Bishop’s Address November Synod 2022

From this bishop’s perspective, there is a new energy around in the church. Maybe it’s catch up after Covid, but in the last two months the number and diversity of those being confirmed tells of growing faith.

The joy of the clergy praying, praising and resting together deepened the connectedness of the diocese, and the work of parishes and bishop’s mission orders providing a welcome for Ukrainians, and opening churches up on weekdays as warm places, tells of mutual care which overflows in generosity

The wonderfully creative team effort which has enabled the opening of the first Passivhaus (net zero) school in the diocese in Frenchay tells of the new partnerships forged between a parish church and its local authority to save God’s planet.

The courageous exhibition at the cathedral, opening up story of that church’s connections with those trading in our fellow human beings for profit, has created spaces for honest speaking, painful listening and penitential commitment.

And at long last the funding bodies of the church has responded positively in moving us into the next stage of investment Transforming Church. Together.

With all these, and other developments, I have looked with new eyes at the Book of the Acts of the Apostles. I fear my Sunday School lessons, with weeks tracing Paul’s journeys, persuaded me that this was one of the most boring books. But re-reading it is breathtaking. The church is hardly able to catch breath to keep up with the dynamic explosion of growth as the good news of Jesus’ life, death and resurrection ripples outwards from Jerusalem along the trade routes of empire and new communities form. There is no settling down..the sprit beckons the apostles across borders they thought were uncrossable…to Samaritans, eunuchs, gentiles…and it gradually dawns on them that God is the God of the whole world, of all peoples and is concerned for the redemption of all things and all peoples.

And I have sensed in the atmosphere of this diocese something new in the possibilities for growth, and change and freedom.

Now the earliest church did not have a plan….it had relationships, not least with the God experienced as the power of the Holy Spirit.’.*it seemed good to the Holy Spirit and to us…*that understated phrase from Acts 15 which was at the heart of the Jerusalem summit at which it was agreed that Gentiles were, with the people of Israel, daughters and sons of the living God. And out from Jerusalem went the emissaries proclaiming this word of the Lord.

At Bishop’s Council residential last week, we were considering how change best happens in our church; agreeing that changes happen in particular places which nudge, encourage, influence other places (as Jesus showed us living in a particular relatively confined place and a specific time, in order to transform every place and time). To honour and support these local changes what is needed is not top down hierarchical thinking which sets us against each other, but shared responsibility, distributed authority, collective working. We need to draw on diverse perspectives, we must continue to strengthen our connectedness, we need to be curious about what each other us up to, and what we can learn. Above all we need to work to strengthen trust in each other. The Book of the Acts of the Apostles resounds with stories of transformed lives and churches. It also, with a degree about frankness tells of human duplicity (think Ananias) and broken relationships (think Barnabas breaking up with Paul and sailing away). Thank God that, then and now, there were and are go-between women and men whose maturity and humility holds individuals and communities together.

I have talked of particularity and of mutuality, gifts of Jesus and the Spirit. And alongside these there is the accountability that Jesus talked of in his relationship to the Father. Whilst we look, with anticipation and a little trepidation, towards the beginning of Transforming Church. Together, we are in this meeting focused not so much on visioning as on accounting. In the budget debate and its decision making we are setting a plan in figures to which all of us are going to be working, the Board of Finance overseeing expenditure. All of us having a part to play in supplying income, not out of compulsion, but out of the grace of our generosity.

Before that, in the report on Safeguarding we will hear of the detailed review of past cases undertaken by this and every diocese by external professional reviewers. I pay tribute to Karen Howard, our reviewer who worked with us over many weeks. In one diocese 9 reviewers were needed because of the complexity of the task. And every Diocesan Bishop has faced moments of judgement, and right preoccupation with those who have suffered deeply at the hands of the church. And yet alongside that judgement has come affirmation. A colleague bishop, rather weighed down by the review, told one of his chaplaincy communities the background to the review, and the extent and expense of the project. A woman who had suffered much under communist rule said ‘but this review is a beautiful gift. It shows how much you care about people, especially the little ones’.

Sisters and brothers, you will no doubt have noticed that I have been talking yet again about God the Spirit, the Son and the Father in speaking of empowerment, particularity and accountability. You may by now have noticed that I have a bit of a thing about the life of the Trinity and the dynamism at the heart of the being of God.

So let’s end there, with a call by the great missionary bishop and theologian J.V. Taylor[[1]](#footnote-1), to follow the first followers in the way who were called to mutuality in depth, confiding in one another, forgiving one another, bearing one another’s burdens, building one another up. That mutuality is the song of the pages of the New Testament. That word mutuality sums up the exchange of self with self which burns in the being of the living God and should burn brightly in the reflected aliveness of us, God’s people. May that indeed be so in our call to follow Christ in this Diocese of Bristol.

1. A matter of life and death 1986 p 75 [↑](#footnote-ref-1)