

## **Diocesan Synod 12 November 2016**

### **Presidential Address**

History is always full of surprises. The past year has seen the unexpected outcome of the referendum on our membership of the European Union. Events in the Middle East look quite different since the significant Russian military involvement in Syria began. The presidential election campaign in the USA, for me at least, had a surreal quality, with hardly any sustained attention to what the two candidates would actually want to do if they were elected. All elections have a certain focus on the character of those who stand for office, but I don't recall anything quite like this.

I often think back 100 years or so. Could anyone have predicted the course of the twentieth century, even in outline? A bit, perhaps, but only a bit. Will the same be said of the twenty-first century, in due course? I can't be sure, of course, but I expect so, and perhaps even more so than in the twentieth century – history tends to speed up.

This sets a challenge to all organisations, and not least to the Churches. How do we plan for the future, amid so much – and arguably a growing – uncertainty?

We have the promise that the Church is not a merely human institution, but is founded and guaranteed by God himself. 'The gates of hell shall not prevail against it'. But that promise does not guarantee the future of a particular institutional form of the Church, or a particular denomination, or of any particular local Church. We should maintain unwaveringly that God does stand as guarantor of his Church, his Body here on earth, while also doing our best to help the institutional life of the Church forward in a way which best fits it to the fundamental purpose and mission which God gives to the Church.

I do not claim that this is an easy task. We are called, with good cause, to be confident in our Faith, confident in our Lord Jesus Christ himself, but also to be realistic about the challenges which we face, and not to shirk or evade them.

The basic challenge, in the circumstances of British culture today, seems to me to be that of 'consumerism', in all its forms and consequences.

The 'consumer is king', as the old slogan puts it. Those who think as consumers will progressively put themselves at the centre of their universe, as they understand the world which impacts upon them. This is essentially the opposite of the central call upon a Christian: 'I live, yet not I, but Christ lives in me'.

Consumerism puts consumers first, but the Christian Faith says that the first shall be last, and the last shall be first. As Dietrich Bonhoeffer put it amid the trials of the twentieth century: 'when Christ calls someone, he bids them to come and die'.

Of course, we are all part of the society to which we 'belong'. We are all inescapably caught up in the dynamics of its consumerism, in a myriad of ways, both personally and through our families. The run up to Christmas will remind us of this, and there's no way to escape. If a festival involves the giving and receiving of presents, then there will inevitably be the whole commercial process of satisfying the demand for presents to buy. Jobs, in general, depend on a thriving economy.

The pension funds which underlie our pensions have to invest their funds, on behalf of the beneficiaries, in order to produce the best returns. And that means engaging with our consumer-driven markets and marketplaces.

Christians, whatever their positions in our society, have to face this openly and honestly, but equally they have to avoid simply conforming to it, giving into it, and allowing our consumerist society to take the form of an idol to which we conform and then worship, which we allow subtly to replace the Living God who in his self-giving love emptied himself, to the point of death, even, death on a cross.

A couple of weeks ago, the latest set of statistics charted the further decline in attendance at Church of England services. Over the past 50 years, there has been a seemingly relentless decline at a rate of something over 1% a year. There are always exceptions, and for a variety of reasons, but we must face this overall background to the life of the Church in this Diocese and beyond – indeed in most of Europe.

This is what I and my immediate colleagues in my staff meeting, in dialogue with Bishop's Council and its committees and our parishes, seek to do, as we manage the appointments process and face questions of pastoral reorganisation. We try to set a budget which is appropriately cautious and close to balance amid the rather demanding cultural climate in which we operate. It would be very easy to let this slip, and to run into a serious deficit situation, which then requires a draconian solution, as has happened in one of the southern dioceses this year.

If this is all that we were doing, we would merely be managing decline. So what are we doing to seek to counter the trajectory and narrative of decline with which, as a Church, we are currently wrestling?

Firstly, we do all that we can, through the selection, training and support of our clergy, to encourage them in their mission and ministry. This is fundamental, although I often think that we could and should do more.

Secondly, we are trying to keep under careful review the shape of the Church in the Diocese. I'm very aware that it looks essentially unchanged. We still operate with the parish and benefice as the basic units, typically with a full-time incumbent overseeing the benefice. We have not gone in for the larger-scale reorganisations which have happened in some other Dioceses. Several decades ago, this would have taken the form of larger team ministries; today, it tends to be in more informal 'clusters' of parishes and benefices and their clergy.

We haven't felt it right to go in this direction, but I think that needs to be kept under close review, and not least as we seek to learn the lessons of best practice in other Dioceses. Realistically, I doubt if it will seem right to embark upon major changes during

my remaining time as Bishop, but I think the issues need to be considered, and reconsidered, with care as we go forward.

One consequence of our current approach is that, as a parish or benefice is no longer able to sustain a full-time priest, quite often it opts to have a part-time incumbent, rather than join into a larger unit, which is overseen by a full-time incumbent. Perhaps surprisingly, we have been able to recruit quite a lot of clergy on a part-time stipendiary basis, and we have more clergy who serve on this basis than in most dioceses.

Parishes clearly prefer to identify with a particular priest, even if only part-time, rather than being part of a larger arrangement. That's fine, and might well be my own preference, but its consequences and effectiveness need careful monitoring and review, lest our clergy and parish communities become too isolated.

Associated with all this, there's the question of what role our deaneries have. The deanery structure in the Diocese was last subject to significant change nearly 50 years ago. A lot has happened since then. I have tried to raise the subject, but I have not managed to muster much enthusiasm for the fundamental review which I believe is becoming quite urgent.

Timing is important here. My own desire has been to address this before now, but the lack of enthusiasm all-round has been clear. Perhaps lack of action has been the wiser course, in the past, but my own sense is that the time is now coming for us to review just what our deaneries are for – are they basically planning units, or support units, for example? And if both, how do these different purposes interact? My own sense, inasmuch as I have made any sense of the matter, is that we would be best placed to consider replacing our 18 deaneries with about a dozen larger deaneries, within which we would seek to establish mission clusters of parishes and benefices.

Well, I may be wrong here, and Dioceses which have tried this don't always report success, but I sense that the time for serious discussion of these matters is approaching.

There are lots of other aspects of the life of the Diocese which I might have chosen to mention. The point is that the current cultural situation which we face obliges us to keep on our toes, so that the structures of the Diocese can be kept as light and fit for purpose as possible. As a Church, as a Diocese, we're climbing a pretty tall mountain, and the going is tough.

Beyond the way the Diocese is structured, the nature and demands of ministry are changing. Parish ministry in itself is becoming ever more demanding, and this puts increasing pressure on our rather thinly-spread resources for supporting our clergy. There's a dilemma here, and not least for a Diocese which obtains the great majority of its funds from the parish share which is contributed by parishes which typically feel themselves to be under considerable financial pressure. There isn't much appetite for more non-parochial appointments, even if their purpose is to support our parishes and clergy.

One encouraging sign amid all this is the number of people, of all ages, who are coming forward for ordination. This Diocese is doing particularly well in this regard. Historically, we have supplied 60% or 70% of our need for curates from ordinands whom we had sponsored. We are now moving into a situation of surplus where we will not be able to offer curacies to all our ordinands, despite increasing the number of curacies we offer by 30% or 40%.

The ministries for which they are trained are more flexible in character, but it's rather an open question how this will work out in practice in the future. Some dioceses, especially those in which the traditional parish structure has become more dysfunctional than is the case here, have put a stronger emphasis upon what are called 'fresh expressions' of Church, with associated 'pioneer' ministries.

Again, we need to evaluate and monitor such developments. For my part, I want all our ministers, in all our parishes, to embrace a fresh and pioneering spirit. I see plenty of examples of that happening, and of parish life responding accordingly, but it may be that we need to put more resource into more explicitly new and different forms of ministry.

Well, there's plenty to engage us as we move forward. Let me end with another, arguably the most fundamental, dimension of how we should respond to a Church which is under increasing pressure from the acids of secularism and consumerism.

How can we live in the world, yet not be of the world? How do we avoid being merely tossed around like a small boat, on the waves which the world generates, to adapt one illustration which St Paul uses?

We will not do so merely by aping the world's consumerist agenda in our mission and evangelism, seeking for levers which we can pull in order to reverse the numerical decline we are experiencing.

The underlying answer, I believe, is to dig deeper into God in prayer, and in all the dimensions of prayer. 'Prayer' is the generic description of how we relate to God in a personal way, in a way which inherently is corporate and personal, woven together. That's why the New Testament urges us to 'pray without ceasing'; it doesn't thereby urge us to go around on our hands and knees, permanently engaged in prayer as we normally understand that term. It's more a question of our basic outlook and attitude.

We all have to set our minds and hearts towards the renewal of our own personal spiritual lives, in the context of belonging to the corporate body of the Church. And that will mean keeping the worship of the Church, and our participation, in central view.

But prayer in the Bible is an active choice, and can also take the form of action. Inasmuch as you did this unto the least of these my brethren, you did it unto me.

A Church which is anxious about numerical decline must begin with a renewed attention to its spiritual life, its worship, its overall ambience of prayer. We need to rise to this challenge, which will make the Church more authentic, and thereby more attractive.

To be a Christian in today's society is increasingly to take a counter-cultural stance. Increasingly, it will be, and will be seen to be, a very definite choice. It will be a choice which those so drawn will need to own and nurture wholeheartedly, if it is to withstand the secularist and consumerist cross winds which Christians will increasingly encounter.

Only a house which is built upon firm foundations will withstand the storm. I don't know precisely what form such storms might take, and how quickly they will come. Perhaps the tide will turn, and a Christian revival will set in, but it would be simplistic and rash to assume that the Church in this country is through the most demanding phase of its current testing.

We can't answer these questions with any certainty, but whatever the immediate future holds, we are called, with joy to lay down strong foundations through building them upon a deeper engagement with God, through prayer and all the forms that prayer may take. Unless we can get that on track, we'll end up on the wrong track, however hard we work at the challenges which are before us.

+Peter

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