

Salisbury Diocesan Synod at Corfe Mullen, Saturday 9th February 2013: The Bishop's Presidential Address

After brief reflections on the readings:

Staff Changes

A very warm welcome to the Venerable Ruth Worsley as Archdeacon of Wilts. It is great to complete the Team of bishops and archdeacons. It means that the Archdeacon of Sarum, the Venerable Alan Jeans, has been able to begin with his new portfolio as Co-ordinator of Ministry for Mission and the Revd Charlie Allen has now taken over from him as Diocesan Director of Ordinands. A very big thank you to Alan Jeans for all that he has done in that role and many prayers and good wishes for Ruth, Alan and Charlie with their new responsibilities.

The New Archbishop

Last Monday I was in St Paul's Cathedral for the Confirmation for Election of our new archbishop, Justin Welby. Already one senses a change of style and priority. His ability to create space for people who disagree strongly about some of the pressing issues of our day is impressive. His desire for us to handle these disagreements more lovingly and in ways that proclaim good news has already set the tone for the start of his archiepiscopate.

Archbishop Justin is undertaking a prayer pilgrimage through a large part of the Canterbury Province in the days before his enthronement on 21 March. The Archbishop of Sudan is coming for Archbishop Justin's enthronement and I hope that there will be an opportunity for the two of them to meet.

Let's Talk

A number of benefices and deaneries have begun to feed back their discussion about the presentation made at the last Diocesan Synod, Let's Talk. This is an opportunity for us to talk, engage, think and articulate our priorities as local church. It is important the conversations take place locally. Your responses will help me to find better measures of the quality and impact of church life.

There is a link to a PowerPoint presentation containing the questions and where to reply on the front page of the diocesan web-site. Please encourage your parishes to have the conversations and send in their responses by 30th April to The Bishop of Salisbury, Let Us Talk, Church House, Crane Street, Salisbury SP1 2QB or by email to letustalk@salisbury.anglican.org.

The Agenda for this Synod:

Christians in Community

In this economic climate it is timely that social responsibility is a main item on today's agenda and I'm grateful to the Archdeacon of Sherborne, Colin Brady and the others who have been involved in preparing this item as well as their preparation of this act of worship as Synod gathers in prayer.

The care of the poor is a priority for the Church and in an economic downturn we have a special responsibility. A considerable amount of evidence has been published in recent weeks by the Church Urban Fund and Church Action on Poverty and others about the ways in which some of the poorest in our society are struggling. We should note that this is worldwide so it is not surprising that development agencies such as Christian Aid are also highlighting concerns.

It is excellent that the churches are responding in each community to care for people in need but the impact of the economy and of significant changes, such as our government's major welfare reforms, is progressively being felt and creating major social change. The provision of food banks is a positive charitable response but raises questions about how we have come to depend on them and questions the nature of justice and equity in our society. In praying, "Thy kingdom come on earth as it is in heaven" we have been given a vision of a way in which we belong together for which Christians can be the agents of change in our society.

Women and the Episcopate

The failure of the General Synod in November to give Final Approval to the Measure for the Ordination of Women to the Episcopate was a considerable blow, coming at the end of a long and careful process intended to secure both the primary objective of women bishops and the place within the Church of England of those who by conscience were opposed. The impact has been widely felt, especially because the mind of the Church had been tested and 42 out of 44 Diocesan Synods had voted in favour of the proposed Measure. Even in November's General Synod 72% voted in favour, but the House of Laity did not give the necessary two-thirds majority, failing by just six votes.

Of course the task is to ask what God is saying to us in the process. I have been encouraged by meetings with women clergy who are not monochrome but have shown resilience, imagination and creativity as well as retaining a sense of hopefulness. We need to be careful with one another, perhaps especially when there are still strong disagreements, but we also need to be clear that the basic decision to have women bishops has been made and the discussion is now only about how best to do this.

As has been widely reported, the House of Bishops met on Thursday. A working group has been formed under the chairmanship of the Bishop of St Edmundsbury and Ipswich and we were encouraged by the progress being made towards developing proposals to enable women to become bishops at the earliest possible date. We also received an account of the intensive, facilitated conversations held by the working group with 15 others from a wide range of viewpoints on Tuesday and Wednesday this week. These were strikingly constructive with everyone joining together in the search for a way forward. There is now a brief period of consultation of all members of General Synod prior to the working group meeting again on 4 March. The House affirmed the nature of the facilitation process and encouraged opportunities which may be available to extend this process further at a diocesan and regional level. There was also support for the facilitation process to continue in parallel with the fresh proposals that will be brought to General Synod in July.

In preparation for and until the time when women will be Bishops, it was agreed that eight senior women clergy will be elected regionally from within bishops' staff teams (in our case that means the Dean, Archdeacon of Wilts and Director of Ministry) to attend and speak at meetings of the House as participant observers. The necessary change to the House's Standing Orders will be made in May.

A special meeting was also agreed for 19 September when the College of Bishops and a group of senior female clergy will meet to take forward the range of cultural and practical issues about gender and ministry in the Church of England arising from the 'Transformations' initiative that was launched at Lambeth in September 2011.

I am grateful to those who have worked on framing our debate today. As well as the specific issue of women bishops there is also recognition that serious questions have been raised about the whole synodical process and the ways in which the Church does her common business.

Children and Young People

At the first Deanery Synod I attended we adopted a Children and Young People Strategy for the diocese. Our Diocesan Education team have done a great deal to begin this in a number of deaneries and today's report is an opportunity to note and celebrate what is happening. It is part of our commitment to children and young people as part of the life of the Church.

Because our life is formed in prayer, I am also delighted that the Revds Jeremy Brading and Charlie Allen are organising a pilgrimage to Taizé for people under thirty from 27 July. The publicity for this is now available. Brother Paolo, an English brother who is a member of the Taizé community, will be visiting the diocese on 8/9 March and meeting a number of Church Secondary School Heads and Chaplains with a view to building relationships with schools that would take people on pilgrimage to Taizé in school groups.

And finally...

In the course of today's meeting we will be giving awards to parishes for their care and use of church buildings. So often our buildings can seem a burden but they can also our best signs and assets we have when they are open and serve the wider community and sing for God and us.

We can look forward to an interesting day as we meet together to seek God's wisdom and guidance.