

Together on the Way

On this last Synod of the Triennium, the first thing I want to say and I know +Christopher would also want to say, is 'Thank you'. Thank you for your presence, physical and virtual, and for your engagement in this shared journey. I use the word 'journey' deliberately because that is close to the root meaning of the word 'Synod'. 'Syn' meaning together and 'Hod' a diminutive of 'Hodos' meaning 'the way'. So as synod members we are '*together on the way*'. I want to reflect briefly on both dimensions of this phrase. We are to be ***together*** across all our differences. Last week I read these words of a Christian lawyer. 'The Church of Jesus Christ is arguably the most international, multi-ethnic, multi-cultural, multi-lingual body on the planet. That is one of its glories and strengths.' St Paul, and indeed the multifarious communion of saints from every race and nation would surely say 'Amen' to that. St Paul, whose life was turned upside by discovering that no-one was outside of or beyond God's love and purposes, shocked those who thought the Church should comprise only 'people like us'. How profoundly shocking it was for first century Greeks and Jews to see Christian communities embracing Greek and Jew, male and female, slave and free. Homogeneity is not a mark of the Body of Christ. Diversity is.

One thing the Holy Spirit seems to be saying to us today is actually what the same Holy Spirit of God was saying to those first disciples. As we heard in Sunday's epistle, Paul writes to those members of the community who were tribal or judgmental of others in the community '*Open wide your hearts*'. In the context of the Church in Corinth, it was open wide your hearts to those who are different and those with whom you disagree. He surely also had in mind his own critics, the so-called *pneumatikoi*, the 'super-spiritual', who denied his claim to apostleship on the grounds of his suffering and admitted weakness, the very things he later boasts are a mark of his apostleship. Shortly, I will have the privilege of ordaining deacons and priests. In both ordination services, we will be recognizing that we cannot fulfill God's purposes in our own strength, and I will be exhorting the ordinands to '*pray earnestly for the Holy Spirit that your hearts may be enlarged and minds enlightened*.' This all about movement and growth, growth in love and compassion and a growing up into Christ who is the Truth. Just as the Church cannot be static as together we step out in faith and follow, neither can your life or mine. We are a pilgrim people. We are together '***on the way***'. We are not yet there. There is more for each of us personally and all of us corporately to learn and to enter into. A disciple, *mathetis* in the New Testament, is by definition a learner, and one who

continues to learn. We are, Paul writes, to go on letting ourselves be transformed by the renewal of our minds. The learning and the becoming continues. A Head Teacher in a school where I was Vicar, had on the wall a poster with the words 'Be patient. God is not finished with me yet'. Which of us could not say that of ourselves? At least, which of us with any self-knowledge could not say that?

But learning can be uncomfortable – as those first disciples experienced. We resist having our prejudices exposed to ourselves or others. America is very definitely not the UK but the murder of George Floyd and what has emerged in its wake, have woken many of us up to the reality of racism in our own country, in our own church and perhaps also – if we have the courage and humility to recognize it - in our own lives. One of the most creative and exciting responses to this in our own Diocese has been the *Amazing Grace* learning journey, undertaken by about 40 people, largely clergy but also Readers and lay leaders. The motivation and ethos of all of this is nothing to do with culture wars or identity politics as understood in secular media. It is the Gospel of our Lord Jesus Christ. I pay tribute to those who had the vision for this and who led it, always listening to God and the Scriptures. I trust that this will all be brought to Synod in due course as prayerfully we seek to become the Church of Pentecost and the Church described in Revelation where people of every race and nation are caught up in wonder, love and praise. In similar vein, as we seek to grow in the ministry of reconciliation, both the *Difference Course* and *Living in Love and Faith* are about sensitizing us to the experiences and perspectives of others – enlarging our hearts and enlightening our minds. All of these things can help us live out more fully and fruitfully the reconciliation ministry to which each of us is called.

Just as learning means leaving behind what we thought we knew, so as we step into God's future for us, we need perhaps also to let go of some of the things we used to do. The pandemic has surely changed all of us in one way or another. Some profoundly through loss and bereavement, some through mental health impact, physical health impact, spiritual health impact and all of these are of course inter-related. Many also through financial- economical impact and, of course, in so many other ways that can't easily be categorized. But for all of us here, it has surely given us pause for thought and indeed prayer. What actually matters most? What is God saying to us through this experience? Kenneth Leech, a great prophetic and pastoral theologian, wrote 'Theology begins where the pain is'. C.S. Lewis wrote something similar, our

pain is God's megaphone to rouse a deaf world. As disciples, as learners, what is God wanting to teach us through all of this? This is a really important question for all of us, in PCCs, home groups, chaplaincies, schools and beyond. We also have the opportunity to draw others outside the Church into some of this conversation which could also be fruitful in God's purposes and our commitment to transforming communities. I'm sure some of these conversations are already happening.

A second good question would be, 'what is God wanting us to let go of as we step out into new life?' To be on the way, we need to travel lightly. We can't bring everything from the past with us. St Paul could see this when he wrote, in Philippians, 'Letting go of what lies behind and reaching out for that which lies ahead, I press on.' What do we need to let go of which lies behind us? What a waste it would surely be if we did not allow the pandemic to teach us anything new and simply try to take up where we left off before the pandemic began.

In the hymn 'O love that wilt not let me go' there is the line 'I trace the rainbow through the rain.' In and through the suffering of the pandemic, we have glimpsed the Spirit of God in a number of ways. There is not time now to reflect on all of them. We have discovered the great gift of the reach of digital. This very gift has given us a new challenge. People can become so comfortable meeting virtually, that some can lack the desire to return to worship together physically. There can be no substitute for meeting together physically.

In my own discernment, I am sensing that God may be telling us to 'get out more'. I am excited by what God is doing 'outside' the church buildings. I shouldn't be surprised because almost all Jesus' teaching, ministering and healing was done not in the synagogue or Temple but out and about, being where people are. Walking, talking in villages, on farmland, on hillside, at the lakeside or even on the lake. In short, out and about in God's good creation where life is lived. This is where chaplaincy and our chaplains have much to teach us, being with people where they actually are. This is incarnational ministry. Let me pay tribute here to all our chaplains, in prisons, hospitals, hospices, schools, universities and places of work. I am convinced that there should be a chaplaincy dimension to all our ministries, what I mean by this is spending time with people who are not Christian. We are not called to be Church-centric but Christ-centric, Christ who calls us and sends us out into the world.

It may be the John Wesley in me, but I think God is calling us, literally, outdoors. Outdoor worship has drawn in those who have not hitherto come through the church doors. A number of churches have experienced this and want to develop it. A number of parishes and schools together, through *Growing Faith*, have seen God do wonderful things simply by meeting outside the church building, not least in the outdoor stations of the cross in Holy Week. I know too of parishes whose outdoor worship has attracted many who may have been reluctant to go through the church doors.

Our Church schools, having faced huge struggles throughout the pandemic remain beacons of light and life and hope. Children singing and dancing at All Saints school Coventry as they celebrated 50 years on the current site really did put a spring in my step. For of such is the Kingdom.

Finally, the pandemic, I think and I hope, has given us all a greater sense of solidarity with all of humanity, locally, nationally and internationally. May we not lose this and let us act on it, encouraging our government to do so also, not least in the sphere of vaccine justice and the environment. The earth is the Lord's and all who live in it. Following the Cathedral's inspirational ministry of crossing boundaries, nationally and internationally, let us not be insular.

+John

Diocesan Synod 22nd June 2021.