



Diocese of Bristol  
Creating connections

## **Address by Rt Revd Vivienne Faull, Bishop of Bristol**

### **Bristol Diocesan Synod**

**17 November 2018**

This address seems to me the end of the beginning of the episcopate of Bishop Viv: as Archdeacon Graham's licence concluded, I am now well embarked on this first year of my consecration. So this is an opportunity for me to set out not my vision for the Diocese (the Diocese has that already), but some of the ways we will together reflect on and implement that vision to create connections with God, with each other and with our communities.

Last Sunday was, I suspect, for many of us, a day not just of remembrance but of encouragement and surprise. Over the four years of commemoration of the Great War, local communities have engaged with immense imagination with the story of their community between 1914 and 1918 and of individuals within it, particularly those named on our war memorials and in our churchyards. Last Sunday, there were large congregations in many of our churches and our civic spaces. We connected with our past, with our neighbours, and I believe we saw God at work.

The City of Bristol observance is held at the cenotaph, which stands a few metres from Colston's statue, and so is part of the geography of the city which has become a stage for the playing out of our contested public life. Yet last Sunday was a day for a gathering ritual, with its marching and wreath laying, its silence and its prayers. The liturgical framework was somewhat sketchy, yet in small details the presence of God was felt. There were no scripture readings set, yet the Jewish faith leader brought a reading from Micah Chapter 4 of swords beaten into ploughshares and spears into pruning hooks, and the Free Church leader brought a reading of the vision of peace from the end of the book of Revelation. There was a shift from the heavy weight of the past to the hopefulness of John the Divine's vision of God's kingdom of peace.

So, a question for you to explore for a moment: where did you see God at work last Sunday?

I admit that last Sunday made me feel vulnerable, as I held that space without the comfort of a thorough briefing. And participation in the public square, whether it is in speech or in action, means we are vulnerable. The place of Christians and of Church in our society is shifting. We live in a culture which makes us (and many others) wary of acting and speaking; a culture which defaults to suspicion; where storms of emotion are whipped by social media; where global forces impact profoundly on our local communities, with rising generations having values which are different from their predecessors; where the market rules.

And yet, last Sunday, those leading Remembrance services sensed communities, just for a while, bound together in faith and hope and love. And, last Sunday, we made connections with our communities. Many came into our churches. And many of us ventured outside the church walls and, in the presence of God, held and guarded the public square.

And I believe passionately that we need to get out more. That will require determination and courage, but it is God's calling.

Firstly, because we are the Church of England. Later today we will be debating a budget and thinking about our giving. Budgets are theological statements, in that they show where our priorities lie. And, with the whole Church of England, this Diocese is committed to having a Christian presence in every place. And our diocese, with others, is committed not just to presence but to engagement. As you may have heard this week, alongside the narrative of decline which was picked up rather too easily by the media, there was the evidence we now have of the 33,000 social projects - from food banks to debt counselling, from day centres for refugees to lunch clubs for the isolated and lonely - which our churches sponsor. There is a revived confidence that we have something to offer every person in our nation. As Dietrich Bonhoeffer wrote in the dark days of the Second World War, *'our first concern as followers of Christ is human beings in all their relationships. The whole nation is our horizon'*.

Secondly, the primary focus of our witness is to the Kingdom of Christ, of which we are heralds as messengers. Last week, at a training session for bishops (yes, we do get some training), we were asked to answer in six words why we, as representatives of the church, operate in the public domain (you might like to try this for yourself). John Perumbalath,

Bishop of Bradwell, who was consecrated alongside me on that glorious day back in July, wrote '*because God is at work there*'.

Thirdly, this engagement is demanding. As we enter more into the public square there will be push back. There will be resistance: we will be asked what right we have to speak or act. But that is, of course, evidence that we are having an impact. That engagement may be risky. We will be engaging with vested interests and, beneath and beyond that, with principalities and powers. That engagement is a tough calling. But it is the calling of the Christ whose witness before Caiaphas and Pilate took him to death outside the city walls. But that, of course, was not the end of the story.

Fourthly, this engagement requires integrity. We will be searched out and known for whom we really are. We are not called to judge the world (that is Christ's task), but we are called to understand God's ways in the world, to get under the skin of what is going on. We are called to engage with care, and to speak and act out of care. We are called to be people of faith and hope and love.

So above all we need to be rooted and grounded in the love of God in Christ. It will be that calling which enables us to be what God and God's world most deeply need.

Last Sunday, we witnessed new connections being made, and God at work in surprising ways.

This week, we have witnessed the chaotic state of the decision making and leadership around Brexit. This is a tricky issue for the Church of England because we are profoundly divided. The majority of Bishops and clergy voted remain. The majority of lay people voted leave. Some of the constituencies in this Diocese voted leave; some constituencies in this Diocese voted remain. And Christians have found it difficult to engage with one another. The political process will continue: to a deal or no deal; perhaps to a Referendum; perhaps to a General Election. Some of us will be speaking into that debate. But all of us now have a calling to engage.

You may have read David Goodhart's *Road to Somewhere*<sup>1</sup>, a helpful analysis of the causes of the result of the Brexit vote and a helpful naming of what has happened to us as a people.

Those who see the world from anywhere are, he points out, the ones who dominate our culture and society: doing well at school and moving to a residential university, and then into a professional career, often in London or abroad. "Such people have portable 'achieved' identities," he says, "based on educational and career success which makes them . . . comfortable and confident with new places and people."

Those who oppose them are those more rooted in geographical identity, who find the rapid changes of the modern world unsettling. Goodhart writes: "They have lost economically with the decline of well-paid jobs for people without qualifications and culturally, too, with the disappearance of a distinct working-class culture and the marginalisation of their views in the public conversation."

One of the most significant aspects of the Church of England is that it holds together 'anywhere' and 'somewhere'. The universal church is an affirmation of our faith, that church calls leaders to move from place to place as apostolic witnesses. So perhaps it is unsurprising that clergy and bishops were nowheres, or at least anywheres. But the local church, the parish is just as important to what our church is and who we are. Last Sunday, the anywheres became somewheres. And the stories of the somewheres gave us hope of the possibility of peace.

So here, perhaps, is one aspect of our vocation to engagement in these difficult days. Can we find the courage - within prayer groups, study groups, discipleship groups, Mums and Toddler groups, Mens groups, worship groups - to give testimony to our identity: each one of us, as somewheres or as anywheres? Can we then explore, perhaps in much smaller groups - twos or threes, more of our story, to the point where in that safe space, we, somewheres or anywheres, can tell each other's stories? And might that engagement be one small step in the road not to nowhere or somewhere, but to healing for our nation?

I leave you to ponder that for a moment, and after a prayer, over coffee.

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<sup>1</sup> Hurst Publishers 2017