

Edinburgh Diocesan Synod – 17th March 2018

Bishop's Address

2 Cor 4.1-12; John 4.31-38

In his well-known poem, *The Bright Field*, R S Thomas describes how in our rush to the future or our longing for an idealised past we fail to take note of those moments in the present when God is revealed. And yet it is these unexpected moments, when the sun breaks through the clouds, that offer us that pearl of great price, of which Jesus speaks, which is worth everything we have and more.

Life, says the poet, is to be found in turning aside

*like Moses to the miracle
of the lit bush, to a brightness
that seemed as transitory as your youth
once, but is the eternity that awaits you.*

Lent is a gift. It's an invitation to turn aside, to cherish these moments of sunlight that speak of eternity; to spend time on things we too often pass by and to discover the 'lit bush', the holiness of the present moment and the sacredness of the ground beneath our feet. God is where it begins for us; God is where it will end. No amount of efficiency or hyper-activity, no amount of painstaking adherence to tradition can substitute for a quiet openness to learning more of God in Jesus. For Jesus is the means by which we navigate, our true north. Without Jesus we go astray.

Our Synod, of course, is concerned with matters we may consider prosaic and routine, but we always begin our synods in intimate encounter with God in the Eucharist. This, I believe, is to make the point that synods too are an opportunity to turn aside and to find God amongst the 'everyday', amongst issues of admin and finance and canon law as well as to hear and share stories of faithfulness and love. To bring the teaching of Jesus to the whole of our life as a diocese and to allow Jesus to enlighten us through that life.

This Synod takes place in the context of a year in which we've reflected on our priorities. And we're now barely a month away from our Big Day when we shall celebrate and draw others into this conversation. And in doing so we'll be doing what the church has always done: to explore in worship, in word and in action what it means to be a follower of Christ in our present, to sustain one another as fellow pilgrims and to invite others to share our journey.

As the great Roman Catholic laywoman Dorothy Day discovered over half a century ago, a life of faith is a life lived in solidarity with our God of justice, mercy and peace, in solidarity too with the weakest in our world, and this can be costly. It was her quest, and it can be ours too to 'live in such a way that one's life would not make sense if God did not exist.'

This suggests that our lives, as those excited and unsettled by Jesus, may appear perplexing to others if not to ourselves. It doesn't make sense for a bush to burn without being consumed by the flames. It probably doesn't make sense to sacrifice your money, your comfort, your safety and even

your life. It can only make sense, for us, because we believe God exists and that God, despite appearances to the contrary sometimes, is to be trusted.

This has always been the perplexity that empowers God's people and each generation must rediscover for themselves how the pearl of great price is to be sought in its time, especially so at a time of rapid and significant change. Looking around the diocese I find many signs that this is exactly what our congregations are doing and collectively we seek to support one another in this, not least through the work of our Enabler of Mission.

Looking at the province too there's much to encourage us and we'll hear more of this later. But we should note that the SEI is training some very able ordinands, including a growing number in their twenties and thirties. And the Institute is both strengthening them in their own growth as followers of Jesus and preparing them for ministry and leadership in God's church. Thank God for that!

But let me emphasize that the business of training people for authorised ministry isn't about selecting a group of super-Christians – Christians who can do the real work of Christ, allowing the rest of us to take a back seat. Much is indeed asked of our clergy and Lay Readers but their call to ministry is for them a working out of the same commission we all receive in our Baptism. Therefore, one of the priorities we're committed to in this diocese and in the Province is to help each baptised person to work out what it means for them to answer the call of Jesus to follow, to take up their cross, to live life in all its fullness – what it means to present our bodies 'as a living sacrifice' and to receive the daily anointing of the Holy Spirit. To discover what it means to be a holy nation, God's own people, who are chosen to proclaim the mighty acts of the one who calls us out of darkness into his own marvellous light. What it means to be sent out week by week to love and serve the Lord.

For we live in a world that clearly needs to hear the message all of us are charged to speak and to live; a message of love, compassion forgiveness and reconciliation; a message of a God who transcends us yet is very near to us, close to those for whom life is hardest. By our lives more than by our words we're called to seek out and serve the neediest people and to discover that the ground they stand on is holy.

The two causes we're supporting in our Lent appeal provide two contrasting examples of very real need. Both charities, Edinburgh Medical Mission and Edinburgh Rape Crisis Centre, live creatively with the consequences of a world where power undermines justice and humanity. And we have the opportunity to support them.

Finally, let me reflect for a moment on the bible readings we heard in our opening Eucharist. They provide plenty of food for thought. The gospel reading is especially apposite for St Patrick's Day, reminding us that 'others have laboured and [we] have entered into their labour.' (John 4.38) But this isn't only true of the giants of early Christian mission, like Patrick. We'll be well aware of how much we owe to those who have gone before us. Sit any group of people down to tell the story of their congregation and it isn't long before they begin to reel out a list of names of people now long gone whose faithfulness still bears fruit.

Those of us who've been ordained for a while, especially those called to be incumbents, will know what it's like to reap the harvest of others' work – sometimes a harvest planted 50 years ago or

more. I really do believe that the fields are ripe for harvesting now, recognising that this isn't merely the result of human planting but of the sun breaking through to illuminate our small field. The point is that as we *harvest* the fruits of the labour of others so we must *plant* too, scatter the seed. It's no coincidence that we chose as the acronym for our priorities the word 'seeds'. And I believe we can sow confidently – confident that in due time there will be others to gather in the fruits.

All this comes to us, as St Paul says in our first reading, by God's mercy. For we don't proclaim ourselves but Jesus Christ as Lord. And although we try to live lives infused with God's values we also know our fragility, that we're somewhat scruffy vessels in whom God has inexplicably chosen to shine the 'light of the glory of God in the face of Jesus Christ.' In Paul's vivid image, we're the clay jars in whom God has deposited his treasure.

Years ago I visited Zimbabwe and returned home with many gifts, one of which was a simple clay pot beautifully painted. I packed it in my suitcase with great care but sure enough when I got home I discovered it was shattered into several pieces. St Paul suggests that we're like that pot. Beautiful but fragile, easily broken. Probably not a secure place to put one's treasure. Yet God persists in choosing us and, and this is Paul's point, doing wonderful things through us. Not because we're wonderful but because the extraordinary power belongs to God. Not power, let us remind ourselves as we draw closer to Holy Week, such as human beings seek for their glory, but power made perfect in weakness... yes, even in our weakness.

I began by speaking of sunlight breaking through the clouds to illuminate a 'bright field' which, unexpectedly, contains treasure. Our readings have invited us to consider other fields, bright with the promise of harvest, fields illuminated by the light of God which is like a treasure contained in clay jars. Our simple and glorious task is to ensure that this isn't hidden treasure but that in spite of and even because of our brokenness and ordinariness God's light shines, drawing others to walk upon holy ground.

+John

Lord God our Father,
we thank you for the miracle of the lit bush
and we pray that we may turn aside as Moses did
to see your glory.
By the grace and strength of your Holy Spirit
may we heed your call to go out in love and service,
to be Good News for others
and to invite others to walk with us in the way of Jesus
towards the eternity that awaits us all. Amen.