

**Salisbury Diocesan Synod – 7 November 2009**  
**Presidential Address by the Bishop of Salisbury**

What is the vocation of the Church in our day? Where have we got to in this Diocese?

**The Church is called to be one, holy, catholic and apostolic.** In welcoming you to a new synod, and in introducing you to the themes of our common life in the current context of today, I begin by reflecting on each of these in turn. This time, I'll take them in the reverse order.

**So first, Apostolic.** Carrying what Richard Gaillardetz calls the 'dangerous memory' of Jesus roots our witness into a basic belonging in a life together undergirded by common prayer, study of the scriptures and a pattern of living not primarily for ourselves but for others. How are you exercising this discipleship? In joining this Synod you are placing yourselves firmly within the orbit of this searching question.

The Diocesan purpose articulates a basic pattern: mature Christian discipleship means leaving our places of safety to find out what God is doing in our communities; it means finding out what he's doing, and how we can join in to make it happen. Alongside grasping this basic pattern of mission – God's Mission, the Fully Alive study material, which we hope will be widely used in Lent and Eastertide as well as for Confirmation classes and refresher courses, spells out a pattern of formation that leads from belonging and believing to action. 'I'm a baptised Christian; here are my gifts; how shall I use them?' That's what we mean when we use the word 'vocation.' That's why my colleagues and I are making visits to all the Secondary Schools in the diocese to meet sixth formers and learn from them about what their vision is; about what choices they are making; about how they are using their gifts. And it's not just teenagers; many people come to those moments when they make a conscious choice about their future: when they choose a life partner; have their first child; reach a mid-life review, as we call a mid-life crisis today; contemplate a change of direction or career; come to their first retirement – whatever it may be. The church is Apostolic when the dangerous memory of Jesus makes us ask, 'What am I doing about it?'

**Second, catholic.** Are we really conscious of the totality of the creation? Are we interested in the whole picture? What sort of society do we wish to be? Does the phrase The Common Good have any resonance for you? It's this catholic focus – this universal and worldwide challenge – that makes me ask in relation to the mess we find ourselves in as a result of the Credit Crunch, 'So what do we wish the currency of our life to be?'

Is there an alternative to a life predicated on getting what we can for ourselves – the assumption that what drives us – personally and nationally – is a greedy and selfish consumerism? Or are we ready to contemplate what some have called 'a gift economy', where our life is measured by what we find we can give, and what that generosity evokes in others? While – like vocation – this is a personal question, it is also one for the nations of the earth and their leaders, whether in Copenhagen or at the United Nations. It is questions like these that we are putting before an invited group of local leaders, businesses and opinion-formers of the future in an all-day seminar hosted by our cathedral next week. These are also questions for the governors and staff of the three adjacent Secondary Schools in Laverstock, on the east side of Salisbury, who have a chance to create a sixth form by the Academy route, but who don't want to lose what they have now in the hope of an uncertain future. But there are challenges here for us all: challenges to the way we live, challenges to the assumptions we make about what is worthwhile, challenges to our essential vocation as baptised members of the body of Christ.

These are the very challenges which we see our partners in Evreux and Latvia, as well as Sudan, responding to differently: that's what's so valuable about our Links. And the challenges are not purely churchy. What are we going to do about the recently imposed Border Controls in the UK, which that assume everyone coming here – whether they are Sudanese bishops or American ordinands – are members of Al Qaeda?

**Third, Holy.** What happens to us when we come face to face with God? All that we read in the scriptures tells us that this encounter, like any encounter, is fraught with hazards. 'No-one shall see God and live'; and remember poor Uzzah who put out his hand to steady the Ark on its precarious ox-cart and was struck down by the blazing anger of the Almighty. Getting too close to God was always a dangerous business. In our time, there is lots around in the Health and Safety directives about avoiding risk. Haven't even our own archbishops repeatedly urged us in this time of perilous danger to minimise the risks of the common cup at the eucharist? Yet, do we really want a cotton-wool society? Can anyone – even if they stay indoors – avoid contamination? How will they build up the antibodies necessary to gain a natural immunity if they never meet a germ, till the one that carries them off? Ought we not rather to learn how to live with risk, and manage it, as a part of our growing up, our becoming fully alive? Isn't death an important and inevitable end to life, not just something to be avoided at all costs as a sign of our failure to control our destiny?

And what picture of the Church is that? In her splendid book *Purity and Danger* on the rituals of taboo, the distinguished social anthropologist Mary Douglas divides the human community into two – those that make for purity – whether it's a social purity, or a racial purity, or a religious or doctrinal purity; and those who are open and engage, and so run the risk of being changed. Those who go for purity are the societies that in the end rule out all the non-conformists, the awkward squad, whether they be intellectuals or artists, and try to stifle their critics. Without challenges these societies wither, like inbred families.

Does this remind you of anything in the Church? Have you heard of groups, fuelled by single issues, who think that the solution is absolute purity? How does that stack up against the picture of rich diversity that we discover on the Day of Pentecost? Was it not the very mongrel nature of the early church that moved it beyond the bounds of a Jewish sect to include Gentiles, slaves and women as equals? In a moment we shall tell our experiences of 'pioneer posts' to Bishop Graham Cray, and get his mind on whether what we are doing in these and other fresh expressions of being the Church looks like standing up to the theological scrutiny of the five marks of mission. Is it God that's at work here? Or is it just a soggy and undemanding bit of self-indulgence?

**And finally, one.** You may have heard that Pope Benedict XVI is passionate that the Church should be one: it's a particular vocation of the successor to Peter that he shares with all bishops. What you have probably also gathered is that he knows what the answer is: and that is that we should all join him. The way in which he discloses this and issues his invitation to the 'continuing' Anglicans who are no longer in communion with Canterbury – it was not only Archbishop Rowan whom he didn't tell: neither the Archbishop of Westminster nor Cardinal Kasper, the head of his Christian Unity Office in Rome knew either – tells you something about how those who know they are right operate.

That may not be your model for how we discern the mind of Christ, and it's certainly not mine. Like all bishops, I share a passionate concern for the unity of the church; it matters a lot to me that we have a Common life, a Common Prayer, a shared concern to be givers, not getters. But I believe that within the rich tapestry of human experience, there are a multitude of strands and

insights, both practically and theologically, and I hope I'm not the only one who thinks that face to face encounter, learning from one another, and the ability to listen before you pronounce are virtues, hospitable Anglican virtues, and that they are rooted in the Incarnation – how God in Christ comes among us to share our life.

Wasn't what was decisively different about Jesus precisely that he got people to talk to him before he gave them his response? Isn't what characterises the Living Word precisely that Jesus doesn't operate like an automaton version of the Tablets of Stone, with a take-it-or-leave-it approach?

It may not be the way the Roman Catholic Church is geared to operate, but haven't they grasped that people who believe in the Incarnational model of face-to-face encounter are singularly unimpressed by attempts to turn the clock back to an authoritarian age? That's not how anyone does business these days, and it makes the Roman Church, for all their apparent strength, look very shaky indeed. While I regret that, for me 'being one' is not about imposing uniformity, it's much more about discovering a unity that is God-centred. Unity – being one – isn't about our agenda, what we think or what we create; it's more about God's gift of a wholeness that is bigger than our imaginations or tidy-minded organisations.

Why do I tell you all this? Partly it is to reinforce what may be the distinctively Anglican vocation: to explore on behalf of the church issues which the rest of the Church is too fearful or too inert to be able to contemplate, like ordaining women as priests and bishops.

But mostly it's because these four marks of the church – one, holy catholic and apostolic – are the primary markers of episcopal ministry. I'm talking about what Stephen, Graham and I, with our senior colleagues and the Rural Deans, try to model, and which the cathedral seeks to uphold and make visible in time and space when we are gadding about. This is what you see on Maundy Thursday, or when we baptize and confirm in the cathedral, or at an Ordination.

When the Greeks said to Philip, 'Sir, we would see Jesus', the enquirers were brought to him, and he told them a mini-parable about change – about dying and rising to new life: 'Unless a grain of wheat falls to the earth and dies, it remains alone. But if it dies, it bears much fruit.' When enquirers say to an Anglican, 'What do you believe?', we don't give them propositional formulas, we say 'Come to church with us.' Here in its vocation to be one, holy catholic and apostolic, we see the Body of Christ, broken, yet glorious. That's our life for you.

+David Sarum