

17th October 2020 Diocesan Synod: Presidential Address

Mark 12.28-34

One of the scribes came near to Jesus who was disputing with the Sadducees. They were trying to catch him out and the Scribe thought he was answering them well. So the Scribe asked him - I wonder why? Was he also trying to catch Jesus out or was this in the spirit of genuine enquiry because it was a straightforward question the answer to which clarified the way Jesus would have been seen by most of the Jewish leadership - Which commandment is the first of all?

And he answered with what to us is the familiar summary of the law to love God and love one's neighbour as oneself. It's not very original. Other rabbis had said similar, a sort of 1st Century Judaism Back to Basics. Except it sides with a particular part of Judaism that was more bothered about the big picture and the spirit of why we do things rather than with the minutiae of what we do in order to keep ourselves right with God and that's a very familiar dynamic within Christianity and every religion.

Religion matters because it addresses fundamental questions of belief and values and meaning. It shapes character. Coming to faith involves asking questions and disputing so as to get us closer to the truth.

The Scribe repeated Jesus' answer and added that the love of God and neighbour is more important than burnt offerings and sacrifices to which Jesus said, 'You are not far from the kingdom of God.' That's where we want to be. That they were unable to ask any more questions suggests this is an authoritative end to the discussion. Not perfect but close enough to be hopeful and satisfying and to be able to get on with life.

We live in strange times and the coronavirus is not going to go away quickly. It is certainly going to be with us through the winter and some. The economic consequences are becoming more apparent. Quite a few commentators are saying that one consequence is that changes that were happening steadily are speeding up. That seems true of church life. Patterns of church going have changed and who knows if they will come back? I recognise the imaginative and creative ways in which many churches are adapting to very new circumstances. Many have developed an online presence very quickly. Many are at the centre of their community responses to care for those in most need. Questions are now emerging about whether we can or should want to continue as we were or whether we need to grasp the moment and make some fundamental changes to the way we are organised locally, as a diocese and across the country that will help us to live a Christian life in this time and place so that we and our successors stay close to the kingdom of God. That was the debate we had at our last meeting and from which the proposed budget for next year has come.

These are tumultuous times. There is a lot going on in the Nation, with Covid-19 and all its personal, healthcare, economic and social implications; with Brexit, climate change and the ecological crisis, and the increasingly apparent Gap between richest and poorest this is a tumultuous time to navigate. Beliefs and values are being tested.

That is also true of Church. The report from the Independent Inquiry into Child Sexual Abuse was sobering and requires a careful and thorough response. It is not for any individual to sort out what is a societal and institutional problem with a particularly damaging impact on the individuals who are victims, and indeed on abusers who are also deeply damaged by their own actions. As a Church we are attempting a collective response to what is abhorrent to our beliefs and values. The task has to be of constant and rapid improvement. I want to pay tribute to those who are leading on this for the diocese, and today particularly Heather Bland our DSA who is retiring at the end of the year. Thank you for all she has done in what at times is an extremely difficult and demanding job.

Next month will see the publication of Living in Love and Faith, a suite of material that has been produced by the C of E about marriage, relationships and sexuality. It follows from the decision by General Synod not to take note of the report from the House of Bishops following the Shared Conversations that came out of the Pilling Report. It has been an immense amount of work by about 60 people over three years. The aim is to have an educational process that helps us to learn from scripture, Christian tradition, each other's experience and think and pray about what God is saying to us in this area of life.

There has been a lot of discussion about the timing of this. It was due to have been published in June. The Coordinating Group of which I am a member discussed delaying it into next year. In the end we decided the subject continues to be important and the work has been done so it is best to get it out into the public domain. Bishop Karen is on the national implementation group. Doubtless in the new year there will be groups across the diocese using the material and we will have a discussion in Diocesan Synod, probably next June. Again, we will need time to find our way through a discussion that for some has been too slow and for others looks like an unwelcome change to foundational beliefs and values. The task for us as Church is to stay close to the kingdom of God.

That's also why the bishops are about to start a series of episcopal visits by Deaneries so that we keep in touch and have a conversation about the way we see things unfolding. Do come and encourage others to do so as well.

In all of these things as a diocese we are fortunate not need to make a knee-jerk reaction but we do need to keep gathering the information and navigate tumultuous times. As we do we can, to sustain Christian worship, ministry and mission, ask questions of our circumstances and keep our eye on the need for a balanced budget in five years. There's no question we are in a process of change that will shape the Church for a long time to come.

One of the reasons Christianity is a great missionary religion is because in the incarnation God came among us in Jesus Christ and Christianity has taken root in every time and every place. As one of the visiting Primates said at General Synod in February, in a crisis it's easy to lose your direction. Loving God and loving your neighbour as yourself will keep us close to the kingdom of God.