

2015 - 8 November Diocesan Synod: Presidential Address

Romans 16.3-9, 16, 22-end

Luke 16. 9 – 15

As part of the Diocese Renewing Hope we have agreed as a Bishop's Staff and a Bishop's Council that meetings begin by placing ourselves under scripture and with prayer. At the start of this new triennium this is exactly what we are doing as a new Diocesan Synod, gathering in the context of celebrating the Eucharist together, hearing the Scriptures for the day read liturgically.

At the recent annual residential for members of the Bishops' Staff we read through the whole of the Epistle to the Romans. It is an epistle that has had huge impact within the life of the Church and beyond. It has the reputation of being a difficult read and we were apprehensive about reading at such speed. In practice we gained a different appreciation for the letter from Paul by reading it in sections across two days and getting more of the sense of the whole of it.

There are some really purple passages:

- Therefore, since we are justified by faith, we have peace with God through our Lord Jesus Christ through whom we have obtained access to this grace in which we stand, and we boast in our hope of sharing the glory of God
(Romans 5. 1 – 2)
- There is therefore no condemnation for those who are in Christ Jesus. For the law of the spirit of life in Christ Jesus has set you free from the law of sin and death. *(Romans 8. 1 – 2)*
- For I am convinced that neither death nor life, not angels nor rulers not things present, nor things to come nor powers nor height nor depth nor anything else in all creation, will be able to separate us from the love of God in Christ Jesus our Lord. *(Romans 8. 38-39)*
- Let love be genuine; hate what is evil, hold fast to what is good; love one another with mutual affection; outdo one another in showing honour. Do not lag in zeal, be ardent in spirit, serve the Lord. Rejoice in hope, be patient in suffering, persevere in prayer. Contribute to the needs of the saints; extend hospitality to strangers. *(Romans 12. 9-13)*

The reading set for today from the end of this great epistle is a series of greetings: warm, personal, human.

“Greet Prisca and Aquila, ... ⁵Greet also the church in their house. Greet my beloved Epaenetus, ... ⁶Greet Mary, ... ⁷Greet Andronicus and Junia, ... ⁸Greet Ampliatus, ... ⁹Greet Urbanus, ... my beloved Stachys. ¹⁶Greet one another with a holy kiss.”

And so on.

This Christian life is relational; in Christ, with one another. Great doctrine and difficult issues are worked out with one another in a Church that is connected by people who know each other. That is what a Synod is. We meet together from across the churches of the Diocese of Salisbury, from Royal Wootton Bassett in the north to Portland in the South, from Ham in the East to Lyme Regis in the West and everywhere in between.

Our Clergy and General Synod members link us to the national Church of England and in various ways, but especially through our Bishops we are linked to the universal, Catholic, Church. Again, this is relational not just organisational.

I've had quite a week of it. Monday and Tuesday were spent at Lambeth Palace and in Westminster Abbey with His All Holiness the Patriarch of New Roman Constantinople, Patriarch Bartholomew. Others in the party included His Eminence the Cardinal Archbishop of Westminster as well as our host His Grace the Archbishop of Canterbury. It was quite a performance. I particularly liked the title 'Yours Beatitude' and later in the week the Bishop of Winchester owned up to always having wanted to be called Precious.

On Thursday night I licensed David John as the Vicar of the Iwerne Valley and the Gospel reading for the day was from Luke 15, the chapter about the lost coin, lost sheep and lost son, Luke's central section on forgiveness. If we are real about ourselves, we are here not because we're good but because God loves us.

The Christian body is the community in which we discover both aspects of ourselves to be true: we are sinners in need of forgiveness and we are made in the image of God.

The titles given to our dignitaries remind us that we are all made in the image of God, called to be holy, a blessing, precious, beloved of God. Members of Synod,

aspire to be Your All Holinesses and look for this in one another. That is what renews our hope as human beings, creatures, before God. In Christ, in George Herbert's memorable phrase, we are "well dressed".

It is really important in the life of a synod, meeting as the Church in this place, the Diocese of Salisbury, who recognise in one another that which is of God, that which is in Christ, that which is enlivened by the Holy Spirit among us. Without this we will simply be another organisation struggling with the institutional realities of our common life.

The church exists to point beyond itself to God and to the kingdom of God on earth as in heaven. Some of our business today is church business. Some is very much kingdom business.

The government's response to the refugee crisis in Europe, and particularly in Syria and the Middle East, is a good start which to the bishops looks a bit thin. 20,000 over 5 years, and only from the camps, does not look a generous and sufficient response to the scale of the problem of migrants across Europe. "Extend hospitality to strangers" (*Romans 12. 13*) wrote St Paul.

In contrast, the response from the churches and many in the wider communities has been magnificent in terms of creating a framework of welcome and hospitality which will help people arrive into what for them will be new communities. I am grateful for the many offers of help. At this stage, we need to work with our County Councils and other organisation for what will be a very small number of people coming into this Diocese. A number have offered temporary housing but what we need is permanent solutions but I am enormously grateful for the spirit with which the churches are responding and I hope that the government will gain the confidence to take a larger number.

The reason why I was with the Orthodox Patriarch at the beginning of the week is because he is "the Green Patriarch". Patriarch Bartholomew has done more than anyone else to create an ecumenical convergence about the environment. He is quoted by the Pope, in 'Laudato Si', by our Anglican statements and by those of the Lutheran Church. In preparation for the UN Climate Change Summit in Paris from 29 Nov- 11 Dec there is agreement that this matter is urgent, that we will not make progress with the Sustainable Development without addressing climate change, that climate change affects the poor more than the rest of us and that this is a spiritual matter.

The Papal Encyclical is “one the care of our common home”. It is not addressed solely to Roman Catholics, nor solely to Christians, or members of the other faith communities. It is addressed to everyone. The scale of the problem that faces us is such that it relativises all the differences that previously seemed so important between us. We are in this together. The economy is a wholly owned subsidiary of the environment. There is no planet B.

In these circumstances the churches play a very significant part. Our government is strengthened by the support we give them, especially by our prayers. Green ribbons and green dog collars are simply a talking point, symbols to help us pay attention to a crisis which is below the surface. Ours is the first generation that cannot pretend that we do not know the implications of the way we are acting. We urgently need to make the transition to a low carbon economy. It is possible but at the moment our actions do not meet our words. As St Paul knew all too well “For I do not do the good I want, but the evil I do not want is what I do”. (*Romans 7. 19*)

We are only able to make a contribution to these wide debates if we are attending to the care of our own home. On this synod agenda finance, education, the Cathedral as well as an introduction to the life of this synod all feature. Our meetings should strengthen the mission and ministry of the Church across the Diocese. We are about renewing hope and we do so through prayer and service. That is how we grow as Christians. We become attractive because we are so evidently more fully human because of our life in Christ.

There is no pretence that Synod is the centre of the Diocese of Salisbury. The church exists in its strongest form in the local communities from which we gather.

After Synod, +Ed and I will be Confirming 43 people in the cathedral, aged 10-90, from across the Diocese. Neil Larkey’s appointment to the Young People’s Confirmation Project is to strengthen our engagement with young people and to help them make a significant faith commitment. His appointment is an example of the ways in which our Diocesan Boards and Councils have reorganised to serve our common agenda – Renewing Hope: Pray, Serve, Grow. Synod might also be pleased to note that Neil’s post is being paid for by the trust fund of the Community of St Denys and my own Church Commissioners’ funding.

The Epistle to the Romans ends with greetings. There are many friendships formed in the context of synod and gratitude is expressed for those who take particularly significant roles among us. In this I am particularly sorry that Gil Williams is unable to be with us today. Gil has been Chair of our Board of Finance for very nearly 10

years. He has done an outstanding job and is now standing down. That decision having been made, he has recently been in hospital for a quadruple bypass. We will give thanks for him and extend our gratitude for all that he has done and pray for a speedy recovery. I am grateful for Nigel Salisbury's willingness to take on this very significant role for us.

Our Director of Education, Joy Tubbs, is unable to be here because of the death of her beloved step-father. Thank you to Giles Pugh and Mandy Christopher for standing in her place today. We remember Joy's stepfather and her family in our prayers.

Greet one another with a holy kiss. It is an expression of our life in Christ to whom be glory now and forever. Amen.