perception that prompted me to ask the Bishop of Ramsbury to set up a working group on Confirmations to see if we can make better use of the opportunities given by them, particularly with

young people in exploring and making commitment to Christian faith. They have completed the first part of their work and will be putting proposals for some new work in the New Year.

A few weeks ago several clergy went to get the feedback about 'The Weddings Project' from just before I became bishop. It was to develop and support the C of E's weddings ministry. They were struck that every week C of E takes over 5,000 baptisms, weddings and funerals. That is a very large number of people to whom we are ministering many of whom are not regular church-goers. If the average congregation at these occasional offices is 100 we are ministering to 0.5 million people a week. We will see something similar this weekend with Remembrance services and events at war memorials. The Let Us Talk exercise about the personality and character of the Diocese of Salisbury and our local churches asked about how we can better measure the quality and impact of church life. When churches do these services well, meeting people's needs so they experience something of the life-giving love of God, that is ministry and mission.

Outward facing and open to the world

In their responses to Let Us Talk many churches talked about themselves as being outward facing and open to the world. There was at least an aspiration to serve the wider community and sometimes really impressive examples of the depth of engagement of individual Christians and congregations. The Church is present in every community so we are uniquely placed to describe what is going on in society and be advocates on behalf of the poor and most vulnerable. It is the Church's character.

A few weeks ago there was a meeting of the South West Churches Regional Forum and Social Responsibility Network exploring some of the implications of poverty, the extraordinary growth of and increasing dependence of food banks, and the impact of welfare reform the principles for which are broadly accepted but the impact of its implementation is causing considerable hardship. There are 3.6 million children in the UK living in poverty and 6 out of 10 of them are in low-income working families. This is a country in which income and geography can improve your life expectancy by over 10 years.

The depth of knowledge and experience in the Forum was heartening. Nationally the Church is raising concerns about children and families in poverty. Following the General Synod motion there is increasing commitment in our churches that we should pay the Living Wage. Our Archbishop has spoken clearly about the iniquities of pay day lending. In support of this I visited the South Wiltshire Credit Union and met people who were grateful for the Archbishop's involvement and very much want to work with the churches.

In a society of payday loans, food and fuel poverty, increasing rents, high youth unemployment, and crises arising from changes in benefits, our churches have a key role. We care for the individual and build hope in our communities by being like light, salt and yeast, changing experience for the common good and renewing hope among those who feel desperate.

Let Us Talk

In response to Let Us Talk I committed to do some work on the core purpose of the diocese. I think it is getting clearer that this is not just functional, important though good order is. The gift of administration is much under-rated, especially by clergy. It is deeply impressive that the collection rate for Fair Share last year was of 98.5% payment, one of the highest in the C. of E. It is a sign of our commitment to one another and it is good to have a Board of Finance who make a point of saying that Fair Share is not just about finance. The way we use our money is an indication of our

values and what we believe. It is about a shared responsibility for ministry and mission, a duty and a joy.

Perhaps what we have come to see is that if what we want as the core purpose of the diocese to be about is renewing hope, it will be stories that renew us.

Relationships

The reading set by the lectionary for today from Romans began, "I commend to you our sister Phoebe". It seems providential when we continue to work on the place of women in the Church. Canon Jane Charman has been involved in the national working group and I am glad she will be able to give us information about what is going to General Synod.

The long list of names and greetings at the end of Romans is a clear indication that what we are about is relational, together in Christ. There's an African proverb I use a lot:

If you want to travel fast, travel alone.
If you want to travel far, travel together.

Pilling

One of the core purposes of the diocese is to provide the relationships that give us a framework for relationships when we conscientiously disagree about something important, as over same sex relationships.

The group chaired by Sir Joseph Pilling for the House of Bishops reviewing Issues in Sexuality, particularly in the light of the reality of Civil Partnerships. The climate is changing very rapidly in society and in Church. Their work has been overtaken by events. Same sex marriage was not on the agenda when they were established. The legislation has now been passed and the first same sex marriages will happen next year no matter what the Church makes of them. In a way that helps us because it takes the pressure off from needing to make a quick response.

There has been a good deal of speculation about the contents. We will have to wait and see. Pilling will report to the House of Bishops in December. Their report will go to the College of all the Bishops in January. I hope it will come with a process attached to it to assist our discussion of it. Some of you will know that at the meeting of Lay Chairs and Rural Deans in July I was asked by some to begin the process early so that we could get started. There was an excellent discussion at meeting of Rural Deans, excellent not because we agreed but that we disagreed courteously and listened carefully. Several of those who disagree with me said the conversation gave them hope. From that experience I am less inclined to large public meetings and more to smaller groups in which it is possible for people of different views to meet at depth.

Margery Kempe, whom we remember today, was a mystic and pilgrim. She was unsettled and restless for God, travelling on. She is a good model for us as we journey together.

Mission

We are committed to maintaining a flourishing Christian presence in every place.

Inherited models of church are about the work of God with people in communities. We need clergy who can lead good worship and take the occasional offices with care and grace.

People are gifted to different things. Not everyone can do everything.

The gifts he gave were that some would be apostles, some prophets, some evangelists, some pastors and teachers, to equip the saints for the work of ministry, for building up the body of Christ, until all of us come to the unity of the faith and of the knowledge of the Son of God, to maturity, to the measure of the full stature of Christ.
Ephesians 4.11-13

D T Niles, from the Church of South India, said “Evangelism is one beggar telling another beggar where to find bread”.

This Synod and next is to share experience and stories from our different parts of the Church so that the whole may grow together into the maturity of the full stature of Christ. We will be telling stories that renew hope.

The Lord be with you.

+Nicholas Sarum
9th November 2013