

Diocese of Leeds

Twenty Seventh Diocesan Synod, Saturday 16 March 2024

Presidential Address

On Tuesday morning's Today programme this week I did a Thought for the Day script about the Russian presidential elections taking place while we speak this weekend. The next morning I did a script on the BBC Radio 2 Breakfast Show ... on Taylor Swift and my need to listen deeply and learn to listen through the ears of my eleven year old granddaughter who is a fan. For the record, I am not becoming a Swiftie. Both scripts are on my blog.

Two scripts, two studios, two different languages. And a pointed reminder of just how weird this world is: from Russian elections at a time of war on European soil – unthinkable even ten years ago – to a global pop phenomenon whose entertainment can drive headlines about Russia, Ukraine, Sudan and Gaza down the running order. The dominance of one doesn't displace the power of the other. Because life on this planet involves every type of human passion, commitment and engagement, at every level, and through a multiple of cultural media. Orchestras still play in Ukraine, surrounded by physical ruins and the deaths of thousands of ordinary people.

So, what do we make of this? I sit on a House of Lords select committee for Communications and Digital and we are currently doing an inquiry into news and trust. Witnesses are clear that a substantial number of people in the West are simply avoiding news because it is all so grim. Britain is broke, councils are going bust, public services are a mess, if they exist at all. War is ongoing in Europe. In Gaza children are dying of hunger and hostages languish in tunnels. In Sudan somewhere between 8-11 million people have been displaced and famine is promised next year. Ethiopia and Tigray are exploding. And public ethics at home seem capable of being subject to the size of political donations. I could go on. I understand the news avoiders.

But, Christians have a problem with this. Christians serve a God who opted to come among us, as one of us, plunging into the reality of the world's convulsions and insecurities and not staying back where reality (and its costs) can be avoided. Soon we will move through Lent into Holy Week and Easter – and this journey cannot be rushed: we cannot leap from Maundy Thursday and Good Friday to resurrection Easter before living in the tragic abandonment of what I still call 'Empty Saturday'. Incarnation means what it says. No escapism for Christians, however problematic or depressing the world appears to be. While Taylor Swift occupies the minds and wallets of millions of young girls like my granddaughter, children are being wantonly slaughtered in wars, and potential genocides are taking place only a short plane flight from our island.

Into this darkness I want to shine a light I have flickered at you before now. The great musician and poet Bruce Cockburn did a song many years ago called "Don't forget about delight". It's a phrase that almost haunts me when dealing with tough stuff (or people) here in the Diocese of Leeds or when engaging with the political challenges of our generation across the globe. Don't forget about delight. People need the encouragement of hope – not

the same thing as optimism – and not just reminders of the challenges: the shining of a light, not just constant exposition of the power of darkness. Don't forget about delight. And this is where I think our Synod fits in.

Our business is not just random bits of interesting agenda items. We are doing the stuff of the Kingdom of God. A synod is, literally, the coming together around the bishop to think and pray and talk – possibly even to learn and change our mind on some things. I don't come to a synod with the intention of dispensing wisdom or “getting my way on some issue”. I want to listen to the different perspectives brought – different lights shone – on our business from Christian disciples, lay and ordained, who bring their experience, understanding and contextual lens to bear on our conversation. In a world where people compete for power, this can be a unique place, a different space for a different dialogue.

Today we will look at some real challenges: fossil fuel divestment, sexuality in the church, the future of our diocesan partnership links, how we are trying, not least through our Barnabas programme and against the continuing backdrop of our challenges with parish share, to encourage and support the parishes and people of this diocese in their particular ministry in their particular context. All of this - and much more besides – forms part of how we follow Jesus together, seeking to look as a church like the Jesus we read about in the gospels. None of this is either obvious or easy.

For example, your response to fossil fuel divestment might be fed by profound concern for the future of the planet; but, it might be driven by a sense of being too small to make a difference. Both approaches – or, rather, drivers find a biblical root: the creation ordinances in the early chapters of Genesis, a vision of the new heaven and the new earth in the Book of Revelation, or the gospel parables which tell us not to despise the smallness of small things.

Or, as I was asked in London last week by someone who isn't a Christian, why the Church is obsessed with sexuality and loving relationships when the world is in turmoil around us. Is it an example of 'distraction therapy', enabling the church to avoid the real challenges such as poverty, conflict and division? How do we attend to hierarchies of priorities? This isn't a case of 'whataboutery'. Rather, it is a complex matter to address so many challenges at any one time in such a way as to avoid diminishing the importance of one by focusing on another. Sex and sexuality matter; but, as Christians in Germany discovered nearly a century ago, some become less of a priority when other matters increase in urgency. Arguing about the colour of the chairs in church might be entertaining for a few, but if this helps us avoid minorities being singled out for violence or exclusion, then we have missed the point somewhat.

This is a clumsy way of saying that we need to keep a sense of perspective. My passion might not actually be the most important thing to deal with now. Today we will make a decision about the next steps in our future relationships with dioceses and provinces around the world. Sudan now has between eight and eleven million displaced people while the civil war grinds on – and when did you last see a report on the television about it? The media radar doesn't always reflect what is most important in the world. But, as our sisters and brothers in Sudan experience violence, displacement, poverty, famine and persecution, so

we must ask ourselves what matters most in our own preoccupations. It isn't 'either-or', of course; but, a sense of perspective can help us with our own necessary repentance – literally, metanoia, a change of mind.

Our partnership links are not an optional luxury. We need to look at our faith and church through the lens of brothers and sisters who live and see and think differently from us. Our commitment to and with them has to be achievable, affordable and sustainable ... and sometimes we need to look again and check we are on the right track with our international relationships and commitments.

I am saying this now as we prepare to discuss and debate with one another. We do so with mutual respect and humility. This is about our common life, and we don't always know ahead of time whether we are right or wrong. Which means that we must learn to listen deeply, hear accurately, speak generously and think carefully and honestly.

We meet one month ahead of the tenth anniversary of the birth of this diocese on 20 April 2014. So, this offers a potent reminder of why the diocese exists in the first place. There is a lot of noise in the world and in the church at the moment. But, like Jesus hearing the call of blind Bartimaeus *despite the efforts of the crowd to drown him out*, we need to listen for the real priorities of a bleeding world and remember for whom and for what purpose we exist. This year we have a number of events to help us mark this decade, starting with the visit of the Archbishop of York over the actual anniversary weekend. We will have one celebration service in Bradford Cathedral, but regret that we cannot fit everybody in whom we would like to invite. Nevertheless, however we celebrate, we can mark ten years of a diocese that has shown courage (to change), compassion (to learn how better to serve our parishes and institutions), and commitment (to a challenging task that not everybody embraced with joy. I particularly record my thanks to close colleagues – most of whom have moved on since 2014 – who bear the scars of all the changes; but, I am deeply grateful to all in this diocese who have served at every level with grace, humour, generosity and courtesy.

I realise that an address on Zoom is not ideal, so I will draw to a conclusion now. I am grateful to be a part of this synod and look forward to what will follow as we deliberate together in the name of the one who came among us, loves us, redeems us and always offers a future ... shaped like resurrection. As we walk the path of Jesus and his friends over the next couple of weeks, may we be refreshed, challenged and renewed by the God who, like with the couple on the road to Emmaus, find our confusions attended to by the risen Christ. In the words of Bruce Cockburn, who urges us not to forget about delight: "Love that fires the sun keep me burning."

The Rt Revd Nicholas Baines
Bishop of Leeds

16 March 2024