

Address to Edinburgh Diocesan Synod

Saturday 9th March 2019

There are many things happening in our diocese. Some you will have read about, some you will hear about later, some you are already part of. And it is right that at a Synod we focus in particular on what we take responsibility for and on what is done in our name.

But it's also important to see ourselves as part of something much larger – not just the Scottish Episcopal Church (SEC) but the Scottish churches, the UK churches and, indeed, the worldwide church.

I've been reminded of this in a number of ways, recently. For example, as part of our holiday in New Zealand, Clare and I, together with Canon Dean Fostekew and the Revd William Mounsey, visited our link diocese in Dunedin, where I preached at the centenary of the their Cathedral – St Paul's. I say it is a link diocese, but I suppose due to the distance it's a rather sleepy link. However, Bishop Steven Benford and I both see real potential for renewing our friendship in ways that don't require long distance travel. We have much in common. And knowing that our Synod is meeting today, Bishop Steven sends these greetings...

"I am writing to send your Diocesan Synod warmest greetings from the Diocese of Dunedin as you meet this weekend. Please be assured of our prayers for a fruitful time as you consider the matters of business before you.

We here in the Diocese of Dunedin are looking forward to continuing the Companion Diocese links, which have recently been dusted off, between our two Dioceses. We were very pleased to have the opportunity to host and meet you, Clare, Rev'd Canon Dean Fostekew and Rev'd William Mounsey last month. Your presence and preaching at our Cathedral Centenary service was a privilege for us.

May God go with you all this weekend."

We should note also our strong link through the Porvoo Communion, with Espoo Diocese in Finland. Whilst I was in Dunedin, our Dean, Frances, was in Espoo representing us at the Consecration of their new bishop Kaisa-Mari. I'm sure that our International Committee in

their report later will have more to say on all this, remembering both that we also link with the Diocese of Cape Coast in Ghana and that next year sees a Lambeth Conference when we shall have the opportunity to host visitors from all over the world, including, I hope, both Bishop Steven and Bishop Victor Atta-Baffoe of Cape Coast.

I represent the SEC on a number of ecumenical bodies and again, our work across denominational boundaries is an important part of our identity as a church. One major new venture you ought to be aware of is the review of ACTS (Action of Churches Together in Scotland) that proposes that our national ecumenical body should be transformed into a Christian Forum focussed on mission. I've also just returned from an overnight meeting of the Columba Contact group, which is a conversation between the Church of England, the Church of Scotland and ourselves, again focused on mission and ministry, particularly for those two churches with a vocation to be 'national' churches. Next week I shall travel to Inverness for another overnight as part of a conversation with the Church of Scotland, exploring 'Our Common Calling' to serve the whole nation of Scotland and to find ways of living creatively with our differences in polity and theology. Given that many of you belong to congregations that take seriously our partnership with the Church of Scotland, this promises to be a real blessing to us.

But we can't look at the church without paying attention to the world we're part of. In the five months since we last met, the slow motion car crash which is Brexit has ground agonisingly on. I know I'm not alone in being dismayed by the failures of the government over this. We know that negotiating our way out of the EU is a challenging task but what especially disappoints me is the partisan way in which the process has gone forward. It is not only the uncertainty but the incompetence that has put national morale at rock bottom. Not Britain's finest hour, not the government's finest hour, not Parliament's finest hour.

Let me note two things about Brexit, however. The first is that in a democracy such as ours we get, collectively, what we vote for. And whilst it's easy enough for us, the woman and man in the street, to be outraged by our elected representatives at Westminster the question is, would we do any better? If we were pulled every which way by party loyalty, respect for the result of the referendum, respect for our constituents and our own sincere opinion about what's best for the

UK, would we still be as clear-sighted as perhaps we are in our armchairs viewing the parliamentary chaos through our TV screens?

It behoves us to remember too that it's not just the institutions of government that have lost the trust of the people in these recent decades, churches and church leaders too have been exposed as lacking integrity in the most atrocious ways. The task of rebuilding trust and the moral foundations of our national identities belongs to us all.

The second thing I want to note about Brexit is that, whatever the outcome of the process, the problems we have now will be the problems we have afterwards. It is, in other words, no panacea. It will herald the arrival of neither Armageddon nor paradise. The inequalities and injustices experienced by many, the feeling of being left out of the loop and ignored, the harshness of the welfare system or the reality of in-work poverty, aren't going to evaporate when we leave the EU. Neither will all be sweetness and light if, at the end of all this, we find we're still in the EU. One of the saddest things I've seen over the last few years is the way in which narrow and sectional self-interest has become a respectable justification for political decision-making. What part do we need to play in politics, local and national, to stand up for the values and the virtues of God? How might our actions be transformative for the tone of public discourse, the style of government and the scope of our economic system to benefit the weakest as well as the strongest?

It was these considerations that led me to join with thousands of others, including Annie Naish and Claire Benton-Evans, in the Sleep Out in Princes Street Gardens in early December (in an experience about as far away from real rough sleeping as you can imagine) and which have shaped my choices for the Lent Appeal, which you'll hear more about in a moment.

For, like it or not, the UK does have a presence and a responsibility on the world stage – Brexit, hard or soft, is no excuse to neglect that responsibility. The way the government has dealt with the case of Shamima Begum the young IS mother and former British citizen represents an example of neglect. On the more positive side, the investigation into the persecution of Christians around the world, introduced by the Foreign Secretary, the Rt Hon Jeremy Hunt and chaired by the Bishop of Truro, is to be welcomed. But in welcoming

it to bear in mind, as the Foreign Secretary did, that Islamophobia too is a real and present danger. Perhaps the key thing is to defend firmly the freedom in every nation for people to choose and to change religion, as set forward by the Universal Declaration of Human Rights. Recognizing that this foundational document for world peace was shaped not least by Christian influences.

So, this is the context within which we meet today, the context in which we long for God's Kingdom to come. This ultimately is what shapes our mission and the decisions we make about how our church responds to the call to follow Jesus. Our discussion around the post dedicated to Mission (not I emphasize about Annie Naish herself who so ably occupies the role of Bishop's Enabler of Mission, but about what that role might look like going forward) is an opportunity to be very intentional about what it means to be faithful disciples ready to reap the harvest that God brings, whatever that may be.

We are those who pray, 'Thy Kingdom Come... Thy Kingdom come on earth as in heaven.' Acknowledging that prayer is a much bigger topic than simply asking for things, yet Jesus does teach us to pray for the Kingdom. And when we pray for the Kingdom, the question is not *whether* that prayer will be answered but *how* that prayer will be answered. As someone who regularly prays for the Spirit of God to come, who lays hands on folk seeking just that rekindling Spirit to bring to completion all that God has begun in them, I have no doubt that God answers prayer. But I've also discovered that prayer is a tricky thing, unsettling not least in the impact it has on the one who prays. And that the Kingdom we think we're praying for turns out to be very different from the one God blesses us with.

So, whether in the ten days between Ascension and Pentecost or at any time, when you pray be ready to be surprised. May God bless us with the ability to be surprised and the courage to respond to God's call.