Diocesan Synod 16th March 2024

Presidential Address

Members of Synod, as you know, I was not at the last meeting of this body, in November; it is good to be back with you, and in particular to be with you as you take further the strategic framework which you began to put in place at that meeting. I feel that I am in some ways catching up with the work that you started then, and further work that my staff colleagues have been doing since then, and I am enthused by the prospect of what lies ahead of us in the next session.

Before I say more about that, though, I need to say a heartfelt thank you to the very, very many of you who since November have sent Julia and me messages, letters and cards, assured us of your prayers, and shown us great kindness in so many thoughtful ways. We have known the Church at its best. We have been walking through a vale of tears, as the traditional translations of Psalm 84 put it; but as we have done that we have never felt that we are on our own. That great psalm paints a wonderful picture of the people of God as a pilgrim company travelling in confident expectation to the city of God, a people ‘in whose heart are the highways to Zion’. This is the true image of God’s Church: we are called to be a people of hope, sure in the faith that our Lord has defeated all the powers that oppress us, in that faith and hope caring for one another in love as we walk together as followers of Christ – and cheerfully inviting others to join us on the Way.

In this diocese, the direction of our travel was set for us by our first bishop, Chad, who brought the Christian faith to the people of Mercia of his time. He is so important for us because the task that awaits us in our own time is nothing less than the re-evangelisation of contemporary Mercia. We are back at the beginning, and the priorities which were his will have to be ours too: to deepen discipleship, to call forth vocations, and to engage in joyful evangelism.

Everything we will be talking about this afternoon is in strategic continuity with what we have been doing, with our priorities of Discipleship, Vocation and Evangelism, and with the work of Shaping for Mission that has been carried forward since the pandemic. More importantly, it is in continuity with all that is going on across our parishes, our schools, our chaplaincies, our Fresh Expressionsand our Cathedral – we will not be asking you to disown any of the pastoral care, the prayer and worship, the teaching and learning, the community involvement that are the very essence of who we are together. Our strength is not in flashy headlines or gimmicky initiatives, but in the faithful living out of the gospel in the everyday lives of our churches across this far-flung diocese.

So why do we need a new strategic framework, and what is new about it?

We need it because we face some acute challenges in our contemporary mission– challenges we have known about for a long time, but which have been brought to a new level of urgency by the impact of the pandemic.

For example: the demographic of our churches rarely reflects the demographic of the communities they serve – we tend to be older, less diverse, and generally more comfortably provided for. Despite that last point (which, like everything I am saying now, is a generalisation), a significant number of our churches are finding their financial sustainability difficult. It is often proving difficult to find PCC members, officers and wardens.

And, beyond all this, we are called to be Christians in a society which seems to have become disenchanted with the Christian faith, or with any sense of an authority given to us from beyond. All these things – and there are more – are serious challenges for us to face in the re-evangelisation of Mercia; and they are mostly challenges that St Chad did not face in the first evangelisation of Mercia; things have moved on from the seventh century (alas).

In this changed, and rapidly changing, landscape, two things are necessary for our journey. One is, a road map to show us where we are heading, with milestones to measure our progress. That is why we have set out some ambitious goals in the Strategic Framework paper.

Bishop Matthew and Archdeacon Megan will say more about them in a few minutes – but I want to stress that these are not intended as an imposition but as an invitation: an invitation to travel with hope and expectation, with the highways to Zion in our heart.

In a changing landscape we need up to date maps; but we also need tried and tested resources, and these have not really changed since the time of Chad, or indeed since the time of the apostles. These resources are the scriptures to unfold to us the truth of God; the sacraments to feed us with bread for the journey; and the disciplined, persistent practice of prayer to keep us obedient to the Spirit’s guidance.

Members of Synod, if you endorse this strategic framework with enthusiasm and clarity, as I hope you will, the first thing we will all have to do in working towards its goals will be to pray. The second thing to do will be to pray, and the third will be to pray, and at all times we must pray, in humility, in expectation and in trust. If we do that, and keep on doing that, we know that our gracious God will bless us – as the last verse of Psalm 84 says, ‘O LORD of hosts, happy is everyone who trusts in you’. May that happiness be ours, today and all the way through to 2030, and beyond.