

Diocese of Leeds

Twenty Fifth Diocesan Synod, Saturday 15 July 2023

Presidential Address

A story that grabbed my attention this week was the complaint by a British pensioner that her holiday in Benidorm had been ruined because there were too many Spanish people there. She is reported to have said: "They get on my nerves; why can't they go somewhere else for their holiday?"

Well, in the light of other media behaviour in the last week or so, this might seem trivial. But, I cite it here simply because it struck me as a perfect example of how easy it is to miss the point and assume that how I see the world is how the world actually is. This is why I never tire of hearing the biblical call to repentance – metanoia, change of mind, of a way of seeing and, therefore, thinking about God, the world and us. And, of course, repentance assumes humility – the basic acceptance that I might be wrong.

Which, of course, means that Spaniards should be allowed to have a holiday in Benidorm – but, why would they want to, if Benidorm is full of Brits who think like that pensioner?

The point of a synod is that we bring together people who are united in Christ and in a common cause – the Gospel of Jesus Christ and all it entails. The clue is in the word: syn-od. That is, a 'coming together' (of odd people?). So, we need not fear expressing our view and perception of whatever issue we are discussing; but, we do so with the humility that others seeing differently might mean that I need to repent, and not them.

While we meet this morning in relative peace we are conscious that the plight of suffering people around the globe is too easily ignored. A cost-of-living crisis here can blind us to the horrors going on in Sudan and Ukraine (to pick just two places in violent conflict). So, it is timely that today we turn our gaze outwards before looking inwards.

It won't have passed you by that the General Synod met last weekend in York. Reporting on it focused almost exclusively on the car-crash encounters about negative stuff: safeguarding failures being the most prominent. Without rehearsing what happened in and around the chamber, I simply want to say that, whatever the challenges nationally, we can be confident about our safeguarding systems here in the Diocese of Leeds. I am sorry that we shall be losing our Team Leader, Carla Darbyshire, who has served us well during her time here. Our DSOs will now adjust to a new regime, but they are a pleasure for me to work with in this vital area of our common life. That said, we don't know what we don't know; and must remain vigilant as we seek to create a safe church for everyone, but especially those who have been damaged by the church in the past.

I had to leave York early (and after some excellent speeches and contributions from Leeds clergy and lay reps) in order to be in London for meetings and debates. I sit on the House of Lords Communications & Digital Committee and we recently published a report on digital exclusion. Our next inquiry will revolve around the revolutionary development of AI and the challenges and opportunities the new technologies can bring us. Underneath the

technological questions (and well-hidden to some people) lie some crucial-but-difficult questions about what it means to be a human being, how ethics are to be done, why morality matters, and why human ability to do something does not mean we *should* do it.

Debates about so-called “illegal migration” and “online harms” revolve around these same questions. The technical, political and pragmatic are vital, but so is the thinking – and the assumptions underlying the thinking – about meaning and value and theology/philosophy. Which is why I went from the chamber on Wednesday to a meeting with Sudanese people about the crisis in their homeland. Which, of course, has a particular importance for us here in the Diocese of Leeds.

We have had a partnership link with the Episcopal Church of Sudan for nearly half a century. Relationships are strong. A visit was scheduled for this coming autumn, but has had to be cancelled because the violence and the destruction in Khartoum makes travel impossible. However, I have promised Archbishop Ezekiel that I will visit him and his people as soon as travel is allowed. We express our solidarity and love not just with our prayers and communications, but by being there physically when times are hardest for them. (I should add that earlier this week I also met with politicians involved in Sudan – we need to exploit every channel possible in a very challenging environment.)

So, why am I telling you this? Well, partly so that you know what some of us are up to beyond the link, but because of our link. But, mainly so that we keep our sisters and brothers in Sudan at the forefront of our prayers and our loving commitment. Sudan has fallen from the headlines and wider reportage, but they must not fall from our attention here.

Later in this synod we will have a brief presentation about our wider partnership links, so I won't say more now. Suffice it say at this point that the Dean of Bradford is reviewing our links and will soon offer proposals for how we set up for the next ten years. I am very grateful to him for bringing his fresh perspective and wide experience of the Anglican Communion to this task on our behalf.

Despite all this, the bulk of our synod this morning focuses on financial matters, and this is right. Our diocesan business still has to get done, whatever else is happening, if we are to shape our common life in such a way as to enable the Church of England in this part of the world to fulfil the unique vocation given to us. We will look at and critique the Annual Report and Financial Statements. This will tell us something about our priorities in the last year and, hopefully, open our eyes and minds to where we might go from here in the light of the constraints and gifts we have together.

In this context, I want to bring some good news.

Our diocesan vision has not changed in the nearly ten years we have been the Diocese of Leeds. We want to grow confident Christians who consequently grow churches which help to transform our communities. This means being faithful to our calling to be and to share the good news of the Gospel as we serve with steadfast purpose the communities in which

we live. We are called to bring hope, not just collude in the grief. This vision has been, and continues to be, at the very heart of the strategic direction of this Diocese.

The challenges of the last three years and our emergence from the pandemic now provide a unique opportunity to reset and retell the story of how we will support this vision – strategically - and encourage the church to become – in the terms used nationally - simpler, humbler and bolder. In doing this, we have been encouraged by the example of the early church. Inspired by the Holy Spirit, Christians of the first century prayed for, equipped, mentored, taught and encouraged the local church. Integral to this approach was a man called Barnabas. Barnabas was intentionally and prayerfully sent out. He not only shared the gospel and taught the disciples, but he modelled how best to support others in doing the same thing. Barnabas exemplifies the approach we want to take as a diocese as we seek the Holy's Spirit power, inspiration and guidance in ensuring that every church has an opportunity to move forward in mission, ministry and sustainability in a way that is intentional, prayerful and achievable.

Rather than being top-down, this strategy places the onus on the local to ask how progress might be made – locally.

So, I am pleased to be able to tell Synod this morning that two weeks ago the Strategic Mission and Ministry Investment Board (SMMIB) agreed to give the diocese £3.9m to fully fund the first phase of the programme we are calling 'Barnabas: Encouraging Confidence'. Barnabas sets an overarching strategic framework around which the diocese can intentionally be supportive of the missional needs of parishes and can bring a focus on revitalisation, growth and sustainability. It enables us to continue to respond to the missional and financial challenges which the diocese faces over the coming decade. This funding provides the wider foundation for supporting parishes right across the diocese as we use this national funding to develop a long-term investment partnership rather than set off a series of ad hoc projects.

There is much to do. Some elements of the Barnabas programme have begun but we are now able to accelerate this, and there will be much more coming out over the coming weeks and months. Please do take the time to engage with it and to make the most of the support that is being offered. And contact Jonathan Wood or Jude Smith if you wish to discuss details of substance or content further at this stage.

I am deeply grateful to Jonathan, Jude and their colleagues for the huge amount of work that has gone into securing this funding.

But, we must remember that this is a means and not the end. The money allows us – faithfully, responsibly and accountably – to attend to what might be termed 'the point of it all': to have communities where God is worshipped, where Jesus is followed, where the Holy Spirit inspires, and where, together in love and mercy, we serve our communities in Christ's name.

This will look different in different places. The glory of the Church of England (if only we can recognise it) is that we offer a menu rather than a single dish to the varieties of people in

our communities, parishes and institutions. Put trivially, I can be swinging incense in the morning and preaching informally in the evening on the same day. Neither is 'better' and it is not a competition. But, our call is to build one another up as we seek to be faithful.

So, let us this morning come together prayerfully, if remotely ... loving one another and recognising beneath all the business our common calling as Christians and Anglicans. As I pray for you and for the variety of ministries which you exercise, please pray for me in those areas where I seek also bring the good news of Christ to a world needing hope.

And, if you do go to Benidorm this summer, please try to learn the local language and see the world through their eyes.

The Rt Revd Nicholas Baines
Bishop of Leeds

15 July 2023