

## DIOCESAN SYNOD PRESIDENTIAL ADDRESS

Saturday April 17<sup>th</sup> 2010

### INTRODUCTION

It is just 7 weeks ago today since I was installed as Diocesan Bishop. In a good way it feels much longer than that. I have been out and about visiting the clergy of 3 Deaneries in their homes, and meeting with wardens, Readers and retired clergy for an evening. There have been a wide range of visits to places across the county and city, and preaching in a range of churches. There is naturally a lot more to come. I have been greatly encouraged by all that I have seen and heard thus far. As you are all aware, I trust, I will be taking time in November to pray over and reflect on my first months and then to share what I trust will be part of the next steps in discerning God's voice to us on valuing people, serving communities and enabling change so I shall not make any more specific comment today.

I am delighted that we are meeting in one of our Church Schools today. This is a vital part of our overall ministry in the Diocese. We serve children and families through the education provide; we seek to do so with a distinctively Christian ethos and values; we aim to make the good news visible and we teach the faith clearly so that children and young people are able to make up their own minds about Jesus Christ. The ministry of our own schools, and the ministry in which we engage in and with all schools, colleges and universities, is an essential part of our mission to our communities. These are places where growth is happening, and needs to be further encouraged.

### GROWTH

It is this theme of growth on which I want to reflect further for a few minutes today. I was with the 2 archbishops and all the other diocesan bishops for 24 hours earlier this week. Most of our time was spent on listening to each other, and sharing with each other around this theme of growth. We had shared together the varied growth plans of each diocese. These are inevitably quite diverse, but also not surprisingly have many common threads.

One of the early delights for me has been living here as Spring has begun. Bishops Manor first was covered in snowdrops, in the snow; then as they died back hyacinths appeared. Now daffodils and tulips are out all over the garden and the first signs of blossom are beginning to appear. Then about a week ago there was the wonderful smell of freshly mown grass. Growth is all around us. The new life of spring acts as a visual reminder of the new life of resurrection we celebrate together, especially during this Eastertide.

Growth was one of Jesus' favourite themes; parables about the sower; the wheat and the weeds; the mustard seed and the yeast all feature growth. As the word of God is sown so it gets a mixed reaction; some is just snatched away; some strangled by the weeds but some grows and bears great fruit. The kingdom grows in the midst of evil growing as well – but ultimately God's kingdom will come in all its fullness. As a small amount of yeast is kneaded into the dough so it has a remarkable effect; it is amazing what impact the presence of a small number of Christ's followers can have on a community as they are scattered amongst it. The Acts of the Apostles tells us the story of a growing church; growing in numbers; growing in new places; growing through difficult circumstances and hard questions; growing in leadership; and growing in understanding. St Paul talked about growth in a variety of ways; the gospel growing throughout the world; growing in maturity as we grow into Christ. The word used can be translated 'increase'. God wants us to be increasing; increasing in

holiness, increasing in fellowship, increasing in where the good news is being made known, and yes increasing in number. The good news of Jesus is such good news, so life transforming, so community transforming we want others to share in the joys we have discovered in Christ.

### **FRAMEWORKS FOR GROWTH**

Now for plants to grow to their best we know they need the right soil, the right watering and feeding, the right sunshine, and the right support. The bishop of Coventry shared this week that he has just planted a fig tree. He has discovered a great deal from others as he has sought advice about it. He assumed lots of space for the roots to spread would be essential. He was told that if he wanted a big tree that was correct but if he wanted a fruitful tree then he needed to put rocks or concrete in around the roots so that they would be bound; that way the tree would be fruitful. The right structure needed to be in place. Runner beans, peas and the like we all know need the proper structure. The same is true of church life; we need the right trellis work, the right framing for the best growth to happen. This is why matters like deanery organisation are important to try and get right; the same is true of Parish boundaries, PCC constitutions and the like; get them wrong and the framework can restrict or strangle growth; get them right and we encourage growth. As the fig tree story reminds us sometimes greater restriction is better; at others greater freedom is required. By and large I tend towards believing our structures need to be light, readily changeable and adaptable when necessary; freeing and releasing not binding. Just occasionally tighter controls are actually for the best.

### **FRESH EXPRESSIONS OF GROWTH**

This leads me neatly onto questions of Fresh Expressions. There is a lot of loose talk around Fresh Expressions, both positively and negatively. Some want to baptise almost any new initiative as FX when most of the time these are simply exciting new initiatives within the existing framework of our ongoing parish life. These initiatives are great, to be encouraged and applauded. They flow out of the continuing reality of people's attachment to their local church, or the still nascent background Christian faith within society. By and large these reach people who still in some way have a connection with the church; often through the occasional offices, childhood memories or schools. These will often be pioneering because they will be very new for the particular congregation engaging in them. Some of these will fit into the helpful description 'Christendom Extra'. Examples of these kinds of initiatives include things like Messy Church, Pizza & Praise, congregations in Old Peoples complexes, Tea-time worship and the like. These are brilliant; they are drawing new people into faith in Christ; they are building up Christ's body and are a vital part of us being a missionary church.

But Fresh Expressions has a tighter definition. Here is how Bishop Graham Cray puts it

*FX is a way of describing the planting of new congregations or churches which are different in ethos and style from the church which planted them; because they are designed to reach a different group of people than those already attending the original church. There is no single model to copy but a wide variety of approaches for a wide variety of contexts and constituencies. The emphasis is on planting something which is appropriate to its context, rather than cloning something which works elsewhere.*

This means real FXs will be places in which I am unlikely to feel at home; and indeed which I may find alien – but will recognise as truly part of the church of Jesus Christ. These will be churches

where people from the 60% of the population who have no interest in or real contact with church as it currently exists discover Jesus Christ for themselves. They will be as fresh as the first Samaritan and Gentile churches were in the Acts of the Apostles – and will raise just the same kind of questions as the early church faced in knowing how to recognise them. As the Church of England, committed to serving the whole nation and making Jesus known afresh in every generation we cannot but walk this pathway with our fellow Christians of other denominations. If we fail to do so we fail to be the church for all the nation. Working out how best we do it is a major challenge.

## **ELECTION TIME**

Noting that we are the Church of England for the nation leads me finally to reflect on elections. We are a national church. I met with my fellow Diocesan bishops to talk over matters which affect us all and which cannot just be dealt with at a local level. As bishops we have a responsibility to lead our own dioceses, and the national church as a whole. We also need the voices of clergy and laity working together to determine how we should govern ourselves in our calling to serve the nation. So General Synod is an important body with a strategic role to play. Hence we need as a Diocese to play our full part within its life. This means having the best people serving on General Synod. So I encourage you to think carefully, pray consistently and act to ensure that the very best people possible offer themselves to serve on General Synod. It is demanding of time and energy but it is important. So please act on this.

We also have a more immediate election to consider. I was delighted to see real issues being debated by the 3 main party leaders in the TV debate the other night. As a nation we do have major issues with which to contend. What values will take us forward? Will we have a real priority for the poorest and neediest both of our own land and of the world? What policies will serve the elderly and frail, the sick, children and families in poverty the best? What will treat the asylum seeker as a fellow human being with dignity? What will end racism? What policies will seek to turn the Millennium Development Goals into reality for the poorest of the world? What policies will treat the planet as God's gift to us for which we have been given responsibility or will we simply go on risking its future by the way we treat it? As followers of Christ we cannot treat a General Election on the basis of what is best for me, or my family or community? It must be on what is best for the poor and for the community as a whole. So for those of us who are well off let us accept that paying a fair rate of income and capital gains tax to re-distribute our wealth to the poor is appropriate – and we should be willing to pay more. We must engage in this political process for the good of the nation. So arrange hustings, go along to them and ask questions about values for our nation, and get out and vote, and encourage others to vote. Be part of the body that fights back against cynicism and apathy and recognises that it is a privilege to be a citizen and we must all play our full part.

## **CONCLUSION**

You will I think be realising by now that I believe following Jesus as Lord affects everything in life. It is a personal relationship which transforms us individually; but it is also a corporate relationship that transforms how we behave towards and with one another. Jesus is Lord over everything – our own lives, our church, our nation. This Lordship must shape every part of who we are and how we live. In all that we discuss and debate as a Diocesan Synod let us seek to ensure that how we do so and what we agree to do is for the sake of the glory of God and the Lordship of Christ in every part of our life together.