

**Worcester Diocesan Synod
Presidential Address**

November 2019

I want first and foremost in this presidential address to pay tribute and offer my heartfelt thanks to Alastair for all he has done as Chair of the DBF over 20 years. He has worked consistently hard over that time and so often has found himself at the sharp end – facing complaints from parishes over parish share on the one hand and resistance on the other to reductions in expenditure. Alastair is a most wonderful servant of the church and the gospel and I am profoundly grateful to him.

I think he would agree that we have some serious business to discuss this evening. Our financial situation is serious, to put it mildly, and as we consider next year's budget we shall also set in train a process of a series of conversations to seek to discern what God is saying to us in all this. As we do so we must not forget what is going on in the world around us.

We gather in unusual times. It's not just that the forthcoming general election will be the first one in December for generations, that traditional loyalties are breaking down and it is very impossible to say what the outcome will be.

Barely two weeks ago I was at the Council House in Dudley for the announcement of the new Bishop of Dudley – Martin's appointment is very good news in the midst of all this. Two days later, Ian Austin, who was there, announced that he would not be standing and encouraged people to vote conservative. Meanwhile, Margot James, having been expelled from the

Conservative party, announced that she would not be standing, even though she had been welcomed back.

These two who, as many of you will remember, have spoken together twice at our diocesan synod meetings were outstanding MPs and their loss will be a great one.

What worries me most in the midst of all this is not the rights and wrongs of Brexit, which is the presenting symptom, it is the erosion of trust and confidence in our institutions, particularly in politics and politicians.

There has grown up a deep-seated frustration with the political process. It strikes me that it is not surprising that parliament has been divided and gridlocked: it reflects the state of the country which is deeply divided. Maybe society has just been scapegoating MPs

As a result, many MPs have withdrawn from parliament – not just the two I have mentioned lots of others including many women, among them Dame Caroline Spellman, the excellent Second Estates Commissioner who says she can no longer bear the hate directed against her.

It can be argued that politicians have not exactly covered themselves in glory but that is no excuse for the sort of vitriol levelled at them. Thank goodness some are prepared to stand. For their sake, and for the sake of our country, we should heed the words of the archbishops in their Advent letter:

We often forget that our political leaders face huge responsibilities and challenges, and these come with personal sacrifices too. In our prayers for this election we

should be thankful for those who put themselves forward for public service and ask that they will seek the common good and justice. We should take part, as important decisions are being made that will affect us all. That includes fulfilling our democratic duty to vote.

What else can we do? We can model the sort of behaviours we would like to see from our politicians. As the archbishops put it:

As followers of Jesus Christ each of us is called to honour the gift of truth, both to speak it and to seek it. We all have a responsibility to speak accurately, to challenge falsehoods when we hear them, and to be careful to separate facts from opinion.

Offering facts and opinions should be done with humility and in love. People who hold different political views are not our enemies. Two people can look at the same facts and in good faith interpret them very differently. Issues need to be debated respectfully, and without resorting to personal abuse. We should engage responsibly, especially on social media. If we leave our echo-chambers and make a conscious effort to listen to people and ideas we disagree with it will help us understand where others are coming from in this election period, even though we may disagree vehemently. As Christians, in recognising God's image in others who are not in our own image, we can start to build relationships that bridge political divides.

With the archbishops. I shall be praying for debates that seek to unite rather than divide, which help to bring us together and rebuild trust in each other, in our institutions, and in our politics.

As we do so, we must ourselves reject and speak out against the language of prejudice and not stoke stigma or hatred towards people on the grounds of religion, culture, origin, identity or belief. Several groups, especially in Jewish and Muslim communities, feel threatened and feel great anxiety. No individual or community in our shared society should have reason to lack confidence in their belonging or security, so parties must make it an absolute priority to offer positive reassurance and avoid anything that increases the perception of fear.

I hope that we shall be able to come together to seek the common good and enable others to do so by our payers and our actions. We really need to do so, not just because of Brexit but because of the much more serious and literally earth shattering crisis that is facing humanity and the planet God has given us to inhabit: climate change.

+John

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