

## **Dr Christopher Herbert's Presidential Address to Diocesan Synod, Saturday 5 February 2011**

A few months ago a white envelope, amongst several brown ones, landed on my doormat. I picked it up. It announced its origin with an understated flourish: "Lambeth Palace".

At this stage in my life, having retired from St Albans diocese in 2009, an envelope from Lambeth usually means that the Archbishop wants me to write a reference about someone. I opened the envelope and read...

The Archbishop, with characteristic grace, enquired whether I was willing to be his Commissary in Salisbury diocese. It was not the sort of request I was expecting. I read the letter a couple of times and my wife said "You will have to say yes, won't you?" I confess that I found the decision a bit tricky. My retirement had already taken a new and lovely shape: I had developed my love of Art History and had become a lecturer for the National Association of Decorative and Fine Arts Societies, and had a large number of bookings across the UK. I was helping out at any local churches that asked, and I had become an unpaid non-exec director of the Abbeyfield Society nationally, which involved a good deal of travel. And then, in addition, there were our three grand-daughters...and perhaps there would be time to learn Italian. But then the letter arrived.

I contacted the Archbishop and had a conversation with him. I explained that I would willingly take on being his Commissary but I simply could not renege on all my other commitments. He understood...

Well. I asked for a job description and was not surprised to discover that there wasn't one...

And what has happened since the arrival of that letter? The lawyers have had a good deal of lawyerly fun and have decided that technically I am a Delegate and not a Commissary...there still is no job description from Lambeth Palace...and I have been gradually drawn into the life of this diocese.

Let me say, right at the outset, that the warmth of the welcome I have been given has been wonderful. It has made what is quite a challenge into a delight, but still a challenge...I want to put on record my thanks, particularly to +Graham who has been astonishingly gracious and generous in welcoming me as a colleague, and I want to say publically what a joy it is to work with the senior staff, the Archdeacons, John, Alan, Paul and Stephen, and Lucinda and the Dean. I really could not have been given a more warm and loving welcome.

And the same is true of the staff at South Canonry, who have been marvellously efficient and hugely supportive. I owe them a real debt of gratitude. Whoever is appointed as the next diocesan bishop here is going to be a very, very lucky person. It speaks volumes for the life and ministry of +David that the senior staff are who and what they are...And let me also put on record that to look after Salisbury, even only temporarily after +David, really is a great and daunting privilege.

So what have I done and what am I doing?

I do not want to bore you with a list and so I won't, but let it be said that I have never had to type so many e-mails before...and I have met all the staff at the Diocesan office plus the Education Centre staff. I have met with many RD's and lay chairmen and have been to meet the teams at the Ramsbury office in Devizes, and in the Sherborne office in Corfe Mullen, as well as the staff at the cathedral. There have been confirmations, and there will be ordinations, confirmations, licensings and all the stuff that goes with being a bishop. I spent

part of a day with the Bishops Council at their residential and with the senior staff at their residential. I meet regularly with +Graham, and shall be chairing staff meetings, Bishop's Council and anything else where I can be of use. I have written articles for the Cathedral and for the Sarum Link, and am in the process of visiting a number of the Church Secondary Schools. In addition, I have met a number of individuals at their request and am at hand to field any pastoral crises that the archdeacons might pass in my direction...But, in spite of all of this, I am deeply conscious that the day to day life of the diocese is in the hands, as it should be, of +Graham, the Archdeacons, Lucinda, Gil Williams and the DBF, and the teams in the Diocesan office and in the Education Centre, and in South Canonry and the Cathedral. They are the cake; I am merely a temporary cherry...

But let me add a few things more, a few reflections...

Like many of you, I carry in my head a series of maps. So, when I was in St Albans, for example, I carried in my head a map of Hertfordshire and Bedfordshire and parts of north London. That was my patch. Now, as Archbishop's Delegate in your diocese I am learning a new map. In terms of geography, my mental map of Dorset and Wiltshire is fairly hazy. I know the A 303...am I getting to know that road?!! Some of my distant forebears came from Abbotsbury, Evershot and Melbury Bubb... and so I know roughly where they are located. I spent one or two childhood holidays in Charmouth and Lyme Regis, and I know that some people in Wiltshire are called Moonrakers...I hope I have not caused any offence...

But, in general, this part of England in my head is a bit blank. In the next few months I am sure that the very considerable gaps in my geographical knowledge will be filled in.

But maps are not just of places, they are also of ethos and culture. And my mental map of the culture of the diocese already has on it a big symbol labelled "Loving kindness". I am conscious that there are other areas of that cultural map which are beginning to take shape in my mind, for instance, Sudan and Evreux and Latvia...In addition, through using the Prayer calendar I am aware of a sense of gentle caring and a gentle, faithful steadiness which pervades much of what you are doing.

One of the things about maps, however, is that they need constant up-dating. At the moment this diocese, it seems to me, is embarking on a lively exploration of what the map of the future of Christian life and mission ought to be. The debate later today, led by the Archdeacon of Sherborne, is part of that process. And I want to add, very hesitantly, if may, to that thinking...

If you read the Gospel of Luke and its companion volume the Acts of the Apostles, Luke tells a fascinating story of the early years of Christianity. For instance, as we just heard Bridget read from Acts chapter 2, following an account of an impassioned sermon from Peter, there is this reaction from the hearers: "Those who accepted what he said were baptised, and some three thousand were added to the number of believers that day."

If this were given visual form, it would show a map of Jerusalem and a bright red flag with the number 3,000 written boldly upon it. From then on the story develops in what seems to be an inevitable way—the Good News spreads rapidly outwards from the central point of Jerusalem until it engulfs large parts of the Mediterranean basin. Much of this success is laid at the feet of a fiery evangelist called Paul. Luke writes Peter out of the story...and who knows why?

Now, compare that map with one showing the sites of early Christian churches in the Mediterranean area. A third century map would show a plethora of churches right across the Mediterranean region, but there are significant clusters, mostly associated with ports. So

Carthage, for example, has a very large number of churches in its vicinity and so does the south eastern corner of Spain.

Why this curious clustering? Because these were the major sites of trade in olive oil and grain. And where trade happens, people share ideas. And it was in and from these sites that new ideas were created and spread, including the foundational ideas and faith of Christianity. If you superimpose a map showing the production and distribution centres of olive oil in the 3<sup>rd</sup> century, on a map showing the location of churches, there is an interesting correlation. (I am indebted to Christopher Page and his huge book "The Christian West and its Singers", Yale University Press 2010, for this insight).

What does this show? It shows that the ways in which we draw maps is significant. Putting it rather crudely, Luke does not mention the trade in olive oil in the way he maps the spread of Christianity. He attributes its spread simply to the evangelising power of Paul and others....

I have little doubt that if an economic or agricultural historian mapped the development of churches in this diocese from the arrival of Christianity, it might well show a close correlation between their locations and the trade routes of the time, and perhaps an even closer correlation between the siting of churches and the locations of the courts of the kingdom of Wessex. In other words, the spread and distribution of Christianity is often more complex and fascinating than we sometimes think, and perhaps much more bound up with secular developments than we might wish.

Put it another way, as you consider the ways in which the church in this diocese might develop in the future,(including the very important development of schools) what are the salient and dominant features of economics and trade that need to be taken into account? And how should they inform our decisions on how best the diocesan Boards might work better and more closely together in order to support and enrich ministry in the diocese where it is most needed – including whether or not we share buildings?

Let me add one further thing. As the trade routes in **information** become more and more important, what are the consequences for the Christian mission in this area of England? If, for example, more and more people work from home using the new Information networks,( they are, after all, the 21<sup>st</sup> century equivalents of the 3<sup>rd</sup> century trade in olive oil) how can we meet the spiritual and pastoral needs of those people? What hubs and nodes of true community and human flourishing do we already offer? Are any new ones required?

I want to conclude by saying one thing more: I believe profoundly in the grace, creativity, faithfulness and vivacity of God. The challenges that face us as we try to map the future are considerable, but because God is God, the future is filled with promise. Where two or three are gathered together... is true, is true, is true, We are accompanied on all our journeying by the risen Christ and so the future beckons as a place where new life is also to be found.

The envelope that dropped through my door all those months ago has already led me, as it were, to some fascinating new places, physically, mentally, culturally and spiritually. My map may still be hazy, but I am certain that within that haze I shall discover, as it clears, something of the very presence of God.

I pray therefore that the next few months and years for this diocese, as you try to map it and shape it, will be filled with the joy and delight and beauty of God.

+Christopher Herbert. February 2011.