Presidential Address to Synod

October 30th 2021

This week sees the Conference of the Parties, COP26, in Glasgow where leaders from around the world will gather to discuss the climate crisis and make decisions about our world’s future. Time is pressing. The warning is that if we don’t take dramatic action now it will be too late to do anything that will impact our trajectory towards extinction, further down the road. During recent weeks you will have heard much in the media to stimulate the debate and the earth-shot prizes have given some signs of hope of what might be achieved if we put social capital and actual finance behind it.

There are some from our diocese who have gone to Glasgow to add their prayers and presence at such an important moment in our history. This morning we pray for all that takes place this week and as we hear the update on the progress being made in our diocesan plans to tackle this climate and environmental challenge, let us pledge ourselves to do all we can both personally and collectively.

At our last Synod in July I spoke of the fishing boat amidst the storm, reminding us of both the life-giving and destructive properties of water. We thought about the fragility of that little boat and the constraint of its resource and yet how Jesus came walking on the water, bringing hope for fearful disciples. I reminded us then, that although we may share the anxieties of those disciples, wondering if our ‘little boat’ of a diocese can withstand the power of the gathering storm, it is a moment to look out and notice the one walking on the water towards us. The one who stretches out his hand to invite us to join him on the precarious path. Peter did just that. But in stepping out of the boat he started to doubt as he looked at what was holding him up and felt the swell of the waves. He lost his focus on Jesus and started to see all the problems around him. It was at that point of crying out for help that Jesus reached out his hand to hold him. I ended my remarks in July with these words..

‘I pray that we will find our faith grows as we too step out onto the challenging path ahead. That we might fix our eyes upon Jesus, the one in whom all we need can be found, and the one who holds out his hand to lift us from the fear and anxiety that might seek to trap us.’

In July I spoke of God being a God of abundance not of scarcity and I told you of being out in Howard’s little Drascombe Coaster on the coast of the Black Isle and how we glimpsed dolphins, a little picture of grace.

This past weekend Howard was up there again in his boat, celebrating with friends and family his 60th Birthday. It was a ‘boys’ own’ event, sleeping out under the stars on the beach after BBQ-ed steaks, fireworks and whisky, with the boat gently bobbing on its anchor in the bay. A wonderful time was had I’m told, but in the morning the boat was nowhere to be seen.

We thought all was lost and it had likely sunk between Scotland and Norway! Much soul-searching was done about how it could have been prevented. If only someone had slept on the boat rather than beside the bonfire….

I don’t want you to think that the Worsley life is just one of boats and it’s certainly not one of plain sailing as you can hear! But it did speak to me again about what we face just now. Today we begin a new session of Synod, with new members of the crew as well as seasoned sailors. As we embark on the next stage of our voyage together, knowing we face choppy waters ahead, we need to set a direction of travel, and ensure we have all we need for the journey. Hence our agenda speaks of the things that really matter to us. Our strategic priorities and the key threads of our work which we have recently begun to focus more clearly on, including that of addressing the climate crisis. And this requires us to set a budget for such work, one that is both realistic and also aspirational.

To navigate the challenges of our current financial situation we have already had to make some adjustments in reshaping the support services we offer to parishes and schools. We have sought to do so with care and an eye to where we perceive we can have the best local and sustainable impact. This has not been without pain and cost to individuals within that process and I want to thank all those who have been a part of that journey for their grace and commitment and the way they have put the diocese and its needs before their own. Thank you!

What you will be presented with today is not only a budget for this year but a projection for the next 5 years, having charted the waters as it were. We know that we are all constrained financially at this time, both personally and across our communities. Thus the principles being presented today, seek to be realistic about what we see as possible considering where we are now, in order to bring us to a healthier financial place. We recognise that we cannot ask more of people in terms of Common Fund contributions this year and thus a deficit budget is being set. It does mean however that if income from Common Fund is to be kept at current levels then expenditure needs to be reduced. We cannot sustain a budget long term where we draw down further monies from a depleting resource, by selling property or borrowing from investments. This is the realism we need to face. And this is why you have the projected plan which gives hard facts and numbers, including stipendiary clergy figures, over the next 5 years.

But this is not the end of the story, just like that of the Worsley Birthday adventure…

The Drascombe was found on Wednesday just off Shetland, having apparently sheared it’s rope in blustery winds. Still intact save for a broken shackle which brought the mast down, and then towed safely into port by a kindly wind farmer. Quite what the cost will be, we don’t yet know. Assessments need to be made for the time of the wind farmer, the distance travelled and any repairs necessary. But you can imagine Howard’s delight and his desire to be better prepared for future storms.

We too need to weather proof our endeavours to live and tell the story of Jesus but we recognise that our God is one of great abundance. His grace is sufficient for all our needs and ours must be a response to His love which calls from us both a commitment to a growth in personal generosity and a determination to address the fragility in the fabric of our life together. We can make changes to this 5 year plan of realism and make it one of greater aspiration if we do so.

Today as we begin this new Synod, may we recommit ourselves to that vision to which God has called us and to joining together in embarking on the journey without fear but with our eyes fixed on Him who calls us.

With thankfulness to Him and for you!

+Ruth