

Presidential Address Given by Bishop Christopher at Coventry Diocesan Synod Saturday 25th March 2017

Terrorist attack at Westminster

Dear members of Synod, we have stood in silence to remember the events in and around the Parliamentary Estate on Wednesday and we have said our prayers for the family of PC Keith Palmer. I have personal reason to give thanks for the dedication and bravery of our Police Force and security services. Evan Rieder, my research assistant, and I left the House of Lords at 1.40 pm on Wednesday for a meeting in the Foreign and Commonwealth Office (FCO), just across the road from Parliament. Soon after we walked past Carriage Gates, I said to Evan that I expected the meeting to last about 30 to 40 minutes which allow us to get back to the Lords for Prayers and Questions. I even had a supplementary question up my sleeve about food growing in schools.

In fact, the senior official at the FCO had generously set aside one hour for the meeting but we came to a natural end at about 2.45 pm. As we exited the building, Evan noticed something on the FCO television about an incident on Westminster Bridge. Keen to get back for Prayers and Questions, I said that I wanted to go back to the Lords. As we turned down Whitehall I asked Evan whether he was happy to head towards Parliament and any potential danger that there might be around it. He came with me. By this point - about 2.50 pm - the police were cordoning off the Estate preventing us walking past Parliament's Carriage Gates. We had no idea that that gate had only just been breached and a deadly attack had taken place. The police told us Parliament was locked down, as would be the FCO very soon. We tried to find another route into the Lords but by now the seriousness of the incident was becoming clearer. More quick witted than I, Evan phoned Bishop's House saying, 'the Bishop is safe - he's in my hands!'.

As well as paying tribute to those who defended Parliament, I would like to thank Evan for his own loyalty to me regardless of personal risk to himself. That sort of concern for others and willingness to act in a solidarity of defiance to those who would strike at the heart of our national life, its institutions and the duties and principles that undergird it, were much in evidence on Wednesday, especially by those on Westminster Bridge who tended the injured, the gate keeper of Lambeth Palace among them. May the Lord comfort the bereaved, heal the injured and deliver us from evil.

Dear friends, the problems in the world are deep and grave: civil war still continuing in Syria, thousands trapped in fighting in Mosul, famine in Yemen, South Sudan and Somalia, nuclear capacity and despotic rule in North Korea, terrorist attacks on the streets of Europe. Against them the tensions and difficulties in the Church are small by comparison. They are not insignificant though, for in a world where the US is divided over its President, the UK divided over Brexit, Scotland divided over Independence and where there is no peace in Jerusalem, the way the Church handles its own disagreements may determine our relevance to the world and its life.

Marriage and same sex relationships

The bishops, with their responsibilities to guard the doctrine of the Church, order its worship and promote its unity, are not having a straightforward time. The House of Clergy of the General Synod chose not to take note of our Report on 'Marriage and Same Sex Relationships after the Shared Conversations'.

I have already told the Diocese that I was disappointed by that outcome because I believed that - as the Archbishop of Canterbury put it - the Report gave us a good road map for the next stages of our work together in the Church.

Nevertheless, the work that the Archbishops proposed shortly after the debate will carry forward the Report's main intentions - that of developing a teaching doctrine on the doctrine of marriage set in the context of a deep and rich understanding of the nature of humanity and of human society, and the shaping of generous pastoral responses to everyone in the life of the Church whatever their understanding of their personal sexuality.

Diocese of Sheffield

The House of Bishops' Declaration on which the settlement over the ordination of women to the episcopate was based has also been rocked by recent events in the Diocese of Sheffield. Actually, in the official processes of the Church it worked well. It allows for priests and bishops who remain unconvinced by the propriety of the ordination of women as priests or bishops to be appointed as diocesan bishops. However, it was after the news that one such bishop, Bishop Philip North, was appointed to the see of Sheffield that the Declaration became tested in the views of those who did not have a direct part in those official processes. Understandably there were local concerns in Sheffield Diocese at Bishop Philip's appointment. It must have been unsettling news for many priests in the Diocese, especially but not exclusively women, who do not share his views. The tragedy of the events as they unfolded, with the strong national pressure by some voices against his appointment, and not a little personal attack on him of a sort that can never be justified, was that the Diocese of Sheffield and the Church as a whole were not able to work out what his ministry would have looked like in practice. There is much more that could be said, I will restrict myself to three observations:

- First, Philip North is a brilliantly gifted priest and bishop of deep irenic convictions, who, I have no doubt would have made an outstanding Bishop of Sheffield for all the clergy and people of the Diocese. He is in my daily prayers.
- Second, as the Archbishops made abundantly clear in their Statement yesterday - the Declaration of the House of Bishops remains in force and will remain in force. With their five Guiding Principles, they express and embody the teaching of the Church of England.
- Third, their teaching needs to be understood better and we need to work much more at the practice of 'mutual flourishing' to show what it can truly mean for the Church and for the world.

Thy Kingdom Come

The needs of world and church call us to prayer. So it is wonderful that the Archbishops' Call last year for Anglican Christians to pray as Jesus taught us, 'Thy kingdom come, thy will be done on earth as it is in heaven', has this year grown

into a national initiative for all the churches, indeed it seems to be becoming an international phenomenon. In 2016 we went on our 'Diocesan Pilgrimage from Cloud to Fire' from Ascension Day to Pentecost.

Although we will not be replicating the physical pilgrimage in the same way in 2017, Bishop John, Bishop Jonathan and I hope that the whole Diocese will respond energetically and imaginatively to the Archbishops' Call. It will be an especially good time for us in the Diocese to pray for an outpouring of the Spirit upon us to empower us to witness to Christ because it will be almost exactly a year ahead of the Archbishop of Canterbury's visit to the Diocese in our centenary year. The Archbishop will be among us as an evangelist to tell people about Jesus and to invite them to find life in Christ. Let us pray fervently for the ground to be prepared and that the Lord - as at the first Pentecost - 'will add to our number those who are being saved' (Acts 2.47).

I will be sending out a letter to Ministers shortly about Thy Kingdom Come. May I say briefly now that our Novena of Prayer will begin with an ecumenical Ascension Day Service in the Cathedral on the anniversary of the consecration of the New Cathedral (25th May). I am delighted to say that on that solemn and joyful day, in the year when we mark the 500th Anniversary of the Reformation, His Grace, Archbishop Bernard Longley of the Roman Catholic Archdiocese of Birmingham, will be joining us together with, we hope, many of his priests and people.

The Days of Prayer will end with a Festival in the Ruins of the Old Cathedral throughout the afternoon of Pentecost Sunday, June 4th, culminating in an informal celebratory service, still in the Ruins and including baptisms and confirmations. Clergy - please start preparing your candidates. (And, if I may say, in passing for Easter Day in the Cathedral at 5.30 am).

Christian Aid Week

As well as praying for the needs of the world, scripture calls us to give generously to those in need. This year will be the 60th Anniversary of Christian Aid Week. This week of focusing on and fundraising for the needs of the world's most vulnerable people, which is the longest running community fundraising week in the UK, had its origins in the refugee crisis of post-war Europe. In our present century the world faces another refugee crisis of even greater proportions, so it is very fitting that in this anniversary year Christian Aid Week will focus especially on the needs of refugees. I hope that the Diocese in its many forms will engage with Christian Aid week with renewed efforts this year over 14-20 May. It is a work of the churches together in this land with which we have been deeply associated. The first guide to organising a Christian Aid collection was, in fact, written by Allen Edwards of the Cathedral who died in 2015, and thousands of wonderful, faithful, compassionate people like him over more than half a century have been distributing the famous red envelopes across the Diocese. You will find more information about the Christian Aid week and its connections with Coventry on your seats.

Archdeacon John is to retire

There is one other aspect of our diocesan life which I would like to say a few words about. After four years service as Archdeacon Pastor following a period of eight months as Acting Archdeacon Pastor, the Venerable John Green has given

me notice that he will be retiring from post at the end of August. There will be other occasions in the future to express the Diocese's gratitude to John, and for me to say something of my personal thanks to him. Let me for now, though, say how greatly I value John's wisdom, humour, godliness and sheer humanity.

Beyond his distinguished and dedicated service as Archdeacon Pastor, I have been most blessed by his own indefatigable sense of call to ministry.

Having served his time as Archdeacon to the Fleet (a place in the Navy that allowed him to write in the green ink of an Admiral!), John could have been content with a gentle, low-stress retirement having fun on his own canal boat, taking the odd service and preaching occasional - and brilliant - sermons. But when he came to see me not long after leaving the Navy, John told me that he felt the Lord was requiring more of him. The rest is history . . . except that it has an important footnote. Though well established in the extraordinarily demanding ministry of Archdeacon Pastor - or perhaps because of it - John said that he wanted to be more rooted in a parish than he had been hitherto as a roving Archdeacon and, as time went on, became additionally Associate Minister at St Mary Magdalen, Chapelfields.

John is a big presence and will leave a big space to fill. On 30th or 31st May, I hope that we will be interviewing for a full-time, stipendiary, temporary Assistant to the Archdeacon to work alongside John in his latter stages in post and then become Acting Archdeacon during the Vacancy. We will be advertising in the diocese for that post in a few weeks' time. I hope it will attract clergy who may be interested in a secondment to this important ministry. The provisional plan is to interview for a full-time, permanent post in the autumn and, in addition, to make a permanent half-time appointment of a person to work alongside the new Archdeacon Pastor to carry some of the considerable load that falls on this vital post for the health of the Diocese. Please look out for details of these three posts as they emerge, and also for other points when we will be saying our farewells to our venerable pastor who has won a permanent place in our hearts.