

Presidential Address at Coventry Diocesan Synod

25th June 2013

I have just had the privilege of spending nearly eight days in Nuneaton, glimpsing the kingdom of God at work in visiting schools, including a special school, colleges, the hospital, a factory providing much needed employment and supporting local youth projects. I have been a judge in Hilltop's (a local estate) got talent. I was playing the Simon Cowell role which I hope you don't think comes naturally to me! I have been encouraged and inspired by what I have seen and experienced there of inspiring worship, making new disciples and transforming community life. There are many examples of churches **responding to need** in the community, whether it be for those with mental health issues, young carers, the bereaved, the elderly, those in debt, many examples of Church halls providing space for all sorts of activities and events which make a difference to the quality of community life. I have witnessed perhaps especially that God blesses the service of Christians when **we work together** across denominations. I have in mind the **Food Banks, Street Pastors, night shelters** for the homeless, in Nuneaton, the **Sycamore Counselling Centre** and its café and bookshop, in chaplaincy teams in hospital, hospice and North Warwickshire College. I went to a lunchtime prayer meeting with Christian leaders from ten different denominations. I know and rejoice that many such things and others are happening in the other deaneries. What is clear is that the credibility of the Church and of our witness grows as we are seen to love and serve our neighbours whoever they may be.

In the course of the week I, and clergy from Nuneaton, met with local and county councillors to reflect on the needs of the communities and how they and we could respond together in the light of severe budgetary restraints. Those in local government have agonising decisions to make about where the cuts should fall. I found there, as I have in other parts of the Diocese, not just a willingness but a *desire* to be part of this dialogue with us as we seek to support them personally in friendship and prayer and of course to challenge too where we believe decisions or priorities need to be challenged or changed in the light of God's kingdom.

We also met on the next evening with Marcus Jones, the MP, and faith and community leaders across Nuneaton. What emerged from that again was a real desire to work together and to respond together to the needs to local needs.

I share these experiences which could be mirrored across many parts of the Diocese because although one Christian voice we hear in the media says Christians are being side lined or are even victims of rampaging secularism, on the ground, many people in positions of influence, locally, regionally and nationally are very glad indeed of the presence and work of the Church and very ready to listen.

Karl Barth is said to have said '*You must preach with a Bible in one hand and a newspaper in the other*'. This though should not only be true of preaching but for all Christian living. We are people of the Word called to live *in* the world for which Christ died. We are always to be involved in that 'double listening' to God and to his world in all its groanings and agonies.

Reading our newspapers in one hand, we see and know the world is wracked by division, often murderous, bloody, hateful division. I do not think it melodramatic to say that what is happening now in Syria and is already spilling over into neighbouring countries, the Lebanon and Jordan, threatens the security not only of Syria but far beyond in every direction. As we know, what began as a quite proper largely Sunni Syrian movement for reform and greater freedom in Syria, has now been hijacked or piggy-backed by jihadist groups from many different countries, including almost certainly cells from this country. To these extreme Islamists, and they are the dominant force already in parts of Syria, democratic freedom is the last thing they are fighting for.

A few years ago, on behalf of Archbishop Rowan, I travelled throughout Syria to meet Christian leaders of different denominations. I had one to one meetings with almost all of them, including in Aleppo, Bishop Paul Yazigi and Metropolitan Ibrahim both currently being held captive by Chechnyan terrorists. They were both kidnapped and the driver of their car was killed as they returned from a mercy mission trying to release other Christians being held hostage in Syria. I also met with the Sunni leader known as the Grand Mufti, the Shia leader and the Druze leader. Though Syria was demonised by George Bush, 43, as part of the axis of evil, I was struck by the freedoms enjoyed by Christians. I was deeply struck by the quality of relations between Muslims and Christians, there was much mutual hospitality, sharing of the *Iftar* fast-breaking meals in Ramadan and a working together to provide for the countless refugees, many Christian, flowing in from Iraq post Saddam. Syrian minorities, whether they be Christian, Druze or Alawite are understandably fearful of what may follow Assad. Putting in more weapons of war or even troops into this cauldron seems to me highly dubious obviously from a Christian and theological perspective and actually also on the political level too, though as Christians we should never divorce the two. Armed western intervention always makes life worse for Christians as it has done so tragically in Iraq. To be able to associate western armed intervention in a Muslim country with the Christian west plays wonderfully into the extremist agenda and leads to the killing or exodus of many Christians. An urgent humanitarian and diplomatic response on the other hand is surely essential. I wrote to William Hague about this about a month ago expressing concern about simply arming the rebels as a solution, but recognised in my letter the immense complexity of the situation and the challenge he and other political leaders face in responding, assuring him of our prayers.

The challenge for political leadership in so many countries, including our own, is how best to hold together peoples of different faith, culture or ideology and when violence happens not simply to counter it with more violence. This, as we know, is the Kingdom and gospel

message epitomised in our Cathedral to show that there is another way. But how far do our lives as Christians witness to this other way? How far is our own house in order? Do we walk the walk or just talk the talk? When Tertullian wrote '*See how these Christians love one another*', he meant it! People came to faith through exposure to the love of God at work among Christians. Now when we hear these words, they are almost always used ironically. Diversity is part of God's plan for His creation and His people, it is indeed characteristic of who God is, Holy Trinity. Diversity in the Church is good and of God and witnesses to God's love for all. Division in the Church damages our witness.

One characteristic of so many of the early church communities which was both so shocking and so attractive to those around it was precisely their diversity. No-where else would you find Jew and Gentile, slave and free, men and women, rich and poor in unity one with another. And it was not only the diversity of background and culture that was evident, there was a diversity of *practice* amongst such Christians too as we read in Romans 14. Paul implored them not to judge each other for their different understandings and practices, to respect each other's consciences and to honour the integrity of their sisters and brothers in Christ who understand things differently. He concludes this passage on holding difference together, in Romans 14 with a strong warning. '*Why do you pass judgement on your brother or sister? Or, you, why do you despise your brother or sister? For we will all stand before the judgement seat of God.... each of us will be accountable to God.*' (vs 10,12)

In the currently contentious areas of theology and practice whether they be on ordination of women or of women as Bishops or more recently and increasingly in the area of human sexuality, there have been words and attitudes expressed, whether by dogmatic conservatives or dogmatic liberals or others, which have been deeply judgemental and contemptuous of the views of other Christians who, in conscience, see things differently from themselves. Such things of course wound the Body of Christ and damage our witness to the world. Very much at the top of Archbishop Justin's agenda, as he revealed in the national conference on Reconciliation at the Cathedral, is how we as Christians can live well with difference rather than divide over difference. There were powerful examples of just that in the people that he invited to come. If it is a particular charism of the Church of England to embrace diversity as we have done for some centuries, it is perhaps a particular call to us in this Diocese with the story we have through the Cathedral, a story that inspires people all over the world in reconciliation ministry. What might it mean, what should it mean for us here and now to be, in the phrase of Karl Barth again, '*reconciled reconcilers*'?

+John Stroyan