

2014 8th February Presidential Address

Diocesan Synod at St Nicholas Church, Corfe Mullen

Mission

At our last Synod we began to share experiences of mission in the Diocese. We are going to continue that process today. There was some criticism last time that the presentations were from clergy. It was always going to be a game in two halves and this time there will be greater input from laity.

Rejoice in the Lord

The reading we have just heard from Philippians 4:2-14 is marvellous in setting an approach to today's business. There is trouble between Euodia and Syntyche. He does not write them off because of their disagreement. Paul appeals to his loyal companions to help and he recognises that these women have struggled beside him in the work of the gospel. With his other co-workers their name is in the book of life. "I urge them to be of the same mind in the Lord."

That might speak to us as we begin to consider how we are going to handle the Pilling report on human sexuality and discuss matters about which there are strong and divergent views among faithful Christians. We need to do so with what our Archbishop has called, "good disagreement". It won't help if we see this as a distraction from the main tasks. Nor will it help us if we allow this to be the single defining issue of the Church. We need to conduct ourselves so that we model what it is to be a Christian today, and conduct the conversations in ways that witness to the love of the Lord Jesus. This afternoon the Revd Dr Malcolm Brown, Director of Mission and Public Affairs for the Church of England, will give us an introduction to Pilling, I hope both the content of the report and the process by which we might consider it. The College of Bishops meeting at the end of January asked for study material to be prepared and Canon David Porter, the Archbishop's Canon for Reconciliation, wants to test the process he is devising for facilitated conversations. It will take some time for this to happen, and though that means our waiting I think we should join in the C of E's process rather than set off on our own. We have waited this long, we can wait a bit longer!

"Rejoice in the Lord always, and again I say, Rejoice." It is such a lovely phrase, not anxious about difficulties but confident that "the peace of God which passes all understanding will guard your hearts and minds in Christ Jesus." I pray it is so for us and that the ways in which we live and deal with one another will be true, honourable, just, pure, pleasing, commendable.

The passage we heard read ends with Paul grateful for their concern for him. As was noted in the service it reflects the care for others which is gospel but Paul does it in such a way that is full of joy and renews our hope as well as the hope of those being served. One of our presentations today is about social justice and mission and Paul sets a tone for the way in which we do this, not from guilt or burden but with joy.

The waters have come up

Save me, O God,
for the waters have come up to my neck.

² I sink in the miry depths,
where there is no foothold.

I have come into the deep waters;
the floods engulf me.

Psalm 69 could have been written in the ancient church at Charminster, or quite a few other places in the Diocese these last few weeks. We are having to cope with storms and floods and some

places have had a particularly difficult time. I join with other Church leaders in the region asking prayers of solidarity with those whose lives and livelihoods have been damaged and disrupted by the floods and storms, damaging homes and disrupting businesses.

The human spirit is strong. People have pulled together and cared for one another. The emergency services have been excellent. "We often suffer, but we are never crushed. Even when we don't know what to do, we never give up. In times of trouble, God is with us, and when we are knocked down, we get up again." (2 Corinthians 4:8-9) We are also being given a powerful reminder of the need for us to care for the earth and our environment, that, too, being part of our commitment to justice.

Renewing Hope

Renewing hope is becoming something of a theme for the Bishop's staff. I have been thinking a lot about the difficulties we all seem to have in setting priorities. It was clear from the responses to 'Let Us Talk' and it led to a sense of our being overburdened. I like the phrase in the Eucharistic Prayer, "It is our duty and our joy always and everywhere to give you thanks and praise." From the presentation about Energising Local Ministry we might be helped to think about the simple description from the Diocese of Evreux that every Christian and every Church community is called to worship God, proclaim the Gospel and serve our neighbour. It is not prescriptive about how we do this and can be adapted in every context. I think the simplicity of what it asks might help unburden us and release our energies.

South Sudan

Welcome to Bishop Elijah of Cueibet. With Bishop Fraser, suffragan Bishop of Juba, he has been on a course in Canterbury for new Bishops of the Anglican Communion. Because of the present crisis Bishop Fraser was needed back in Juba immediately. I am pleased to welcome Bishop Elijah to our Diocese for a week and to this Diocesan Synod.

Since early December there has been terrible fighting in South Sudan. A report published on Wednesday by Médecins Sans Frontières says that the speed and scale of the violence over the past six weeks in South Sudan has been unprecedented. The Archbishop of Canterbury's very recent brief visit to South Sudan gave him a vivid experience of the scale of the problem. In Bor, where there had been 250,000 people, the streets were almost empty and many of the buildings destroyed. 3,000 had been buried, a similar number had not. He could smell death. When they came to St Andrew's Cathedral the bodies of 20 clergy and lay workers were laid out and Archbishop Justin was asked to bless a mass grave. The anger at those who did this is very great.

The latest report from the UN Office for the Co-ordination of Humanitarian Affairs (Ocha) estimates nearly ¾ million people have been displaced within South Sudan. Another 130,400 have fled to nearby countries. As the scale of this crisis becomes clearer, it is estimated that 3.7 million people are at high risk of food insecurity. Bishop Hilary Garang emailed two weeks ago and said he had never known such violence and so many deaths. Malakal has been destroyed. The number of people being forced to leave their homes and livelihoods has meant that as well as meeting urgent health needs, displaced people need fundamental support such as food, shelter and water.

Our partnership with the Episcopal Church of the Sudan and South Sudan is over 40 years old. We were reminded last year that when the link started in 1973 it was so that informed prayer would lead to informed giving. In 2013, our Diocese contributed approximately £240,000 to the work of the Episcopal Church of the Sudan and South Sudan, which included some £90,000 on Medical care. Considerable financial support is also given through Deanery and personal links and via a variety of funds to the Juba Secondary School, nearly £500,000 in all.

In response to the immediate needs we have already sent £13,500 - £10,000 to the Episcopal Church's Sudan Relief Agency's for their initial response, and £3,500 to support a meeting of their House of Bishops where they talked, prayed and planned their response to the crisis. An excellent communiqué has been issued by the Bishops with a recognition of the deep and difficult work that is needed for peace and reconciliation.

An Appeal for the South Sudan

Our Links Committee have been working hard with other international partners to find effective ways of making a contribution. Today I am launching a Diocesan appeal that will run through Lent to Easter for help the Episcopal Church's Sudanese Relief Agency. I hope that the Diocese will give generously because the need is so great. After Easter, when we are through this first phase of immediate humanitarian response, we will ask again for help with more targeted projects where our contribution will make a difference to the rebuilding of people's lives and the stability of the world's newest and possibly most troubled State.

Please give generously and find ways to ask your churches and communities to give. The people of Wiltshire and Dorset, Poole and Bournemouth have taken the Sudanese to heart and will want to contribute to meet their needs now.

You can make your donation by posting a cheque payable to:

South Sudan Appeal
Church House
Crane Street
Salisbury SP1 2QB

Or from next week on the Diocesan website you will find a link to a JustGiving site where you can make your gift by credit card.

I very much hope we can raise a great deal of money to help our brothers and sisters.

Women Bishops

Next week at General Synod we will be at the Revision stage of the Measure for the Ordination of Women to the Episcopate. There is still work to be done to ensure in July this will go through with the necessary 2/3rds majorities in each House. Because it is Article 8 business we, the Diocesan Synod, will be meeting on May 15th to vote on it. Deaneries can decide themselves whether they want to discuss it. They are welcome to send in their views which will be reported to the Diocesan Synod but not counted in a vote.

General Synod 2015 and Deanery Synod Elections 2014

Yesterday's Church Times reported that only 23% of respondents to their readers' survey have confidence in the General Synod's leadership. That begs a question about the role of Synod and whether governance is the same as leadership but it does reflect a level of dissatisfaction. This is a timely reminder that 2015 will see the election of a new General Synod and much needs to be done to widen the membership of the new synod to better represent the mainstream of the Church of England.

At a Diocesan Synod I am talking to the converted but please make sure people in your churches know that it is the lay Deanery Synod members who elect the lay members of General Synod, and Deanery Synods will be elected this year. Make people are aware of the significance of these Deanery Synod elections. The whole process depends on getting on to your church Electoral Roll and ensuring that the people elected to Deanery Synod will properly represent your wishes in the people they elect to General Synod.

A coalition of groups has prepared material. It will still be useful even if you disagree with this particular aims for inclusion and opposition to discrimination. Jane Charman has 80 packs of material and you can take one for each church to stimulate and engage church members. There will be a link to this material on the Diocesan website.

General Synod meets Monday - Wednesday next week and I would value your prayers so that, too, may become a matter of joy in the spirit of Paul writing to the Philippians. "I know what it is to have little. I know what it is to have plenty.... I can do all things through him who strengthens me. In any case it was kind of you to share my distress."

The grace of the Lord Jesus Christ be with you.