

Diocese of Leeds

Thirtieth Diocesan Synod, Saturday 22 March 2025

Presidential Address

Amid all the work this last week I had three very enjoyable and stimulating experiences. They involved Europe, a design studio and the announcement of a bishop. Too much joy for Lent, I know.

As you know, I have been leading an inquiry into the future of Europe and have interviewed nearly 60 people and groups. The inquiry arises from an experience back in 2006 when I returned from a visit to Kazakhstan and felt an odd sense of dislocation. Kazakhstan took independence in 1991 after the collapse of the Soviet Union and I began visiting in 2003, representing the Archbishop of Canterbury at global interfaith conferences. I also met young people in Astana – partly through radio interviews there – and, when I asked them why they tolerated corruption and dictatorship, was struck by their overriding commitment to and enthusiasm for the country they felt they were building. They would point out of the window at a city that was growing exponentially. Wealth was growing and poverty reducing. They were building a country, an economy, a future.

I flew back to London via Frankfurt and found myself wondering what my children and (eventual) grandchildren were building. To cut a long story short, it seemed to me that, rather than building a world, our children were being asked to hang on to a post-WWII settlement to which they no longer committed themselves. Vladimir Putin is known to have accused the West of not believing in anything for which we would shed our blood – unlike the youth of Russia. So, if young people don't invest in a settlement they have inherited from previous generations, how might we enable them to write a new narrative for a Europe that they can build? It is a big challenge, and I have interviewed school, university and PhD students, politicians, commentators, diplomats, journalists, lawyers, bishops, and so on.

I will report later this year, I hope. But, last Monday I interviewed the former Archbishop of Canterbury Rowan Williams, and one of the things we discussed was how we now have a culture of victimhood – at the heart of populism – which denies agency. The Church cannot do other than reject such a culture (or cultural habits) because we hold to a conviction that human beings are made in the image of God, are co-creators with God of our world and society, and take responsibility for shaping the world. Not victims, but agents. So, rather than endlessly complain about why everything is wrong, we choose to do something about it.

On Tuesday, while in London, I went with my colleague Alison Bogle to visit the studios of Thomas Heatherwick. It was an amazing space and a very stimulating conversation. Thomas designed the new London double-decker buses and, most memorably, the work of art that housed the Olympic flame in 2012. His book *Humanise* – also the name of his business - is well worth reading as it looks at buildings and space through very creative and different eyes. Take, for example, the simple observation that a building which a hundred people

enter is walked past by thousands of people: so, why is more attention not given to the impact on them?

We went on to discuss buildings with soul, houses of faith, space that humanises and doesn't eliminate joy. But, the reason for mentioning this here is that he shone a different light on churches and image and colour and how these can change the imagination.

The conversations with Rowan Williams and Thomas Heatherwick both illustrated what we Christians call 'repentance'. Metanoia means (literally) changing your mind – looking at God, the world and us differently in order to see God, the world and us differently in order to think about God, the world and us differently in order then to live differently in the world with God and us. But, in order to submit ourselves to such a process, we have to have the courage to dare to have our prejudice challenged. And, so Jesus suggests in Mark's Gospel, there is no better, more enjoyable, more exciting or invigorating choice to make than to be open to change.

I say this today because this lies at the heart of what the Church is for. But, it is really hard stuff. Think of something you would find it impossible to do and you will see the point: like asking me to support Manchester United. Or City. Or Everton. You get the point. But, how can we invite other people to 'repent' if we ourselves are unable or unwilling to do so?

On Wednesday I announced that the Venerable Malcolm Chamberlain is to be the next Bishop of Wakefield. Malcolm brings unique experience of parochial ministry, university chaplaincy, archdeaconry, estates ministry, and diocesan engagement with parishes. Sadly, he is a Leicester City fan and we must pray for the good of his soul as they head towards relegation this season. But, he is also a music lover, and the power of music is to provide a sound lens through which we might see and hear the world differently.

The whole point of bringing new people into our diocesan leadership – as well as to parochial or institutional ministry – is that new people have the potential gift of helping us to see who we are and what we do differently. So, we welcome Malcolm to his new ministry and pray that his leaving Sheffield will go well before he is consecrated at York Minster at 11am on Wednesday 11 June and begins work in our diocese.

The other point here is that as we turn to our agenda as a diocesan synod today, we do so recognising the wider context in both world and church. The post-war settlement I referred to earlier – and the institutions and assumptions underlying it – are now up in the air. The world is changing ... and not necessarily for the better. While uncertainty becomes more real than ever, we must lift our eyes to what might be called 'the point of it all'. The church, committed to territory, fired by a gospel of repentance, prophetically defiant when faced with trouble, has a vocation to bring hope, courage, love, mercy and joy in the gathering darkness. Let's not get sidetracked.

We might also look to our sisters and brothers in Sudan here as they look hopefully to a future in which they can build a new Sudan: new homes and churches, new infrastructure and vision. Currently stripped of all expectations, their eyes are open to God's future.

The specific agenda for today's online synod doesn't look particularly ambitious. But, it allows us to pay attention to some serious matters – from parish share to safeguarding. Money and behaviour. Culture and priorities. Gospel and world. As our diocesan values state: we love God, creation and our neighbour as ourselves. We live in the world – as it is, but we are drawn by a vision of how the world might be: the kingdom of God. And we are unafraid to make mistakes, if we have the courage to learn as we go. And that pertains to parish share as it does to safeguarding.

At a future synod we shall prepare to debate matters of sexuality and the options we face in relation to LLF, 'Living in love and Faith'. We must remember that LLF began not as a process leading to decisions about sexual ethics, but as a process aimed at bringing people of different theological convictions or perspectives together – not just for some anodyne conversations, but in order to help us learn what it all looks like when seen through the eyes of the other. An exercise in empathy. I think it's fair to say that this was ambitious and perhaps not entirely successful. There have been some remarkable encounters, but people largely stay in their bunkers. Metanoia is really hard.

However, as we prepare in the Diocese of Leeds to debate these matters that are so powerfully close to all our lives, identities and convictions, we also need to pay attention to how we debate – how we listen and hear and speak and think. This requires a willingness – a repentant and self-denying choice – to see each other as sisters and brothers in Christ. So, at our next synod we will work on the 'how' before we debate the 'what'.

Sisters and brothers, being godly does not mean being right. In all our common life I hope we can be Christian, not losing sight of whose kingdom we pray will come on earth as it is in heaven. I commend this to you as we move onto our agenda this morning.

The Rt Revd Nicholas Baines
Bishop of Leeds

22 March 2025