

Address to the Edinburgh Diocesan Synod

21st October 2021

The people of Israel, in exile in Babylon, were asked by their captors to sing one of the songs of their homeland. 'How are we to do this,' they asked, 'when we have been torn away from all that is most precious to us, when we feel no joy in our hearts?' 'How are we to sing the Lord's song in a foreign land?'

We may well ask the same question, for increasingly, the land we find ourselves in seems unfamiliar – it's almost as if we are living in a world the same and yet several degrees askant from what we were used to. Yet, in this season of pilgrimage we are constantly reminded that we are a people on the move, unsure of what we are likely to experience on the way yet trusting that God walks with us.

We have no captors to rail against, for our situation is shared by all humanity and to a very real extent created by all humanity. Yet, sing the Lord's song we must (even if behind our masks). Sing the Lord's song in the face of pandemic. Sing the Lord's song into a world wrestling with climate crisis. Sing the Lord's song in response to senseless acts of violence done to our elected representatives, in response to anger and to disappointment. We sing, as Abraham may have sung as he left home, knowing not where his journey would lead, only that God required it of him. Not so much a pilgrim, perhaps, as a wanderer and a seeker.

I know that many of us are weary. Deeply fatigued. Unable, as yet, to discern our destination. It's not so much the long hours of work but the living with uncertainty, the dealing with constant change, the need to navigate in unexplored waters, surrounded by people whose own fears and insecurities either reinforce ours or are, in some perverse way, blamed on us. I hear this, I see this, I experience this for myself and, therefore, I repeat my thanks to our clergy, our vestries and all our people for their resolve. This remains a time for patience and kindness, a time to weather the storm, to see where the wind takes us; it is not yet a time to throw our cargo overboard.

For, as I say, this is not a voyage we alone are making. The whole world travels with us and we're constrained, invited, called, required to sing the Lord's song, to give reasons for our hope, to bear witness to God's faithfulness and God's judgement wherever we find ourselves, however strange that land may be. With COP26 looming, with deep questions about social, trade and climate justice exercising us, this is not a time to be faint-hearted.

My verse for us all today is this - 'Therefore, my beloved, be steadfast, immovable, always excelling in the work of the Lord, because you know that in the Lord your labour is not in vain.' 1 Cor 15.58

I invite you to see all that we shall discuss today in the light of what I've just said and, especially, in the light of this verse from St Paul. This is clearly not a 'business as usual' Synod. The fact that it's conducted online makes that obvious. And whilst the agenda, with its elections and accounts and budget has a reassuring familiarity, we'll be well aware that our financial plans are shaped in expectation that we're embarked on a journey in which we, as Christ's people, reach out our hands in support and solidarity. It should be no surprise

that our Standing Committee (like General Synod) has given much thought to how to support our charges, nor that it is prioritising clergy well-being and training.

I emphasize, all this is done in anticipation of where God may be leading us, it isn't done out of a nostalgic yearning for a golden land (or a golden age) to which we long to return. I think the Genesis story suggests that exile is our permanent rather than our temporary state, at least until the dawn of the heavenly Jerusalem.

Finally, a brief comment on a question that exercises all of us. In one sense it's a small matter, in another it's something that speaks deeply into our hearts. 'When,' folk ask, 'may we once again receive wine at Communion?'

It's a matter the College of bishops have debated at length and have regularly laid before our Advisory Group on Covid. For the moment, such is the high rate of infection and because of the patterns of transmission of the virus, the sharing of a common cup, in the old style, can't be permitted. Receiving in one kind – the bread alone – was our decision as lockdown began – and I suspect most of us thought that this was a temporary measure, likely to be short-lived. We now realise that Covid-19 isn't going away soon and that even when it does recede there may well be those who will be reluctant to share a common cup. For myself, I want us to find a solution to this, but not one that materially alters our theology of the Eucharist as a result. There are a couple of possibilities put to us by the Advisory Group that the College of Bishops will be considering at their meeting next month. My hope is that I shall then be able to make a statement to the diocese that offers a way back to sharing the wine of communion appropriately and safely.

Strange times, strange decisions required of us and much forbearance, for which I thank you. I know you will be weary of me asking you to be patient. Let's remember, that in these matters we are all seeking to do our best and to be faithful – concerned to do the work of the Lord in the loving way our Lord would expect. Let me, in finishing, repeat that verse from St Paul:

'Therefore, my beloved, be steadfast, immovable, always excelling in the work of the Lord, because you know that in the Lord your labour is not in vain.' 1 Cor 15.58