

Diocesan Synod

Presidential Address

Each year I offer some thoughts upon the life of the Diocese, and wider events. It feels to have been a rather momentous year politically on the national and international stage, with uncertainties and consequent anxieties at an increased level.

That poses a considerable challenge to the Churches. How do we carry our witness forward in the context of today, without being drawn unhelpfully into particular controversies? Individual Christians will participate as they feel called to do, and from a variety of political angles. Churches as a whole, and leaders within them, will generally feel much more constrained – and rightly so, in my view.

Early on in my ministry, soon after I was ordained, I decided to tell nobody how I would vote, or had voted, in any election (or referendum), and I have maintained this. Of course, faced with Hitler, or apartheid South Africa, I would doubtless feel differently and take a more public stance, but mercifully, in the UK, this hasn't arisen in my lifetime. And it's probably possible to contribute to public discussion of important matters, without adopting a party political platform. At least, that has been my decision and choice since I was ordained, and not least since I became a Bishop.

My main concern, and attention, of course has been on the Diocese itself – not just on its internal life, but on how the changing character of our wider society and culture impacts upon it.

Broadly speaking, and with some notable exceptions, British society is becoming more secular. Surveys of personal beliefs and social attitudes reveal Christian belief

and practice to be increasingly marginal in our society, and especially among the younger generations, and I have the sense that this process is gathering pace.

Twenty-five years ago, when I was Vicar in Beverley, we had over 100 children regularly attending what we still called 'Sunday School'. Fifty years ago, in my state secondary school, there was a daily school assembly with a hymn, prayers, and a reading from the Bible.

A lot has changed in just a generation or two, and the impact is now becoming very obvious.

Of course, school exposure to religious practice was always potentially ambiguous, and often rather disconnected from the active commitments which go with membership of a local church. And the widespread ignorance of Christian belief and practice among younger people in particular may actually present the Churches with an opportunity as well as a challenge. I believe this indeed is the case, but how are we to grasp these opportunities and meet these challenges?

Staying with the younger generation, we have certain strengths in this Diocese, inasmuch as our parish share system naturally limits the parish share which we ask from our larger and better-attended churches. This leaves more resources available for the local Church to deploy, and I am pleased that so many regard it as a priority to employ a specialist in children's and youth work. In the past month or so, in a couple of our more medium-sized parishes, I have met two new Children's and Youth Workers, and heard from the incumbents concerned what a difference this makes.

We are also exploring with the Church Commissioners an application for mission funding which would greatly improve the diocesan support for this aspect of parish work, and enable better initiatives in deaneries and across the Diocese.

The opportunities and challenges are there for all generations, of course, and the Church has to embrace its mission in all its dimensions. A common, but rather overlooked, thread, it seems to me is the need for the Church carefully (and indeed persuasively) to articulate the underlying *truth* of the Christian Faith. In the past it has been easy to take for granted that a certain *prima facie* plausibility of the Christian Faith existed in our society.

The highly critical view of Christian teaching espoused by the so-called New Atheists, led *par excellence* by Richard Dawkins, has brought this home particularly sharply. His central critique, as I understand it, is that the central Christian claims are just plain silly, bonkers - that the Son of God was incarnate on this earth 2000 years ago, in Jesus Christ, and that by his public execution under Pontius Pilate a sacrificial redemption was made for all the sins and shortenings of the universe, death included.

To Dawkins & Co, this is just mythological make believe, which deserves only to be mocked. It bears as little relation to the real world as do the Harry Potter novels, indeed, much less. Let's never forget that the term 'Christian' was originally a term of mockery, directed at Christians by non-Christians. The Dawkins critique is actually not that new at all.

I mentioned earlier how we can no longer take for granted a certain familiarity with the Christian Faith, learned at school and elsewhere. We now face the challenge of putting the case afresh, sharpened by the rather unfriendly media-led culture around us. We read in the New Testament of the need always to be able to give an account of our faith, albeit with gentleness and reverence (1 Peter 3:15).

Gentleness in the Bible is synonymous with love, and points to the limits of any argument. God, as Christians understand him, is too mysterious, too unfathomably different from us, to be reduced to the conclusion to an argument, however carefully and rationally constructed.

Reverence points to the deep truth that only God can truly reveal himself. Only God can take our meagre witness, and use it for his purposes. Any defence or explanation of our faith can only be offered as a prayer.

The Christian Faith has come to make sense to me, over the years, in terms of what the Psalms call 'the beauty of holiness'. More sense than the belief that the world and all that has evolved in it has arisen purely by chance. More sense than the belief that somehow the world has always been here, and is in some sense an emanation from the Godhead. More sense than the belief that there is a Creator, who merely stands back, lets things happen, and perhaps provides moral guidance and instruction to human beings.

A God who takes ultimate responsibility for his creation by re-creating it from within, in the mystery of the incarnation, the cross, and the resurrection, makes more sense to me than the alternatives which I have encountered. But it doesn't seem to make much sense to increasing numbers in our society, and our challenge is to accept that this is the situation which we face, and do our best to re-evangelise our society, our culture.

That will not be easy, and it will take a long time to turn the ship of decline around. I suspect that we will need to wait for favourable currents, a favourable wind, in the shifting sands of history and culture. Perhaps it will be some combination of threat and crisis which will catalyse this, and it seems a safe bet to assume that the twenty-first century will provide these in abundance, one way or another. But I don't know, and I don't believe any of us can know. What I do know is that our task is to make sure that the Church is as shipshape as possible, that our wicks are trimmed and supplies of oil have been brought in, as with the wise virgins in the parable.

The only thing we can be sure of in relation to the coming of the Bridegroom is that he will be unexpected – just as the Messiah who was born in a stable and nailed to a cross was totally unexpected 2000 years ago, to even the most devout Jews.

Our task, I believe, is to strive to make the Diocese as fit for purpose as possible, so that when opportunities arise in the future we can take them. That is the endless challenge, and task, in which I seek to lead us.

In relation to the traditional structures of the Diocese – which have proved fairly resilient so far – that means seeking to make all aspects as fit for purpose as possible, undergirded by cautious financial planning, given the evident uncertainties which we face. It means investing our time and resources into providing clergy who are trained and supported for the great task of re-evangelisation which is before us.

It also means being alert to new ways of addressing the challenge of re-evangelisation, so-called new or fresh expressions of Church, provided they can be made sustainable, and learning from what works well in other Dioceses, and indeed in other denominations. But – I believe – we also need to be cautious before believing that there is any quick or easy way to address the challenges we face. The Church is not like a business which needs to re-invent itself, or find a new product. We don't have the equivalent levers to pull, or strategies to hand. But equally, we need to keep constantly under review the whole range of policies and practices which enable the Diocese to operate.

I approach all this, day by day, with both joy and enthusiasm. The truth of the Gospel is, I believe, a radiant truth, which is like the lamp set upon a hilltop. Even the gates of hell will not prevail against the Church of God. The first Christians faced their tasks in circumstances far more difficult than ours, and we need to keep that always in mind, amid the admittedly turbulent times which seem to lie immediately before us.

Peter Forster

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