

## **Diocesan Synod 15<sup>th</sup> May 2014**

It is good to have that passage from Acts 16: "On the Sabbath day we went outside the gate by the river, where we supposed there was a place of prayer; and we sat down with the women who had gathered there", including Lydia, a dealer in purple cloth.

### **Ordination of Women Bishops**

The first part of the agenda is to consider the measure for the ordination of women to the episcopate that will go to General Synod in July for final approval. So far, 34 dioceses have voted in favour of the draft legislation, and none against. We have encouraged discussion in Deaneries and I am grateful to those members of General Synod who have been to speak at meetings around the Diocese, particularly Chris Corteen and Nigel Lloyd. The reports I have received suggest we have had long enough talking about this in the Diocese of Salisbury and we want to get on with it. We need to be a bit careful about this and as a Diocesan Synod I would encourage you to take the opportunity tonight to engage with the issue one last time. Though it is almost miraculous to have turned round this measure so quickly after the failure of its predecessor in November 2012, we should not take it for granted that it will sail through General Synod in July unimpeded and it would be helpful tonight to add our energy and not inconsiderable weight to the measure.

On Saturday 3<sup>rd</sup> May there was a celebration in London to mark the 20<sup>th</sup> anniversary of the ordination of the first women priests in the Church of England. 1,000 people gathered in Deans Yard Westminster and marched to St Paul's, including a good number from this Diocese. As we marched, it was striking not just how joyful was the assembly but that passers-by, taxi drivers and lorry drivers cheered and hooted in support. It is not often that the C of E gets such strong affirmation in the public square at the moment and it was a joy to be a part of it.

The women who were ordained in 1994 gathered on the steps of St Paul's for a photograph and then processed into the cathedral to sustained applause. The girls' choir from our cathedral sang with the St Paul's choir. Our Dean spoke at the service at which Canon Philippa Boardman presided and the Archbishop of Canterbury was Deacon and preached.

It has been a long journey. Kate Addie in her talk at the cathedral about women in the First World War mentioned that Maude Royden was not able to preach in a London church so the service moved to the church hall. The first woman priest in the Anglican Communion was Florence Li Tim Oi, ordained in Macau in 1944. After the War, when there was much controversy, she did not want to cause dissention and decided to be like a 'deckchair', folded up in the corner waiting for a time when she could be useful. In 1994 there was considerable reserve in the way the Church of England broke new ground, so as to respect those who could in conscience not agree. In contrast last Saturday week felt like a champagne moment, one in which it was clear that we have as a Church received and welcomed women into ordained ministry. Thanks be to God.

There will be a Diocesan celebration at Evensong in the cathedral on Sunday 16<sup>th</sup> November, which is expected to be the day before the measure will complete its journey through Parliament and is promulgated.

### **Love the stranger**

Galatians 3.28 was one of the texts used a lot in making the argument for the ordination of women.

There is no longer Jew or Greek, there is no longer slave or free, there is no longer male and female; for all of you are one in Christ Jesus.

Christianity is non-tribal. We see it in the story of the Good Samaritan, an oxymoron for as the Gospels repeatedly say that Jews despised Samaritans. I saw it in the newly installed Forgiveness window by Laurence Whistler at St Nicholas Moreton on Sunday night. It's on the front of the latest Grapevine out today. What Whistler noticed in the enigmatic accounts of the motives and character of Judas is that Matthew says Judas repented when he saw that Jesus was condemned and brought back the thirty pieces of silver (Mt 27:3). The priests and elders refused the blood money for the treasury but bought a field for the burial of foreigners. In Whistler's window the coins are falling from the hands of Judas hanging from a rope and as the coins hit the ground they germinate as seeds into flowers. It is a window suggesting the limitless forgiveness of God – Whistler had been struck by the stories told by some of the early Fathers that Hell must exist but might not have anyone in it. What particularly struck me is that Matthew says the money was used to buy a field as a place to bury foreigners. It is a very Christian act to care for the outsider. This is non-tribal religion.

We are moving into very interesting territory at the moment with the European elections next week. There is a feeling that we can defend what it is to be English by protecting ourselves from all these outsiders. I have watched this happen before in economic downturns and we have been through the most severe economic downturn of our lifetimes and longer. There has been an interesting public discussion about whether Britain is still a Christian country. Maybe we are better described as post Christian, but undoubtedly the culture of this country has been profoundly shaped by Christianity and the public response to the march with women priests suggested there is still a very powerful recognition of what the Church represents of God to the nation.

Christianity is non-tribal and cares for the stranger, the alien in our midst. You couldn't jump from that to political policy. Christianity is non-tribal and it is non-party political but we can't pretend we have nothing to say about what it is to be an outsider, and we care for them as we care for one another and for our families. Our account of being English, British, European, human beings living together in one world simply can't stereotype foreigners or demonise them or scapegoat them for the ills of our society. We flourish or fall together and we need to recognise that in the political choices we make.

Similarly, Christianity has a care for the poor because of the simple dignity of all people. The Trussell Trust, founded in Salisbury, reported before Easter that 913,000 people were fed through their foodbanks for some days in the last year. The Church has done a wonderful job in providing for them, volunteers and food in I think 18 food banks in this Diocese but we also need to be asking why this has happened.

Most foodbanks are used by working people whose wages are subsidised by benefits. The peak time for use is late afternoons and early evenings when people are coming home from work. It is becoming clear that the main reason for this growth in dependence on foodbanks is that the changes in the benefit system have resulted in delays to benefit being paid. I have made a short submission to the All Party Parliamentary inquiry into the rise of foodbanks chaired by the Bishop of Truro and Frank Field MP with four case studies of people from this Diocese who have been caught by these delays.

For example, Ian has just had his disability category changed from, "Sight Impaired" to "Severely Sight Impaired" (Registered Blind). He will be entitled to more benefits. However, the benefits he currently receives because of his sight loss have been stopped until his new benefits have been processed. This will take several weeks. Though the new benefit will be back-dated this is little comfort to Ian during those weeks he has to do without. Why can't the Benefits Agency pay the old rate till the new one is processed?

Or Gary said at the Gillingham Poverty Hearing chaired by Bishop Graham in Lent, "I was unemployed, on Job Seekers Allowance. Then I became ill so Job Seekers Allowance stopped and I had to go on sickness benefit and that took eight weeks. The Foodbank kept me going. It's great that there are people who care. The good news is that I had an interview this morning and I got the job."

We live in a society which often sees poverty as the fault of the poor people themselves and blames them when for most poor people it is not their fault. Christians care for the stranger and the poor because of the dignity of all people created by God. That becomes part of the politics of our society in which we flourish or fall together.

## **South Sudan**

In the South Sudan the conflict has deepened since we met in February. Thousands have died and the UN estimate the number of displaced people has risen to 1.2million with a serious risk of famine likely to affect over 4 million. The peace agreement of last Friday is encouraging but it does not yet look stable.

Under the pressures of such appalling violence the strains of the Anglican Communion over human sexuality are given perspective. But the ECS&SS is one of the Provinces in the Communion that feels the pressure most strongly from those seeking a greater acceptance and recognition of sex relationships. In this my personal views are a difficulty for the Archbishop of the Sudan. I have therefore asked the Bishop of Sherborne to work with the Archbishop and the Sudanese House of Bishops on rebuilding a relationship that is strained over this particular matter. There were a large number of visits to the Sudan last year and I am not aware of any causing problems but Bishop Graham will also ensure that our Deaneries with links understand the needs of the Sudanese Church so that we do not add to the pressures the Sudanese are facing. Meanwhile the work continues for Deanery links, the Medical link and our support for education in the Sudan. I am grateful to those who have given £18,000 so far to the Diocesan appeal for humanitarian aid to assist those in greatest need and we will continue to pray for our brothers and sisters in Christ, which is the basis of the link.

Bishop Anthony Poggo will be visiting the Chalke Valley Deanery next week and Bishop Graham will also be meeting him.

Synod might also like to know that in the rich mix of relationship in the Anglican Communion, Archbishop Josiah Fearon from Nigeria will be visiting the Bishop of Ramsbury this weekend and we will invite him to take part in the Confirmation in the cathedral on Saturday.

## **And Finally**

I am very much looking forward to leading a pilgrimage of 63 people to the Holy Land from next Wednesday, 21<sup>st</sup> May to 2<sup>nd</sup> June. I have no doubts that we will engage both with the Biblical stories and experience the risen Lord who was 'here or hereabouts' and the present political realities of Israel and Palestine. We live as Christians in a context, which is sometimes sharp and uncomfortable but we find the resources for renewing hope our prayer, by growing in discipleship and serving God's world.

The ordination of women, the Judas window/Forgiveness window in Moreton, the care of the stranger and the poor and our partnership with the Sudan are all examples of where we hope difficulty will be used by God to create blessing and opportunity. Were the way always smooth and

the path easy, we would be very much less the people God would have us become: so to God be the glory, now and forever.

Amen