

Bishop's Synod Address – 25 October 2018

Brothers and sisters, as always, I want to use this address to offer some context to our meeting, both in terms of our world and our church.

There have been moments during my lifetime when political fashions have seemed to contradict those deep principles of our faith that we should seek and find Christ in the outcast and the sinner, in the weak, the poor and the broken. Those of us who lived through the 1980s may remember the national and international controversies of that decade. I would suggest, however, that 2018 faces us with challenges greater than ever – local, if I may describe UK politics in that way, and global.

Climate change, mass movements of people, the rise of the far right must all give us reason to stop, to reflect, to pray and to act. On top of this the shameful political machinations around Brexit, the uncertainty and the deep national divisions, test moral character as never before in these post 2nd World War years. It's always the poor who suffer most from political upheaval, those at the bottom of the pile, and our recent years of austerity, cuts to essential services, cuts to benefits have been rolled out with little empathy for those who must live with the consequences. Add to that the harsh Home Office policies on immigration and the abusive culture revealed in the Houses of Parliament, this becomes a perfect recipe for mental distress and low national morale.

We must remember that as Christians we're called not merely to speak good news to the poor, but to live that good news – and to be prepared to make nuisances of ourselves in the cause of justice. We live in and because of Christ. Our mission in Christ is not about growing a self-interested institution but helping to form disciples who live out in their work and their homes a sacrificial and world-transforming message of the God whose goodness, righteousness and love is a burning fire – in whose light we find judgement.

We're learning to speak a language of discipleship – to understand that each of us is called to be on fire with a longing for the God who longs for us. Each of our congregations is to be a community in which such disciples are moulded and a place of nourishment and commissioning for life in Christ. Not to preserve our church – although such a church, I believe, will thrive – but to send us out in peace and unity to love and serve our Lord – who came not to be served but to serve. Indeed, unless we are prepared to stand vulnerably before our holy God, and to be moved by our vision of God to take up the cross of loving service and prophetic action we are merely playing games with faith.

You know this well. And I'm constantly grateful to those congregations, and there are many, who minister to and amongst the homeless, the poor and refugees – through shelters, food banks, soup kitchen and financial advice. Thank you to those of you who seek to embody a care for the planet in your own actions and advocacy. Thank you to those who are growing into an understanding that Christ calls us not to be a church **for** the poor but a church **of** the poor – a real challenge when so many of us are so affluent.

Acknowledging this challenge, and that Christ calls us to press ever onwards and upwards, I want to note and affirm all the many positive developments and new opportunities that are

opening up for us in the diocese. We have a lot of vacancies, but vacancies aren't in themselves negative things; they're an opportunity to reflect and grow and plan for the future. True, there have been significant farewells, not least Ian Paton from Old St Paul's, now duly consecrated as Bishop of St Andrew's, Dunkeld and Dunblane. And at the end of this month, Douglas Kornahrens retires after 35 years as Rector of Holy Cross, Davidson's Mains. What resilience and staying power he has demonstrated!

But balancing all this, in September we welcomed two newly ordained deacons, new students in training for ministry including two pioneering the mixed-mode pathway. Andrew Bain brings all his experience to guide him as the new Priest-in-Charge of St Salvador's, Stenhouse, and, at last I can announce that an appointment has been made to the Borders Centre of Mission – Galashiels, Hawick and Selkirk – and we shall find out who that is on 4th November. This is a post supported by the charges, the diocese and the Church Army in partnership. A firm commitment to the future.

Mustard Seed, the mission community gifted to us by Ps&Gs, is going from strength to strength in its partnership with St Margaret's, Easter Road. St Vincent's, in Edinburgh's New Town, is not only a growing congregation it has also, through the generosity of Mr Gayre, received a gift both of their building and an endowment to help maintain it.

There are other stories to tell, of growth in faith and mission and service, growth in confidence – stories every bit as positive as these. Forgive me for not recounting them all. But I hope the stories I have told demonstrate clearly our collective commitment to the life and growth of some of our smallest congregations in some of our most deprived communities. I emphasise this because you will now know that Emmanuel, Clermiston has made the decision to close. You're welcome to ask questions about this after I've spoken, and we shall formally be invited to close the incumbency at our synod in March and to bless the remaining members on their way.

There is a sadness, of course, but there is also much to celebrate. Emmanuel was a church plant by St Thomas's several decades ago. Those of you who know about such things will know that many church plants do not last as long. That it has done so is because of the faithfulness and the determination of the people of that community – many have heard of Christ through that time, many lives have been touched. We need to be realistic enough to know that whilst new adventures begin others reach an end.

Your synod papers tell you that we are carrying out a review of the role of the Bishop's Enabler of Mission. This is timely, considering that the money you committed to this runs out next year, so we need to take stock and to think carefully about how we want to proceed. In one sense this review is separate from Annie Naish herself, but I know that you will recognise the impact she has made over the last two years on our life as a diocese and that her work and influence has been integral to several of the encouraging stories I've just told you. Many of us have been inspired by the Growing Together process which has given us our priorities for mission and, like me, many of you here were thrilled by the Big Day at our Cathedral when 500 people gathered to share their stories and to thank God together in that wonderful act of worship and communion. The strong message that came from those who attended was, 'More of this, please!'

A key outcome of our growing together has been an enlivened sense of our common mission. Mission, as we well know, is a slippery word. The mission of the church, to my mind, is to do what we're here for; and that begs a further question: what are we here for? Well, we're here to worship God and, by God's grace, to grow healthy disciples who love God and love their neighbour. We reflected, as we set our priorities, that seeds must have fertile soil in which to grow, they must be watered and fed if we are to reap a harvest. This is why we concluded that healthy disciples are part of a community that encourages them to grow in their encounter with God – to grow in knowledge and in prayer – in other words, that we should develop disciples. We concluded that this community must engage positively with people of all ages, that it must enable people of all ages to discern their calling to ministry. We concluded that a church that is growing healthy disciples looks outwards, to serve the needs of others and to empower the whole people of God to share their faith humbly and confidently.

As we realised these things together, increasingly we discovered a sense of partnership (key to some of the stories I told you a moment ago). There is a renewed willingness for congregations otherwise quite different to work together. And there is a growing number of examples of larger congregations offering individuals to serve smaller congregations – as treasurers, for example. And indeed, there are one or two congregations who are seeking just that at the moment – if you can help, let me know.

All these things come into play as we review the role of the Enabler of Mission. And in doing so we are already realising that our priorities must also lead us to take a hard look at how we are structured as a diocese. Over the coming months we shall review also how the Mission & Ministry Committee is structured and have another look at those ancient and much neglected bodies, Area Councils. As we wake up to the importance of partnership, how are we to enable good partnerships to form and good support networks for our clergy and lay leaders without something rather like Area Councils. It's a subject I've avoided in recent years, but I'm beginning to feel that the absence of such forums is preventing important things from happening.

In short, I'm excited by what is being achieved and what can be achieved. So it's strange, bearing all this in mind, to have to face the sad decision of St Thomas's, Corstorphine to leave us. You have the letter from Margaret Robertson, chair of the vestry, which offers us an explanation. In an email acknowledging Margaret's letter I said:

'This is by no means a matter of indifference to the wider diocese and we too must come to terms with the loss involved (and just to be clear, I'm not talking finances). You need to hear, although perhaps you already understand, that tears and sleepless nights have not been the lot of St Thomas's Rector, Vestry and Trustees alone. Not least I have in mind the anguish of some present and former members of St Thomas's over the decision you have made. We shall all have much to reflect on, I think, once this period is over. Much to bring before our Lord.'

I also suggested that, although this is not what I had hoped for, since a decision has been reached it would be helpful for matters to be brought to a speedy conclusion – and I reaffirmed that it's my intention for this leave-taking to be as kind and gracious as possible.

Obviously, our legal officers and Diocesan Secretary have had to look hard at all this. St Thomas's present constitution, written when they joined the SEC, makes it clear that the only reason for leaving can be that the SEC is no longer in full communion with the Church of England. It also indicates that the congregation must always pay their full dues to the diocese. The properties, however, are vested in St Thomas's own trustees and given that, as I understand it, those trustees support the decision, if the congregation is to leave all they need do is to create in effect a new entity with a new constitution that has use of the buildings.

I am happy to try to answer your questions on this in a moment. But as I say, my sadness is increased by the thought that St Thomas's are leaving us at such an exciting and significant time for our diocese. For St Thomas's, under successive Rectors, has given so much to us – how can I be unaware of that standing in this building. We're thankful for the blessings that they under God have scattered along our way and it's my earnest prayer that those blessings will continue to be theirs as they forge a new path. I am also thankful for and ask you to pray for those who continue with us in new congregations – with all that they shall bring to enrich us in God's service. Thank you to so many who accepted my invitation to join in the time of reflection in May, and those who accompanied me to a meeting with the congregation at St Thomas's prior to their vote. It has been a time of unexpected blessings as well as great sadness.

Our synod papers indicate that, of course, there is a financial side to all this and our officers have worked hard and effectively to produce our budget. I hope that all I have said today explains why I believe we are using our money well. But it does present us with a challenge that some congregations and some individuals are better at responding to than others, to put our money where our faith is – to open our wallets to the guidance of the Holy Spirit.

I've spoken at length and I offer all these thoughts and comments, inadequate as they are, to you and our diocese for your reflection, your prayers and your action.

+John