

## Diocese of Leeds

Twenty Fourth Diocesan Synod, Saturday 18 March 2023

### Presidential Address

When Jesus instructed his friends to “love one another as I have loved you” – more than once – did he mean it? Faced by the one who would betray him and the one who would deny him, and aware of the tensions between them as they walked along the way with him, was he being a little bit romantic or idealistic? Or did he intend there to be exceptions in particular circumstances for particular members of the group? Did he define closely enough just who was to be loved – within the group of disciples – and who might be excused?

These are not idle questions – especially as we examine ourselves in Lent. They are deeply biblical. For when we read the gospels we are supposed to be struck by the uncomfortable fact that it is always the ‘wrong’ people who find themselves healed, restored, forgiven by Jesus ... whilst the ‘right’ people consistently either miss the point – the Word made flesh standing in front of them – or, eventually, nail him for breaking the theological rules. If you don’t believe me, read about him healing a woman – it’s usually a woman – on the wrong day, the sabbath; or preventing a woman from being stoned to death, as the Law prescribed.

It is a while since I focused on Mark’s Gospel and my contention that the key to the narrative lies in chapter one and verses 14-15. So, I’ll re-visit it now.

Jesus returns to Galilee “proclaiming the good news of God.” If you were listening to him in Galilee – the hill country of the north where all the difficult people come from – what would you hear as the “good news of God”? What might be the content that, when you hear it, would sound like good news for you and your people? Well, I think this is an easy one, largely because of what follows in verse 15: the sign of good news is that the Romans are leaving. When the Romans go, we know we have got our land back; we no longer have to carry in our pockets or do our everyday trade in currency that blasphemously bears an engraved head of the pagan emperor surrounded by the words ‘Emperor and Son of God’. When the impure heathen have left our land, then we will know that the pure God can be among us again without fear of contamination.

So, ‘good news’ for the Galilaeans will be signified by the removal of the occupying forces of heathen blasphemy, idolatry and sacralised violence.

Mark then summarises the ‘good news of God’ in four phrases: “the time is fulfilled, and the kingdom of God has come near; repent, and believe in the good news.” Which means what exactly? And remember we are trying to listen through first century Palestinian ears, not twenty first century Christian ears. I want to suggest this reading of the text:

To a people longing for liberation, an end to their latest exile, the evidence of God’s return will be the removal of contamination, impurity. Yet, Jesus says that they need wait no longer – the time is now here ... the Kairos of God. And the people will look to see that the Romans are on their way out. Which they are not. So, are these hollow words? A fantasy by the

latest aspiring liberator who will also fail to deliver more than words and violence? How can this be the time if the 'unclean' is still hanging around, keeping God at bay?

Well, Jesus rubs home the point: "the kingdom of God has come near." How? How can the presence of God – what John in his gospel calls "the glory of God" – be near while nothing has changed? This is a theological as well as a political nonsense, surely? A good Jew would be wondering if this was a wind up by the returning carpenter. Is he just playing with our hopes and longings?

But, then comes the clarifying bit: "repent!" Not just admit your own failings and sin – the sort of thing meant when people with placards get in the way of shoppers on a Saturday in town. Repentance, from the Greek 'metanoiein', means literally 'change your mind'. And I venture to suggest that in this context Jesus is telling the people that if they want to spot the presence of God in the here and now, they are going to have to change the way they look and see and think and live. Put bluntly, the challenge is: dare you see the presence of the holy God right here and now while the Romans remain and everything is compromised? Yes, even while the heathen blasphemers rule? Yes, even while we all feel contaminated by the offence of pagan presence?

In other words, dare we challenge our inherited and assumed theology – which has shaped and coloured our understanding of God, the world and us – and look differently for evidence of the presence of God while life and the world are a mess? Can we, who challenge others to 'repent', start by repenting ourselves?

"Believe in the good news" does not mean "give your intellectual assent to a set of propositions about God", but, rather, "now commit yourself – body, mind and spirit - to this new way of looking and seeing and thinking and living in the world as it is". The rest of the gospel narrative offers a series of illustrations of those who could repent and those who could not. Read the whole gospel when you get home and you will find yourself laughing at the end because the wrong people get it and the right people don't. This is echoed in John's Gospel by Jesus's words to the religious leaders of his day: "You search the Scriptures because you think that in them you have eternal life; and it is they that testify on my behalf. Yet you refuse to come to me to have life." (John 5:39-40)

In other words, you read your Bibles, but miss what is standing in front of you right now.

Can you imagine how enormous was the challenge this presented the first disciples? It isn't trivial or obvious. Jesus was asking for a complete change of sight and mindset and lifestyle. Easy for us to read; murderously difficult to do. Do we fear being contaminated by mess while God chooses to contaminate mess with love and mercy and justice and forgiveness? And, of course, Jesus was asking for trust – fundamental to this notion of 'belief' – in a future that they couldn't yet see: trust in him, but also trust in those who also walked with him, despite their real differences.

Now, you have come to a synod, not to a sermon. But, I have used half my time to set this out because it offers a biblical context for the sorts of issues we are dealing with today and in our Church. *Living in Love and Faith* (LLF) was not a bright idea dreamed up by bishops

determined to undermine the Church of England and follow some pagan agenda. It involved serious work over nearly seven years. Like Jesus in the gospels, it was a response to the challenge of what and who are standing in front of us and raising challenging questions about people's lives and response to the call of Jesus Christ. It is the most serious and in-depth exploration not only of sexuality, but also of anthropology, history, science, psychology, theology, and so on, that any church has ever done. And the aim was to bring Christians together in order that we all might recognize the person behind the issue. It wasn't about changing people's minds (unless they chose so to do); it was about getting out of trenches and meeting co-disciples of Jesus who look and see and think and live differently. Many, if not most, of those who engaged openly with LLF found it enlightening at the very least.

As you know, the bishops eventually brought a proposal to the General Synod last month and the proposals were accepted by the synod. I won't rehearse here the mechanics of the debate or some of the nonsense that went on. Suffice it to say that nobody likes bishops unless the bishops say exactly what different people want to hear the bishops say. That's life, I guess.

But, that was not the end of the process. The LLF Next Steps Group was required to take it away, in the light of the debate, and return in July with a further proposal (which, obviously, the Synod could accept or reject). However, between now and then the College of Bishops will meet again next week to look at what further work has been done. And all of us can take the time to revisit the theology addressed in LLF resources. (I won't be at the College as I will be at my final meeting of the Governing Board of the Conference of European Churches in Brussels before the General Assembly in Tallin in June.)

I am grateful to those who have written to me with their reflections and concerns, some of which are premature or driven by fear. I get it and understand why people, particularly on the conservative end, are worried. But, given that those who are content with what is proposed don't write to me, I can also reveal that nobody seems to be happy: the church has gone too far or not far enough; the church (and remember that the General Synod is comprised of bishops, clergy and laity) is denying scripture or is driven by a secular agenda. It is the case, however, that the church – that is Christian disciples of different experience, culture, conviction, repentance, and so on – is in this place precisely because it is taking seriously a challenge that won't go away if we just ignore it or pray hard enough against what we don't approve (for whatever reason).

So, the process has not finished. And none of us can abdicate responsibility for how we obey Jesus's command – not suggestion – that we love one another as he has loved us. Whatever the cost. We get no opt-outs or vetoes. And Mark's challenge to repent is not just aimed at those whom we think are mistaken.

Along with CS Lewis's *Screwtape*, I have felt for decades that all the Evil One has to do to neuter the church is to distract them with a bit of sex. But, there are other issues which demand our attention and common commitment. Our economies are fragile, our political discourse has been corrupted, injustice is seen everywhere, conflict and violence are fired up all over the globe, and people long for words, vision and actions of hope. Not despair by

looking at what is, but daring to believe that God, in Christ, is here now, among us and with us and for us, calling us to see beyond the immediate challenges whilst committing ourselves in the world as it is. I once tweeted that “Easter means being drawn by hope, not driven by fear”. And I believe our vocation is to embody and articulate that hope.

Today we will look at adding the former Bishop of Kirkstall to our cohort of Honorary Assistant Bishops in the diocese. We will consider the last meeting of the General Synod (which addressed far more than LLF and sex). We will receive an update on the case of a former registrar who stole millions of pounds from the historic Diocese of Wakefield and some of which money we are trying to win back from insurers. Bradford will be UK City of Culture in 2025 – something that offers this diocese great opportunities to infect our local culture with gospel celebration in the midst of our contemporary West Yorkshire cultures.

And, finally, we will consider Barnabas. Not the character in the Acts of the Apostles, but our programme to support our parishes – all of them – in ways that might make a difference, starting from where they are. Yet, Barnabas is worth ending on in the light of where this address began. For he and the Apostle Paul found they couldn’t work together because of differences and tensions over priorities and personality. Yet, they did not deny their belonging to one church, being shaped like Jesus Christ, yet having to confront and adapt to new situations and challenges in different contexts. They belonged together – even when distanced – and that was part of the witness of Scripture.

I will listen with interest to all that is said or asked today. I will ask myself where I might need to repent and look differently. But, I will not cease to see this church as Christ’s and all disciples as equally called by God to a new way of living. Together.

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Bishop of Leeds

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