



Presidential Address

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Diocesan Synod, 19 November 2022

- Mark 7 : 24 – 30

God's Church for God's World – the title given to the 2022 Lambeth Conference and the title I want to use for today's address as we make our focus the worldwide church to which we all belong.

Our reading for today is set geographically in the context of modern-day Syria, and one of the main characters is a mother of a young girl who is unwell. A mother who would do anything to make her daughter well again. In the story we find her begging, literally begging Jesus to heal her child. Jesus responds in a way that has always left me puzzled: "Let the children be fed first, for it is not fair to take the children's food and throw it to the dogs."

I'm no Greek scholar, but I am assured from my research that he did not mean it to be an insult, that instead of using the usual word, he used a diminutive word which described, not the wild dogs of the streets, but little pet lap dogs of the house (perhaps not unlike those dogs that we see people carrying around in their handbags) – so characteristically, perhaps meant in an affectionate manner – it takes the sting out of the word. So not a voice of contempt but one of affection. Jesus did once say that he had "come to the lost sheep of house of Israel." Here he was restating this once more, albeit in a different way. The human in me, however, is secretly still disturbed by Jesus appearing to add to the distress of the woman – referring to her child in effect as a dog.

We take offence so easily, don't we? We do. It is not almost as if we are looking to find something to be offended by - but something to have an argument over. And how easy it is to stay with this particular bit - "How dare he say that my child is a dog? How dare he?" Look at this things that we take offense to – and I am including myself in this because I feel a little perturbed by Jesus using that kind of language.





But the woman in this story has no time to take offense, her only concern was the wellbeing of her daughter. Her focus was about goodness, healing, and wholeness; not looking for an excuse to be angry at others - or even angry at the world. She is quick off the mark, “Sir, even the dogs under the table eat the children’s crumbs!” So, she uses that to still keep focus. In other words, “I’ll take the crumbs! If that is all that is going, if that is what is going to bring healing to my child, I will take the crumbs!”

We are told that Jesus “entered a house and did not want anyone to know he was there. Yet he could not escape notice,” Perhaps Jesus was seeking a bit of downtime – and we all know what that feels like. When I wrap my scarf around my neck and hide my dog collar – which I did at the station to other day and then I asked a man for directions, and he referred to me in a way that said he recognised who I was. And that was disturbing! So, Jesus is seeking this downtime. But this woman notices him. This mother showed every sign of curiosity that enabled her to listen and get behind what was being said. Her curiosity helped her to understand where Jesus was coming from, what his mission was, what his needs were. No wonder she was not angry at his outburst.

But not so with us. We rarely listen to each other. What are we afraid of? What are we afraid of? Why don’t be listen to one another? We rarely listen to God, too, because we are so sure we already know the answers long before the questions are even asked. We fail to nurture the kind of curiosity that enables us to truly listen to one another’s perspective and truly encounter the other. We come armed, ready to say what it is: “God has laid this on my heart and I’ve just got to tell you what it is that God has laid on my heart!”

Jesus could easily have gotten rid of this woman – after all, was he not trying to find a bit of peace and quiet? But on this occasion, Jesus chooses to remain present with her. Might we also try to be present with others? It is necessary for us to be incarnationally present with those who are suffering, those who are marginalised, those who do not agree with us. The Syrophenician woman, Jesus the Jew... look at all the things that separated them. But might we stay present with one another?





Staying “present” in ministry means being able to be of service to those on the edges as well as to those in the centre - the known and the unknown. This mother also stays present and engaged and as a result, both she and her daughter receive the healing and wholeness was sought. A woman seen by some as an outsider, is seen and valued by God. And, my goodness, I know what that feels like! Seen and valued by God. By those who simply say, “You’re a woman, what can you add to this conversation? You are a woman, you’re not entitled to stand at the front and lead.” It hurts like hell.

Valued, seen and valued by God – and that gives me all the encouragement that I need. That gives me all that I need. And gave the woman all that she needed on this occasion. Our Lord is not afraid for her voice to be heard. If Jesus was not afraid for the woman to speak, what are we afraid of? What are we afraid of? What is the church afraid of, when we say to a woman, “You’re not allowed to speak. This is a holy place”? You’re damn right it is a holy place. It is God’s holy place, not yours. It is God’s church for God’s world.

Seen and valued by God. Our Lord is not afraid for her to be visible and engaged in his presence. Visible and engaged in his presence. This woman’s story is one of hope, healing, relationship, and reconciliation. It is these that lie at the heart of the mission that we are called to be part of as God’s Church for God’s world. I wonder how, together, we might reimagine the kind of transformation that this can and will bring about? The people of God locally, nationally, and internationally working together as one in all our diversities.

I cannot help but wonder what God’s Church in this diocese might look like if we were all prepared to practice being present with one another and those who we serve, being curious and willing to reimagine our lives together. Why? For the sake of the gospel. For the sake of the gospel - not for our church traditions, not for our labels but for the sake of the gospel of Jesus Christ.

In a world where we are easily distracted, and self-interested, it was good that the Lambeth Conference gave us a different focus. It enabled over 700 bishops and their spouses from over 165 countries to meet, to renew friendships, to reflect, to





pray together. Our gathering gave us an opportunity to address several topics such as mission and evangelism, discipleship, peace and reconciliation, Church unity, inter-faith relations and the life of the Anglican Communion. And all this against the world backdrop of war and conflict, racial inequality, gender and socio-economic injustice, modern day slavery, mass migration, rapid scientific and technological change and the climate crisis. That's the backdrop in which we met, that's the backdrop in which we meet today, that's the backdrop in which we live. And we must never forget that and be 'closed'.

Personally, I was relieved that for once, we were not obsessed by a certain subject matter. In my small bible study group made up with myself, a native American, an Irishman, an American, a Sudanese and a Latin American, we too were not focused or obsessed with that particular thing – we were focused on that backdrop as it impacts on us, on our various communities. In my online group were from New Zealand, Australia, Pakistan, Philippines, Ghana and four others from the UK. We discovered that we all had more in common than the things that some would have us believe should separate us. Our commitment to stay together as God's Church for God's world was based on the prayer of our Lord in John 17 that we would be one as he and his father are also one. In our time together we listened and learnt from each other's story. I am still in touch online with some of those who I spent time with in the summer.

Over the summer, during the Lambeth Conference I was able to host the bishops and their spouses from our link dioceses (Madagascar & the Indian Ocean, as well as our German partners). I am excited by our links and I look forward to seeing this grow and develop. Together – being God's Church for God's world, not looking at the things that separate us, but keeping focus on the things that bind us together as one.

From my encounter at the Lambeth Conference, there are two stories that stood out. First was the African bishops speaking of the devastation that war brought and is still bringing to his country. We talked about the use of rape against women and young girls by the soldiers where it had become a weapon of warfare. But I was struck by the conversation that the bishops were having with those in





military leadership.

The bishops from that country, in conversation with the military leadership. That conversation was enabling soldiers to stay within reach of their families, to prevent what was seen as the inevitability of rape being normalised. I wondered, what is missing in this conversation? I wondered who was missing in this conversation? Who needed to be in that room with the bishop and the soldiers? Who needed to be at that table when this matter was being discussed? And I wondered what the conversation then would be in that context.

My second story was with an indigenous bishop from Manitoba. He spoke eloquently of the work of the missionaries who came to his country two centuries ago. And they welcomed them in and received the Christian faith. However, I could hear and see the pain etched in his voice and on his face as he shared the sadness of how their indigenous culture was demonised. The missionaries failed to see the work of God's spirit in the native culture. They equated Christianity with their European culture, he said. And from this came the tragedy of residential schools where churches were complicit in the attempt by those of a western culture to forcibly assimilate indigenous people by the loss of their language and their way of life.

Today there are still many inequalities which is a result of the legacy of the past. We need to own that, we need to acknowledge that and we need to pray that God may enable us to reimagine what that new future might be - and the kind of legacy that we might leave behind for generations to come. The fact that they were present at the Lambeth Conference is a testimony of their commitment to work towards building the kind of hope that brings well-needed healing, forgiveness and reconciliation. A commitment to deepening the quality of our relationships so that we may truly witness to the love of God in Jesus Christ as we walk hand in hand with one another.

In conclusion, the links between ourselves and different parts of the Anglican Communion can help to bring today's reading alive by bringing hope, healing, relationship and reconciliation. This is a two-way mutual process. As God's





children, we are God's church for God's world – all of us. Men and women, able-bodied, disabled-bodies, black and white, pink and blue... Together we can commit - children and adults, too – together we can commit to living this out and be the change that is needed. No more “you in your small corner and I in mine”. Let's change it!

My prayer today is that as a diocese we listen, we learn and we act – develop our sense of curiosity. And if we're going to develop our sense of curiosity then we have to look outside of the walls that we have built around ourselves, stay present with one another and thus reimagine our lives together with and in God's Spirit. Building new relationships across God's kingdom as together we commit to making Christ known in words and deeds. And the word of the hymn I end with: “Not forever by still waters would we idly rest and stay but would smite the living fountains from the rocks along our way.”

