

## **2021 13<sup>th</sup> February Diocesan Synod: Presidential Address**

Thank you to Mike Tufnell for leading our prayers. When there's anxiety about the pandemic and its implications for the things we hold dear, it's a good reminder that God is faithful and love is what we need in the best and the most difficult of times.

It has always struck me as an irony that for florists and card shops St Valentine's day is one of the biggest days in the year but in the Church long ago St Valentine was demoted. Maybe he never existed. We have separated ourselves from one of the saints everyone remembers when what the world needs and longs for is lifelong loving relationships. That ought to be a bit of a warning about our how we relate to the society around us and we could use Valentine's Day creatively. As it says in 1 John 4.7, "God is love and those who live in love live in God".

Tomorrow, the Sunday next before Lent, the Gospel reading at the Principle Service will be Mark's account of the Transfiguration. There's a lot of talk in today's Church about how the Gospel transforms lives and communities. Transforms, not in the sense of removing pain and difficulty but by transfiguring that pain and difficulty through love so that we bear it in a way that is transformed.

It's a stark reminder to us that the Feast of the Transfiguration is kept on 6th August which is also Hiroshima Day. Sydney Evans, Dean of King's College London when I was a student, and then the Dean of Salisbury who commissioned the Prisoners of Conscience window in the cathedral, formed a Company of the Transfiguration to pray this. The basic recognition was that the same human life can be transfigured by love as is disfigured by evil. Here is the basic religious choice articulated so clearly in the Hebrew Scriptures by Moses in Deuteronomy chapter 19: Today I set before you a choice between life and death. Therefore choose life.

The meaning of life is not how successful we are or how long we live but it is the quality of that life transfigured by the love of God and our responses to one another in the gift of this extraordinary world which is so briefly ours. That sets a very helpful framework for this Synod in which we will be thinking about what is happening to us during this pandemic and what will be needed from us in the coming years. As last time we met, we are establishing a planning framework, a Mission and Pastoral Plan, for now and as we come through the pandemic.

Even in difficult circumstances we can live, individually and corporately, in the light of the resurrection as people who are energised by the transfiguring love of God and one another. And don't forget to love the creation because the economy, which we seem to love so much, is a wholly owned subsidiary of the environment.

Next Tuesday is Shrove Tuesday, which has always seemed to me a very English and politely reserved Mardi Gras. On the eve of Lent there's usually a bit of a pancake party in families, churches and communities before we move into the solemnities of the Forty Days. Necessarily it's going to be different this year. Parties are off. It's not so easy to have a good party on Zoom.

Zoom is a way of us keeping in touch. That is partly what gathering for Synod in this format enables: us keeping in touch. So far, the two diocesan synods we have had on Zoom have worked pretty well. Let's hope for today. Part of the agenda is to check out how people are, what we're thinking and doing: keeping in touch.

My sense is that we are finding this third lockdown significantly more difficult than before. We're tired. It's gone on a long time and been much tougher in Winter than it was in the long warm days of Spring and Summer. Young people are having a really difficult time. Families are having to cope in greater isolation than is good for people, other than to keep the same from the virus which is our over-riding concern.

There have been a number of false dawns. I am not convinced this virus is only this year's problem. Nor was it ever going to be only last year's problem. It so obviously was never going to be over by Christmas. The virus has become more easily transmissible. The vaccination programme is going well but it isn't going to solve all the problems of how we are going to live with this virus. Recreational travel is off the agenda but that's symbolic of a much greater change in the way we live. No wonder tempers are frayed.

There is a lot to be said for kindness but conflict is much more difficult to resolve when we can't physically be in the same room. The loss of a shared meal and for many Christians the loss of frequency of the Eucharist, means we don't have the same things to nourish and sustain us.

How are we coping and what are we learning? Synod gives us an opportunity to check in with each other, recognising that experiences are varied but listening closely to what is going on and how it is still possible for people to be transfigured by love in these most difficult circumstances. If the role of the Bishop is oversight, one of the functions of Diocesan Synod is to help build that oversight.

Of course there's plenty of determination and increasing hope that we will get things going again. The one thing that looks certain is that we won't be going back to things as they were. The world has changed. The tectonic plates are shifting in all sorts of ways. We can't yet see what this is going to mean but we do need to be alert to God within it. Forgiveness and resurrection, the Easter story, are at the heart of this.

Next Wednesday is Ash Wednesday and the beginning of Lent. These forty days are always fertile territory for the Church. I wonder if that might be more so this year? A penitential period in which to turn away from sin and be faithful to Christ. The disciplines of Lent are self-examination and repentance; prayer, fasting and self-denial; and reading and meditating of God's holy word. They are the sort of things made for lockdown, or at least can be fairly easily done in lockdown. We can't go away on retreat. We can organise our time for a retreat in daily life.

Charitable giving, an act of love, is also something to do and develop in Lent, teaching us to live for others and not just for self. I liked an idea of the Bishop of Gloucester's that as we are vaccinated those of us who can and want to make a donation to Christian Aid to pay for someone in the poorer world to be vaccinated. If we can formalise it as Gloucester Diocese is doing, we will let you know but it struck me as one of those good ideas that just needed us individually to act on.

Finally, on a more personal note Helen and I have been very touched by the many good wishes we have received following the announcement I will be retiring in July. I won't be able to write to everyone who has written to us but through this Synod address I thank you all.

*Lord God, you have appointed me in the church as bishop and pastor. You see how unfit I am to attend to such a great and difficult office, and if it had not been for your help, I would long since have ruined everything. Therefore I call upon you.*

I am not leaving until 3rd July. Who knows whether we will be able to meet in person for a farewell but I will leave the diocese at Evensong in confidence in the providential love of God and the competence and commitment of colleagues with whom it is a privilege to serve.

Now, let's get on. There's important work to be done. To God be the glory now and for ever. Amen.