Bishop Michael – Presidential Speech
Diocesan Synod – 25 November 2023

In his first letter to the church in Corinth, St Paul says this:

‘Now there are varieties of gifts, but the same Spirit; and there are varieties of services, but the same Lord; and there are varieties of activity, but it is the same God who activates all of them in everyone.’ (1 Cor 12: 4-6).

At the deanery gatherings that have been taking place this autumn, Bishop Ruth, our Archdeacons, members of our diocesan support services team and I have had the utter privilege of seeing how these words of Paul are happening in life and action across the parishes, schools and chaplaincies of our diocese. We’ve been from Frome to Exmoor, Portishead to Yeovil and almost all stops in between. There are just three more deaneries to go. Above all, I want to say thank you to everyone who hosted the gatherings with such generous hospitality. Just as much I’m hugely grateful for all the inspirational stories of good practice that have been shared and for the insights you generated about where God is active in our communities and where, as churches, schools and chaplaincies, we need to be joining in so that we can live out our common vision of living and telling the story of Jesus.

Let me share with you some of the learning that I’ve gained through being able to listen to people so widely across our diocese.

Firstly, I am overawed by the commitment shown by people around our diocese to witnessing and to living out the Gospel of Jesus. This is at the very heart of what we are called to be and do. From St Mary’s in Frome where they are seeking to grow a new Christian community in a former vicarage, to our new Court Chaplains in Taunton.

I’ve also been struck by the entrepreneurial and intentional ways in which we are seeking to build and be at the heart of local communities, bringing love and care for our neighbours, and service to those in need. From Common Good lunches offered to schoolchildren in Baltonsburgh to helping set up and walk alongside a new community Park Run in Portishead.

I encountered brilliant examples of us going to where people are, and of not just expecting people to turn up to be with us. This is particularly so with respect to our work with children and families. From Goathurst in the Quantocks to St Francis’ in Keynsham we’re seeing amazing work happening to offer worship, teaching and growth in discipleship that fits around families’ needs.

During this year we’ve been talking about giving focus to our common vision through working in four particular areas – valuing and cherishing the people and resources we already have, developing new Christian worshipping communities, sharing in ministry and leadership and deepening and growing faith. The gatherings were extraordinary experiences of seeing these priorities happening every day among real people in local contexts.

The gatherings were wonderful opportunities to celebrate so much good that’s happening around our diocese. They were also opportunities candidly to name difficult and challenging issues that we are facing together. There were four particular topics mentioned at a number of the gatherings that I’d like to reflect on this morning – the pandemic, faculties, finance and living in love and faith (LLF). Let me take them in that order.

When the pandemic started in 2020, a colleague at the World Health Organization told me that this would be a three-to-five-year event. It’s year 3 and we’re not out of the woods yet. I want to thank everyone who’s patiently enabling our churches to rebuild from the shock of the pandemic where habits of church attendance were broken, our work with children and families severely affected, many volunteers stepped back from previous commitments and many of our normal ways of doing things turned upside down. Of course there were positives too. We now use technology in completely different ways. Churches served their communities during lockdowns. Data suggests that we are recovering. That’s down to you, your hard work and faithfulness. Thank you.

On faculties, I am delighted to report on the excellent work that our diocesan secretary, Jenny Hollingsworth, and our DAC chair, Simon Baker have undertaken dramatically to increase our capacity to respond to applications and inquiries. By bringing the administration of faculties in-house, under the care of the splendid Jacqui Carreira-White, we have increased staff time available for this work by about 50%, at no extra cost. We’re also making much greater use of the capacity offered by the DAC standing committee better to consider applications more quickly. We hope that very soon you’ll start to see the benefits of these changes.

Issues of finance were raised at a number of gatherings. We’ve plenty about that to say during our synod agenda today – both as we think about next year’s budget and as we think about how our Common Fund should be collected in the future. What I do ask of our discussions is that we bring to them all our creativity, faith and good sense. The budgets set during the last three years here in Bath & Wells have kept parish share requests far below the level of inflation. In 2021 and 2022 inflation went up by 14%. In contrast, for the same period our Common Fund request went up by 3.1%. This reflected our understanding of just how squeezed our parishes have been since the pandemic struck. The difference between the increases in inflation and parish share has been covered by us making savings, squeezing our investments, cutting posts in parishes and in central services and by selling assets. Even with these actions we have been running huge deficits year on year – this year we’re again due to end up £1.5m in the red before selling of our assets. In setting next year’s budget we face the fact that this year inflation has run at more than 10%. Our stipends have gone up by only 5%. This is an ongoing reality that we have to find ways to engage with so that our life together can be sustainable into the future. Please bring your full thought and consideration to how we address this challenge. It’s not susceptible to simplistic answers. I do think we can find solutions if we work together.

Now to LLF. Folk spoke passionately at the gatherings and many of you will have read about the bruising and painful meeting of General Synod that happened last week. I’d like to take some time this morning to summarise how we’ve reached this point, what happened last week and how I invite us all to move together in the unity that was Jesus’ command to his followers.

The LLF process has been running for six years. It has painfully revealed that we are together in a church where, using the Anglican resources of scripture, tradition and reason, different church members and parts of our church have come to very different conclusions about how we should best respond to people living in same sex relationships and particularly who would like those relationships to be recognized and celebrated within the life of the Church. Some would like to see the Church offer same sex marriage just as now happens in the civil system. Others view the offering of prayers of blessing for people in same sex relationships as completely incompatible with the teachings of the Church. Most people, I would suggest, sit somewhere on a continuum between these two polarities. What we have learnt is that any amount of argument does not seem to alter people’s particular views. Sadly, we have come to realise that we are not going to reach a simple unified position.

Into this situation the House of Bishops offered proposed prayers of love and faith which were debated at February’s synod and again last week. The prayers seek to find a middle way between our polarities, preserving the Church’s teaching that Holy Matrimony is an estate that can only be entered into by a man and a woman, whilst at the same time offering recognition and celebration of those in same sex relationships and asking for God’s blessing upon the people involved. As with many compromises in life, the prayers run the extreme risk of pleasing nobody – a truth richly demonstrated by the debate that took place in London last week.

I don’t want for a moment to suggest that the work taken to bring this work to Synod was complete or that it could not have been much stronger. For example, the motion would have been much strengthened had it been accompanied by a document laying out the specific legal advice that had been given about the changes proposed or had the pastoral guidance accompanying the prayers been completed as was originally envisaged. In fairness to the drafting group, they have been seeking to develop this work in an incredibly pressured environment where the competing demands of different groups made their task considerably more difficult than it might have been.

So where have we reached and what will happen next? The actual wording of this month’s synod motion doesn’t take things much further than the motion that was passed in February. Please take a moment to read the motion that passed. The motion said this:

That this Synod, conscious that the Church is not of one mind on the issues raised by Living in Love and Faith, that we are in a period of uncertainty, and that many in the Church on all sides are being deeply hurt at this time, recognise the progress made by the House of Bishops towards implementing the motion on Living in Love and Faith passed by this Synod in February 2023, as reported in GS 2328, encourage the House to continue its work of implementation, and ask the House to consider whether some standalone services for same-sex couples could be made available for use, possibly on a trial basis, on the timescale envisaged by the motion passed by the Synod in February 2023.

What this means in practice is as follows:

* The prayers for covenanted friendships (which are uncontentious) will be commended for use by the House of Bishops
* Prayers for same sex couples that can be included within liturgies such as a Sunday service of Holy Communion will be commended for use by the House of Bishops – possibly for use as soon as December.
* Consideration for the introduction of so-called standalone services – where a couple would come to church for a specific liturgy offered just for them – will now happen among the House of Bishops.

This last point about standalone services was the subject of an amendment by the Bishop of Oxford that was narrowly approved by all three houses of General Synod. It’s contentious for two reasons. The first is that the probable route for its introduction would be for such services to be authorized by the archbishops for an experimental period to be followed by a vote of synod that would need a 2/3 majority to pass - unlikely given the current makeup of the Synod. The second is that for some, the stand-alone services could be thought to look very much like a wedding service. This leads some to ask whether such services would contravene the church’s teaching that holy matrimony is between a man and a woman. As further work from the House of Bishops becomes available and the way ahead is clearer we will of course be communicating this with you.

So, what would I suggest would be the best way forward for us here in Bath and Wells?

Firstly, I have long and consistently been of the opinion that the use of the prayers of love and faith should be ‘opt in’ rather than ‘opt out’.

Secondly, given the differences that exist among us, I’m also passionate that the decision to use or not use them must be subject first to the consciences of individual ministers (be they clergy or Readers) and should also only be used in any church with the full backing of the PCC.

Now the challenge I have is this. The commendation route that has been used for the prayers mean that as bishop I can’t insist on the use of the prayers being subject to any opt in process. But for the strongest pastoral reasons, and in pursuit of the unity to which Jesus commanded us as the people of God in this diocese, I would like to make the strongest possible plea that we should all commit to make ‘opt in’ the way we do things round here.

The ‘opt in’ approach I have in mind is that the prayers would only be used be used by those ministers who wished to do so who have the full backing of their church’s PCC. If approached by enquirers they could then say ‘welcome, come in, we’d love to celebrate these prayers with you’. By the same token, any minister and PCC not willing to offer the prayers can, when asked, simply say ‘we’ve not opted into their use’. They would of course have the option to refer enquiries on to other ministers and churches that have.

I’m also conscious that there is much fear and uncertainty about what the future will look like. And that’s not been helped by the pastoral guidance not yet being issued in full. One of the best ways to counteract fear is agency. So, my second proposal is that we should work together here in Bath & Wells to develop our own guidance in a number of areas. We’ve begun to do this, for example, for our work in schools. But we also need to think this through for the handling of vocations, vacancies, encouragement to senior roles and in a number of other areas.

We have a lot on our plates. And we could very easily turn inwards as we think about the challenges that face us. But I’d like to finish with these words of Jesus:

‘As you, Father, are in me and I am in you, may they also be in us, so that the world may believe that you have sent me. The glory that you have given me I have given them, so that they may be one, as we are one, I in them and you in me, that they may become completely one, so that the world may know that you have sent me and have loved them even as you have loved me.’ (Jn 17: 21b-23)

It’s said that in October 1917, the Orthodox Church was too busy to attend to the unfolding revolution happening on the streets of Russia because their leaders were caught up in a vitriolic argument about the correct colours of vestments to be worn at different seasons of the liturgical year. I’m not suggesting that the differences we face about LLF, finance, or even the administration of faculties are in that league. But we do live in a world where there is a cost-of-living crisis, where unprecedented numbers of our fellow citizens are using food banks, where a war of deadly attrition rumbles on in Ukraine, and where some several thousand children have lost their lives recently in Israel and Gaza. Our world is watching us. Will we be concerned first and foremost with our divisions and issues? Or will we be united in responding to the colossal needs that we see around us? If the former, then the world will rightly write us off. If the latter, then we stand a chance of fulfilling the commission we have been given by Jesus - that we may be completely one, so that the world may know that the Father sent to us his Son, and loves us with a love that’s stronger than death.

Thank you
Bishop Michael