

Bishop Nicholas' Presidential Address to Diocesan Synod, 18 February 2012

Gospel Reading: Matthew 9.9-17

At this Synod we are going to begin with an item about money. It is for obvious reasons. We are in the worst economic climate of our lives and the pressures are considerable.

- Cuts in public spending and a major restructuring of the economy.
- Widespread concern about the size of City bonuses whilst our investments, particularly our pension funds, are performing less well.
- The increasing gap between richest and poorest.
- Rising unemployment, particularly among young people.

In these circumstances, the Church is bound to voice our concern for the poorest in our society. Parts of the Welfare Reform Bill, which has been broadly welcomed or accepted as part of the restructuring, has been opposed by the bishops in the House of Lords out of concern about the damage it will do to poor families and children.

The significance of finance and financial services is huge, so we need to understand money and its place in the economy. There are interesting resources in the Diocese. Andrew Studdert-Kennedy had a productive sabbatical researching, thinking and writing in this area. We wanted to make his work more widely available. Antony MacRow-Wood is leading for the Church of England on Credit Unions. I was also sent a copy of Canon Peter Dominy's PhD thesis in which there is a sustained argument that money is not neutral, to be used for good or ill, but inherently corrupted and corrupting.

There will also be members of Synod who work, or used to work, in banking and financial services. 'Services', that's an interesting word in this context. 7 years ago, when I was fundraising for the buildings renewal of St Martin-in-the-Fields, the Chairman of a major Bank told me that he had a problem with the brightest and most able of his younger colleagues who wanted to make sufficient money by their early 40's so they could leave "and go and do something useful"! They did not see banking as a service or a public good. So this discussion is not just about an understanding of money but the public good and the way we relate to one another and create a just economy.

We have a certain amount of expertise among us and today is an opportunity to share information and see what clarifies for us as Christians.

In relation to the Gospel and the call of Matthew the tax collector who exploited the opportunities of an occupying power and maximised his own gains, Jesus kept the company of many tax collectors and sinners. The call for sinners to love justice and act mercifully means this is about who we are individually and together. There is a social and public dimension to our faith.

I am sorry my comments about same sex relationships got such elevated treatment by The Times, when reporting a small part of a wider interview. I hope I got the tone and content clearer in the subsequent interview for BBC Radio 4's Sunday Programme. When Civil Partnerships were introduced in 2005, I thought their distinction from heterosexual marriage was helpful. They are an important support to faithful love, and faithful love is a distinctive mark of Christianity because it reflects God's love of us.

Because the quality and nature of some Civil Partnerships is similar, possibly the same as for married couples, I have come to see that the rapidly adopted name "gay marriage" may be appropriate. As we know, the Government begins its consultation about this next month

and that they have already explicitly exempted religious communities from being forced to accept the conduct of homosexual marriage in addition to heterosexual marriage.

In saying what I did, I am trying to create the space for an honest conversation. We have no option but to recognise our context is changing and that we are talking about people, some of whom are within the life of the Church; that we are talking about 'us', not 'them'.

For the avoidance of doubt, the position of the Church of England, House of Bishops and Diocese of Salisbury has not changed. There are no authorised services of blessing for same sex partnerships and it is not possible for Civil Partnerships to take place in Church of England churches. I will, of course, keep to the Church's discipline whilst hoping that we find opportunity to explore the issues which divide us.

Last Tuesday I met with the Bishop of Sherborne, the Archdeacon of Dorset and 10 clergy who had written expressing their concerns about my reported comments and a short note of that meeting is being drawn up and I will put a statement on the Diocesan web site.

Sexuality was one of the items identified at our last meeting for inclusion in a future Diocesan Synod agenda. The Chairs of the Houses of Clergy and Laity, the Diocesan Secretary and myself had provisionally identified this would best take place after the working parties of the House of Bishops had reported on Civil Partnerships later this year and that on some other matters related to 'Issues in Human Sexuality' next year. Synod might feel a greater sense of urgency about this in response to my contribution but I wasn't starting the debate, and my own instinct would be for us to wait and for me to consult with my Bishop's staff. If you want to let me know what you think about the timing of such a debate I would be grateful for your views.

The General Synod met in Westminster just over a week ago. I have a high view of the importance of laity, clergy and bishops meeting together to conduct the shared business of our national Church though all my previous experience tells me the Church is most easily itself in its local form. So General Synod is not my idea of heaven but there were some very good moments and the spirit in which we met was impressive. A full report will be on the Diocesan website. You will have seen reports that progress was made with the proposals for the ordination of women in keeping with the strong support given by all but 2 dioceses. The House of Bishops has been asked to consider what will come to the next meeting in July for decision but not to make substantial changes.

The key document now is the draft illustrative Code of Practice that will guide the provision for those the pastoral and sacramental care of those who, as a matter of theological conviction, remain unable to receive the ordained ministry of women as priests and bishops. Concern was expressed by a minority that this needed to be included in the legislation. I hope the House of Bishops will resist this as it would seem to me to be a substantial change to the proposal about which there was such extensive consultation. However, I happily commit that in this Diocese we will make generous and gracious provision for the small number of parishes who will feel themselves vulnerable when the legislation is enacted.

Living with diversity creatively is one of the most pressing issues of our times. It is the background to our decision about whether or not to support the Covenant for the Anglican Communion. There has been a good discussion in the Deaneries which reflected the sense of there being good arguments, both for and against, opportunities and dangers on both sides. Voting in Deaneries was in favour, almost exactly the same percentages among clergy and laity: 54% in favour, 32 or 31% against and 14 or 15% abstentions, a high number which might reflect the complexity of the subject.

The Archbishop of Canterbury has put a huge amount of effort into this as the way forward for the Communion. I have thought long and hard about my own position which, as a matter of public record prior to my appointment as bishop, is against. It seems to me that the Covenant will indeed create a different set of relationships in the Communion but that this will on balance be unhelpful and un-Anglican, like a piece of unshrunk cloth sewn on to an old cloak. I am particularly concerned that the effect of section 4 will be to exclude some Provinces from the heart of the Communion, particularly because the views being excluded are represented within the parochial life of our own Province. I have asked the Bishop of Sherborne to propose the Covenant and the Dean to oppose it to show that at a senior level in the Diocese we are not in agreement and that we can live with our differences.

Later we will return to more domestic business with the DAC Awards. I want to acknowledge the work of the DAC, particularly its Chairman Canon Bonney, as well as all the work going on in our parish churches to make the buildings fit for purpose, not least to be open for effective service of the whole community, and to the glory of God.

Finally, there has been a lot of discussion this week about the impact of aggressive secularism. The ruling that it is wrong for prayers to be a formal item on the agenda of Bideford Council may not be as far-reaching as at first seemed. Prayers can be an informal matter before the meeting begins; and who could resist the idea that it is good to have a period of prayerful reflection before a Council does its business on our behalf? There has been an announcement this morning that the Government will address this matter quickly but the ruling fuels the sense of creep that many Christians are feeling about the reduced room for faith in public life. The robust contribution from Baroness Warsi, a Muslim, when visiting the Vatican earlier in the week criticised the intolerance of aggressive secularism. She called for a "confident affirmation of religion". "The societies we are, the cultures we've created, the values we hold and the things we fight for stem from . . . centuries of Christianity. You cannot and should not erase these Christian foundations from the evolution of our nations any more than you can or should erase the spires from our landscapes."

In one of the first events of her Diamond Jubilee year, Her Majesty the Queen, speaking at Lambeth Palace before a meeting with representatives of eight non-Christian religions, as well as Christian representatives, said,

"We should remind ourselves of the significant position of the Church of England in our nation's life. The concept of our established Church is occasionally misunderstood and, I believe, commonly under-appreciated.

"Its role is not to defend Anglicanism to the exclusion of other religions. Instead, the Church has a duty to protect the free practice of all faiths in this country."

We look forward to welcoming Her Majesty the Queen when she will be visiting the diocese and to our celebrating with her the 60 years of her remarkable reign. In this time there have been huge changes in British society and the quality of mercy has created tolerance and the acceptance of diversity in Britain.

In Christ something new is happening for the sake of the world. What is the new wine and what the new wineskins in these debates about money, sexuality, women bishops and the covenant? Jesus presents a radical challenge to religious people whilst associating with the outcast. It is the same challenge we face today.