**EXETER DIOCESAN SYNOD**

**20th March 2021**

**Presidential Address**

**by the Right Reverend Robert Atwell, *Bishop of Exeter***

It is extraordinary to think that in three days’ time, we will mark the anniversary of the first national lockdown. This global pandemic has been raging for over a year and for many people Tuesday will be a significant anniversary. In Devon, the death toll has topped 1,000. Some will be mourning the loss of loved ones, made worse if they were unable to draw upon the support of families and friends in their bereavement. Others, including many young people, will be mourning the loss of educational and employment opportunities. It is a year they will not get back.

I was vaccinated on 13th February and am grateful for the scientists who developed the vaccines and who will continue to refine them in response to new variants of the virus that will inevitably emerge in the months ahead. Because let’s be clear, this virus is here to stay, and we need to adjust to that reality and learn to co-exist with it in the way we have learned to live with other viruses and diseases.

**Understanding the neuroscience**

Listening to a neuroscientist on Radio 4, I was struck by his analysis of the spate of mental health problems that have arisen during the year. He described it as a ‘shadow pandemic’, generated by a loss of hope, the deprivations of social distancing and enforced isolation. We humans are hard-wired for relationship, as the opening chapters of Genesis makes clear. ‘It is not good that the man should be alone;’ says the Lord, ‘I will make him a helper as his partner’ (Genesis 2.18).

The neuroscientist highlighted three factors that generate stress: uncertainty, unpredictability and uncontrollability. In combination, they trigger adrenalin production in the body to help us negotiate the crisis, but when the adrenalin pump is switched off, we feel overwhelmed with tiredness. His explanation may help us understand better our experiences during the past year. It may also explain the steep rise in domestic abuse that has been reported nationwide. This is something we will be reflecting on when we revisit our diocesan safeguarding and domestic abuse policies.

Uncertainty, unpredictability and uncontrollability have certainly been our lot for months now and, in spite of the rollout of the vaccines, are likely to characterise our lives for some time to come. We have been living with **uncertainty,** with a raft of questions that have no answer. Will I get Covid? If I do, how bad will it be? Will I end up in intensive care on a ventilator? Will I develop long-Covid? Will the children need to be home-schooled again? What about my job? What happens if I’m made redundant and can’t pay the mortgage or the rent?

Happiness and predictability go hand-in-hand. The routines and rituals with which we shape our lives are constructed on a platform of predictability. We take out insurance policies to protect ourselves against **unpredictability,** against the ‘slings and arrows of outrageous fortune’ that threaten our wellbeing. As a Diocese, like every other organisation and business, we maintain a risk register to mitigate surprises. The unpredictability of the current situation continues to be challenging. Scientists cannot predict how the coronavirus will mutate. The Government cannot predict how quickly the British economy will recover. As a Diocese, we cannot predict how our finances will pan out. As individuals, we cannot even predict where or when it will be possible to go on holiday safely.

Then there’s **uncontrollability**. Which of us doesn’t hate the vulnerability that comes with not being in control? Throughout the past year, the Government has tried to control the spread of the virus, but it cannot stop the virus mutating. When many of us re-open our church doors for business this Easter, we do not know whether people will turn up. We don’t know if our wonderful army of volunteers on whom our cathedral, parishes and schools rely, many of whom are very senior citizens, will venture forth in spite of being vaccinated.

Uncertainty. Unpredictability. Uncontrollability. These things generate anxiety and it is important to recognise their power lest they control us. Our task as a synod today, as we engage with the items that come before us, is to seek the wisdom of God in the belief that God is faithful and journeys with us. Just as Jesus set his face to go to Jerusalem so, with God’s help, we too will not draw back in fear, exhaustion or alarm.

I say this because three things happen to communities and institutions when people feel threatened. First, they turn in on themselves and become obsessively introspective. Secondly, they become incapable of making decisions. And thirdly, their members turn on each other in a blame frenzy. You only have to look at the bear pit of social media to find evidence of that.

So today we need consciously to counteract self-destructive tendencies by keeping the windows of our mind open onto God’s world. We need to have the courage to make decisions and, for those items that need further consideration, to trust one another until we are in a position to make a decision. And above all, to be gentle with each other, mindful of one another’s tiredness and vulnerability.

**Churches stepping up during the pandemic**

The last year has undoubtedly been traumatic, but in truth wonderful things have been going on across Devon during the pandemic that deserve applause. Churches have been stepping up and stepping out in service to their local communities. By way of illustration, during today’s Synod, although it is not stated on your agenda, we are going to hear three ‘good news stories’.

We are going to hear first about the ‘Snowdrop Ministry’ of St Raphael’s, Huccaby on the edge of Dartmoor, reaching out to their many visitors. You may have seen it featured on BBC Spotlight a couple of weeks back. Many churches during the pandemic have set up foodbanks, made their porches available as drop-off points, and given up their church halls for food storage. Today we are going to hear how *Transforming Plymouth Together* has run a ‘Feast of Fun’ to work with families at risk of food poverty in Plymouth. Finally, we are going to hear about the relaunch of our *Growing the Rural Church Project* and what they have learnt through the pandemic as people across Devon have rediscovered the importance of family and their locality*.*

On the national news, we have heard distressing stories about patients in hospital unable to be visited and the plight of vulnerable residents in care homes who haven’t seen members of their families for a year.In Lamerton near Tavistock, the congregation has been reaching out to their local care homes and on Valentine’s Day played old love songs to residents through an open window while they danced. They made up gift bags for the residents, which included prayers and messages from children in the village school. It is a superb illustration of what happens when parishes and church schools work in partnership. So it’s particularly good that we will be reviewing the annual report of the Diocesan Board of Education and hear what wonderful work our network of church schools has been doing against all the odds this past year.

**Finance**

Like every parish, business and organisation, our income as a Diocese has been hit by the pandemic. As you will discover when we come to consider the financial report and impact update, the drop in income has hit us hard and going forward will inevitably affect what it will be possible to fund. Thanks to the prudent management of the Diocesan Board of Finance, defeatist talk of financial meltdown is out of place, at least in this Diocese. Please discourage such histrionic talk because it is untrue and only succeeds in undermining morale. However, as members of Synod, you do need to know that we have had to take out a clutch of lay posts in the Old Deanery, which means that capacity is now very limited indeed. And in the months ahead, we face the on-going challenge of husbanding our resources for the sake of the work of the kingdom in Devon.

Unsurprisingly, the Chancellor of the Exchequer is preoccupied with trying to re-boot the economy. We have a similar challenge, though for us the challenge is primarily spiritual. How do we re-boot church life? How do we renew people’s confidence in the Gospel, make new disciples and grow the kingdom of God in Devon?

**Service is sacrament**

As a young priest, I visited Calcutta and was privileged to meet Mother Teresa. My enduring memory of her was that she was tiny, perhaps no more than four foot six or seven. She had a very lined face, twinkly blue eyes and a bone-crunching handshake that took me by surprise. Visiting her home for the dying and destitute at Kalighat, I watched as an old man with suppurating sores was carried in from the street by a group of friends and laid on a bed in a side cubicle. They drew plastic curtains around his bed to give him some sort of privacy. The stench was overpowering because the wounds on his back were full of maggots. I watched as two nuns went into him and began gently washing him, cleaning his wounds and talking quietly to him in Bengali. I’ve no idea what they were saying, but being an international religious order with sisters drawn from all over the world, the official language of the community is English. I noticed on the wall above the pallet where the man was being cared for was pinned a notice written in English. It said, ‘The Body of Christ’.

In many churches on Maundy Thursday, as part of their evening liturgy, congregations include a ceremonial washing of feet in commemoration of how Jesus washed his disciples’ feet at the end of the Last Supper. It reminds us that service is its own sacrament and that if we cannot perceive the presence of Christ in the last, the least and the lost, then we will never perceive the presence of Christ in the Eucharist, in the sacrament of his Body and Blood. Sadly, this year with Government restrictions still in force we will not be able to perform such an act of remembrance. But in reality, people have been washing individual’s feet in all sorts of ways this year through unmerited acts of kindness, leaving food parcels on tables outside church for people to pick up without questions being asked, doing the shopping of a housebound neighbour who is shielding, or singing ‘We’ll meet again’ to residents through an open window of a care home. The past year has been punctuated with many Maundy Thursdays. This summer I hope we can recognise some of the most creative responses to the pandemic in our annual St Boniface Awards. It’s not too late to nominate someone. All the information is on the diocesan website and the closing date is 6th April.

**Looking ahead**

As we emerge from this lockdown and return to our church buildings this Easter, let’s open our hearts to the God who washes our feet in Jesus Christ and summons us to life. Our primary calling is to be more Christ-centred for the sake of God’s world. Looking back on what has been undoubtedly a traumatic year, there are lessons to be learned. Looking forward to all that lies ahead, there are new opportunities to be grasped. The past twelve months has given us a well of experience on which to draw. Our worship and mission will not be the same; indeed, should not be the same. We need to embrace a more mixed ecology of how we do church, better tailored to those among whom we live and capitalising on the new pastoral contacts we have made during the pandemic.

In my experience, change comes not in response to informed pessimism or uninformed optimism, but in response to hopeful realism. And hope is born when we see the world through the lens of our Lord Jesus Christ. This is God’s world and we are God’s pilgrim people, and God calls us to be communities of grace and beacons of hope.

The prophet Haggai, when he arrived in Jerusalem upon his return home from exile in Babylon, was confronted with the sight of the temple in ruins. And God said to him, ‘Start rebuilding. I am with you’ (Haggai 2.4). As we go forward together, God says the same thing to us, ‘Start rebuilding. I am with you.’

+ Robert Exon