

Diocesan Synod – 12 October 2019

PRESIDENTIAL ADDRESS – The Rt Rev James Langstaff

I omitted to say at the beginning that it is of course Matthew's [Girt] first time in the substantive post of Diocesan Secretary, although we have seen him around the place once or twice before. So we welcome you, Matthew, to your substantive role with this Synod as its Secretary among other things.

Most dioceses in the Church of England have a meeting of their synod at around this time of year, and I rather suspect that a number of my episcopal colleagues will take the opportunity in their addresses to say things relevant to where we are in terms of our national life. I have decided not to do that – partly because the situation changes almost daily, if not hourly, and partly because I actually said quite a bit about that at the last meeting of this synod and, if I'm honest, don't have a great deal to add to that. In particular I spoke then about the vital need for us to rediscover that which we hold in common within our society, to attend to the language we use in public discourse and to seek to heal the divisions which have so sadly and deeply come to affect our society. Many of those themes were amplified a few weeks later in the statement issued on behalf of the College of Bishops.

So in relation to all of that, my enjoinder to all of us – myself included – is simply that we continue to pray, that we do all that we can to heal divisions within families (and it does affect families), communities and the wider nation, and that we have an especial care for those who, whatever the outcome and the rights and wrongs of arguments, may find themselves the most adversely affected whether financially or socially. And, depending on how apocalyptic your view as to what might be, the practical outcomes – both short term and long term – communities in Kent, and down into East Kent especially in the Canterbury Diocese, may find themselves affected in very practical ways. And we, as churches, may be on the front line of meeting of some of those needs which arise.

In deciding what to say on occasions such as this, I often try to discern some theme which connects some of the items on which the Synod is to deliberate. Such a theme failed to come to me until I read what I said last time and then found myself thinking about that in one of those 4:00am periods of sleeplessness which most of us probably have from time to time. The theme which I came upon is that of stewardship – stewardship in the broad sense of how we guard, grow, and pass on that which is entrusted to us. This is, of course, a theme with which we are familiar from Scripture. We have the various parables, notably in Matthew and Luke, about those to whom things are entrusted and who must in time give account for their stewardship of that which is entrusted to them. The call is to show oneself faithful in that trust, even if that trust – initially at least – is a relatively small thing. Even the dishonest steward of Luke 16 is commended for his shrewdness; and those in Matthew 25 who prove trustworthy in what is entrusted to them are rewarded with more responsibility. Scripture teaches us also that we are to be the stewards of creation and that's what I was talking about last time; that we have been entrusted with the mysteries that God

has revealed to us; and that we should use whatever gifts we have received to serve others, as faithful stewards of God's grace in its various forms.

Last time I did begin to speak of our stewardship of creation, and we had, I thought, a good and worthwhile discussion around that theme. Since then of course the world has discovered the passion and indeed the fury of Greta Thunberg, we have had the burning of the Amazonian forest, which had a great deal of publicity around it, the Global Student Climate Strike and now the Extinction Rebellion protests in London and around the world. And some of us may have been caught up in those, and some of us indeed may have taken part. This is an agenda one cannot avoid, and my hunch is that it will play increasingly strongly and not least in forthcoming elections such as the next presidential elections in the United States of America. Whatever our views on the political manifestations of this concern, the theological imperative to care for (and thus to seek to cure, to heal) the creation is in my view crystal clear. And of course this is not just about respect for the created order in itself, but it is about loving our neighbour, including those in places like Polynesia threatened by rising sea levels and those in parts of Africa, including our companion Dioceses of Mpwapwa and Kondoia, where once fertile lands are becoming increasingly desertified and the people starve as a result.

Today in this meeting we will receive a brief update on some of the actions taken since our discussion at the last meeting and a gentle request to Synod to approve the direction of travel and to encourage the formation of a group to take these matters forward, not least in partnership with our neighbours in the Diocese of Canterbury. The paper refers also to the Archbishop of Canterbury's Lent Book for 2020 which is to be published next month. It is entitled 'Yes to Life' and has been written by Dr Ruth Valerio, formerly of the Christian organisation A Rocha and now working internationally with Tearfund.

We will doubtless be promoting that book for reading and for study, whether in Lent or at other times, and I am also delighted to announce today that Dr Ruth Valerio has accepted my invitation to become an Ecumenical Canon of our Cathedral for a three-year period with the designation of 'Canon Theologian'. I am really grateful to Dean Philip, who is away at the moment on study leave, for his discussions with Ruth which have led to this appointment, and we will now be working with her to identify the ways in which she can stimulate our theological thinking and our Christian action over these next three years.

Today we have also before us our Common Fund budget for 2020. I will avoid stealing material from others who will present that budget, but I want to say a few things in the context of that Christian call to exercise stewardship. When we think of money, we often use the idea of stewardship when we think about our own individual response, our own individual giving. More in my mind, however, is that stewardship which we – that is I as Bishop, my Leadership Team, the Bishop's Council, and this Synod – share corporately in relation to our diocesan resources. We, in that sense, are stewards of that which is entrusted to us.

I am not going to rehearse the various discussions and debates which we have had over recent years, but I do want to offer a few observations on where we have

travelled and where we are now, not least because I discern that we may be moving into a slightly different place.

1. In relation to stipendiary deployment, we have talked a lot about the need for reductions and we have made them. Indeed (and I am grateful to Richard Williams for researching some of the detail) our notional establishment of non-curacy posts has reduced by over 20 in the last 10 years – that is not inconsiderable, and it has been painful in some places but it has come about. Those reductions have in part been brought about as a result of the 38 or so Pastoral Schemes or Orders which have been put in place during that time, and that is a considerable amount of work by parishes, by archdeacons, and by many others.
2. At the same time, we have seen a considerable diversification of the forms of authorised ministry which we are deploying and of the settings where that ministry is deployed. We now have a number of Bishop’s Mission Orders in place which were not there a few years ago, we have enabled self-supporting clergy to move into roles of wider leadership, and we have lay ministers discerning their callings in increasingly imaginative and mission-shaped ways, which are different to where they might have been, say, 10 years ago.
3. Perhaps slightly counter-intuitively, while we have reduced the overall number of stipendiary posts, we have sustained and even grown our vocations to both ordained and lay ministries, and I would want to say grown both in quantity and – given that quite a lot of the products of it are sitting in this room – in quality as well. Those of you ordained in the last few years, those of you licensed to licensed lay ministry, similarly.
4. Over that same 10-year period, despite the very significant need for increased expenditure on such things as safeguarding, which we will also touch on this morning, we have managed to hold our diocesan-level administrative expenditure to only a 6% increase in real terms over those 10 years.
5. We have also, as detailed in a paper circulated to you for information, been incredibly successful in obtaining external funding from charities and from the National Church to create additional resource of different kinds – that’s another kind of stewardship – not least additional posts to support mission and ministry in our parishes and communities, and we referred to one earlier which is the one that Dylan is moving into. In addition to what is itemised in that paper, which is around particular posts, we have also attracted six-figure sums of external charitable funding into our Missional Property Fund and into our Children & Young People’s Fund – and that is already very directly and tangibly benefitting local mission in our communities as we equip ourselves for that work. On top of that, and this is slightly mind-blowing – we have already or we will quite soon draw into the Diocese £85m of government money for the building new Church of England schools, particularly in areas of new housing. It’s not something we reflect on usually but I was struck by that the other day. And that funding comes through one or other of our academy trusts, and is central to establishing Christian presence and mission in those areas of new

housing – one of the particular challenges facing this Diocese. In addition to being schools, some of those buildings – perhaps most of them – will have the potential to host new worshipping communities as well. And so it is something we need to be aware of and, indeed, to be thankful for – not least to those who have laboured very hard to obtain that money and I think particularly of the Chief Executives of the Trusts concerned and our own Education Team represented by John Constanti and by Bishop Simon as Chair of the Board.

6. All of this has taken place while we also as a Diocese enable parishes to retain locally a higher proportion of their unrestricted income than most other dioceses in the Church of England. You note that I'm putting that the positive way round quite deliberately. In Rochester, well over 60% on average of that income is retained in parishes for local ministry and mission. In our neighbours in Canterbury and Chichester that figure is 50% or, in fact, significantly less than 50%. That is one reason why we are able to have, for example, many more employed youth, children's and families' workers in our communities than is the case in most other dioceses.

I do actually believe that all of that is about good stewardship, exercised by us in this Synod and those who work on our behalf. And that puts us within realistic reach – and others will say more about this later on – of a situation that could be break-even and that, in turn, opens up for us the possibility of a different kind of conversation for the future. That conversation would be less about reducing stipendiary posts overall – we've done a lot of that – and more about making sure that the posts that we do have are the right posts in the right places, in the places where they are most needed for the mission of God. That conversation would be increasingly about how we invest in mission across all our communities in the Diocese, rural as well as urban, existing as well as new. That conversation would be about how we can continue to foster vocations not only for our own benefit, but also to give away to the Church across our nation, and that too is beginning to happen.

And yes, there are challenges which may at times work in opposing ways and make things difficult for us. Yes, total clergy numbers nationally will still decline for some years due to retirements and we need to be realistic about that. The economic impact of Brexit may (depending on what it turns out to be) affect levels of giving in our churches, as also other charities and such like are having to face. IICSA's report on the Church of England will almost certainly affect our public reputation in the land in unhelpful ways and hence have an impact upon our work of evangelism, our credibility in the light of our communities and our society. And, no doubt about, and one might as well name it, our internal disagreements over human identity and sexuality will also have their public effect, and that will, as it were, come out in a more public way next year when documents are published probably in the summer of next year. For these and other reasons, I am certainly not complacent. But I do dare to believe that as a diocesan family, insofar as we are able to shape our own life, we may in some respects at least be on the threshold of a future which has some stability sustainability about it.

Finally I want to turn to what is perhaps the most important dimension of our stewardship – and that is our stewardship of the gospel or, as the first letter of Peter puts it, our stewardship of God’s grace in its various forms. This too we are called to guard, to grow and to pass on. One dimension of that will be touched upon this morning because it is encompassed within the ‘Life Together’ shape of Christian living which we will hear about later on. This is the offer to us as a pattern for Christian living in fellowship with others, offering both accountability and mutual support in discipleship. It embodies much of what is found in the national ‘Setting God’s People Free’ document; it is about 7-day/week discipleship within a framework of mutual commitment to prayer and Christian living. To refer to our gospel reading we heard earlier, it is about how we may be fruitful branches within the vine. And in terms of that potential fruitfulness, actually this could be more important than anything else I have talked about this morning. Indeed without it – without that faithfulness of discipleship and the life of prayer – the other things become mere good activity rather than faithful and fruitful following of Christ. So let us indeed seek to be faithful stewards of God’s grace in its various forms. Thank you.