

2019 16th November Diocesan Synod Presidential Address

Matthew 13.44-53

That's a marvellous reading about treasures old and new. I love the question from Jesus to the disciples, "Have you understood all this?" and they answered, "Yes". I wonder. Most of us are still trying to work it out.

Renewing Hope

We are very glad to be in Amesbury, partly as a support to this church in particular as here too was deeply affected by Novichok and the death of Dawn Sturgess and Charlie Rowley.

Most Diocesan meetings since we began Renewing Hope start with the question, "What has renewed your hope since we last met?" Here are a few of mine.

Last Saturday evening 45 people from 21 parishes and 1 school were confirmed at a diocesan Confirmation in the cathedral. If one of our priorities is discipleship, confirmation is a way to do it. So far this year 502 have been confirmed in this diocese, more than last year, but fewer than the year before.

Next summer, God willing, I will ordain 14 deacons, 4 of whom will be self-supporting. The increase in those offering for lay and ordained ministry is beginning to help us re-imagine our response to the expected retirement of 40% of our clergy this decade.

There are 149 new worshipping communities in the diocese alongside the more traditional forms of church. They have an average attendance of 38 though do not all meet every week. Most do not church elsewhere, though of course some do.

On Remembrance Sunday, thousands of people took part in services and ceremonies with a more or less Christian form to remember those who have died in active service of their country and commit themselves to the way of peace.

It's not unlike the large numbers who will come for Christmas by which I mean all those services that take place in Advent and celebrate God come among us in Jesus Christ.

Chaplaincies renew hope but I am puzzled that where there is worship – for example in schools, hospitals, prisons – the numbers are not counted in church statistics.

Renewing Rural Hope, which is largely paid for by Strategic Development Funding from the central Church, with four Archdeaconry officers, theological resource and training, conferences and residential have given new heart to rural ministry and mission.

The Diocesan Board of Education – whose annual report we will receive this afternoon - in serves more than the 43,000 children and young people in our Church schools and academies, working with parish churches and leading for us as a 'trailblazer' diocese for the Church of England's Growing Faith in the context of churches, schools and households.

The cathedral – also giving their annual report today - provides an iconic focus for the diocese and offers leadership of quality and culture. With next year's 800th anniversary of the foundation of the new cathedral in Salisbury it gives the diocese stability of purpose.

All of this and the continuing Christian presence in every community across the diocese renews my hope daily in God's small miracle of the Diocese of Salisbury.

Renewing Hope - Pray, Serve, Grow

When we introduced Renewing Hope - Pray, Serve, Grow in 2014 we said that it would be reviewed after 5 years. We have been doing this, in part with +John Gladwin's review.

The questions

What do you pray for?

Whom do you serve?

How will you grow?

have proved themselves to be fertile and useful.

There was a strong commitment to this process partly because it was not top down and directive but gave space for interpretation and application in a variety of ways.

In terms of numeric growth we have used the Fair Share numbers as base figures because we have been counting in this way since 2004. They do not take account of the sort of things that have actually renewed hope but they have continued to decline very gently at a rate of 1 - 2% per year most years.

There has been quite a lot of thought about who we count and why? That's part of the work of the Fairer Share review where we have been wondering if we can come up with something even fairer and more helpful to the local church and the diocese. It is a work in progress and more challenging than we expected. It is best to take time not least because the present system has a contribution rate of 98% of what is requested from parishes.

In finance, we need to ensure that ambition, expenditure and income are matched. It can be done in a number of ways – a strengthening of vision and purpose through our diocesan priorities, reducing expenditure, increasing income and in all likelihood a mix of all three. As always, this Christian life will be both challenging and enlivening as 5 years in we refresh Renewing Hope – Pray, Serve, Grow with a commitment to diocesan priorities that are the outworking of that ambition.

The General Election

The General Election will be the third in 4.5 years in addition to the Referendum. Brexit is a strain and whatever happens in the election it is not going away. You don't need me to rehearse my political views, though like you I have them.

I want to say something about what Christians bring to the debate and what we can try to do in our local communities. In such a fractious time the churches can seek to act justly, love mercy and walk humbly with God. It is an old treasure. We have a concern for truth, for our neighbour and for generous hospitality as churches make community in every place.

I want to thank those who have represented constituencies in this diocese, particularly those who have stood down: Sir Oliver Letwin in West Dorset and Claire Perry in Devizes, and for us to pray for all who are standing for election.

I want us to be surprised and challenging at the way those who would govern us casually make promises and break promises. It is not acceptable.

We now live in a world of fake news and alternative facts with the echo chambers of social media feeding and reinforcing our views. There is proper concern about the way those outside this democracy influence us through social media and indeed through the Press which is mostly owned by people with money and strong views who do not all live here in the UK. I am heartened by the ways in which there is so much 'Fact Checking' of what is said. In a world in which it is difficult to be sure what is true, we Christians commit to being about the truth and accountable to it. Elections are about holding our politicians, ourselves and one another to account. Use the hustings that are being organised by churches in most constituencies to pursue the truth.

A part of this Synod is given to the environment. With bush fires in Australia as there were in Siberia in our summer and floods in Yorkshire and Venice we will be asked to recognise there is a climate emergency. Many Councils, including Wiltshire, have recognised that there is a climate emergency as has Parliament. So ask the candidates what they think and how we can act in response to the climate emergency. What policies will support the rapid transition to a net zero carbon neutral economy?

And given the strains of the economy and the willingness to invest in our common life ask about their commitment to maintain the commitment to 0.7% of GDP on overseas aid? It is 'love thy neighbour' and it is enlightened self-interest.

In environmental matters, a varied ecology is needed to support and sustain life. It is an illusion to think that if only everyone thought the same as me or you the world would be a better place. It would lack energy and creativity. Diversity is a gift from God. We need each other to be ourselves and we need to recognise that on earth we live in this one house, in which we need to have a care for the ecology, economy and ecumenism of our common home.

We Christians ought to be good at this. Our Archbishop has made good disagreement an aim for a Church that sometimes struggles with difference but which in fact has almost 2,000 years of experience.

Partnerships

We greatly value the diocesan partnerships we have with Evreux, Latvia and the Sudans. We very much look forward to welcoming the bishops and their spouses from the Sudans for the week of hospitality next July before the Lambeth Conference.

Our focus on Renewing Rural Hope has put us in touch with clergy from the Danish Lutheran Diocese of Haderslev and Canon Jane Charman's participation in a European conference opened the possibility of a new diocesan relationship. I met with the Bishop of Haderslev in the summer when Helen and I were on holiday in Denmark. Coincidentally, it is the diocese where Helen's grandfather served as a parish priest and also one of her cousins. Bishop Marianne and I agreed there is much to gain from collaboration. We decided that it needed no formal agreement. We will see what happens as clergy and people get to know one another and a group of Danish clergy will be visiting us in the Spring. This feels timely because whatever happens with Brexit we continue to

be European and the Church is one body that could help us know our unity in Christ across national boundaries.

Treasure old and new

The genius of the Christian Church is in our being able to adapt to culture and to change over time so that faith is proclaimed afresh in every generation. That requires of us to make use of treasures old and new. This Christian life is an adventure.

Have you understood all this? Yes!