

Clergy Synod: Anglican Priesthood Today

Tuesday 30th January 2023 via Zoom



The **Synod began with worship**, lead by **The Reverend Andrea Russell**, Warden of Gladstone's Library. She does not like being on-line as one cannot say 'hello' so it is not the same as a face to face encounter! However, we do meet as God's children as we do so in the Name of His Son: creator, redeemer and sustainer. She reminded us of a prayer by Desmond Tutu, who perceives that 'goodness is stronger than evil'. Her prayer took up this theme.

Introduction by Bishop Gregory Bishop Gregory read the passage in John 16:12—17 regarding loving one another and Jesus 'laying down his life for his friends'. He linked in what Andrea said with our call to follow in this way.

Presentation 1 by **Rev Giles Fraser**, Vicar of St Andrews, Kew and well known for his skills through broadcasting and writing. He was sitting talking to us in his kitchen near Kew gardens, and during the interview had a visit from a robin! (God known no limits...?!) His opening question was 'What does Priest do?' Giles started with where he is—not just in his kitchen but also in Kew, home of the famous gardens. This place of huge diversity has many, many plants so the idea of rootedness is essential! However such things are not understood by some these days as they did not fit our current cultural values. Giles looked back at the writings of several figures from the past, starting with Theodore of Tarsus who conducted a survey of the English church, made practical changes and then, in AD 673, called a Synod to institute reforms concerning 'the proper calculation of Easter, episcopal authority, itinerant monks, the regular convening of subsequent synods...'. ++ Rowan also speaks of the need to stay engaged whatever the challenges, facing into them rather than being driven elsewhere by them, because we live in a society where rootedness has largely becoming a 'foreign idea'. Place has also been challenged by technology: people can 'go to' services whilst sitting at home! So what is 'place'? And how does this relate to the other question: 'how long should I stay in my present place?'.

Archdeacon Barry, who specialises in rurality in our Diocese, put up his hand and pointed out that there was a difference between having 'one place' and the contrast with multiple places in a rural context. (Giles, it turns out, has only one parish, no car and cannot drive..!) Another cleric spoke briefly of the challenges rurality / multiple parishes faced. The C of E seems to be coming much more centralised but London Diocese is not here but that does not negate the challenges we face. We are respond in some new ways, for example, the appointment of a diocesan 'transition priest'. Bishop Gregory thanked Giles for helping us consider all this.

Questions and group discussions followed. Bishop Gregory offered us three things to discuss in groups of six.

1. How long should we stay in a particular place? 2. We should consider the importance of celebrating the Eucharist in the context of a parish. 3. Is the church becoming too centralised, and if we are, what is being lost? There were no group notetakers, but the one to which I was allocated responded: 1. There is no right answer—it depends on the place and the person. (As the former Diocesan Rural Officer I pointed out the contrast between Ysbyty Ifan and Wrexham, and the layers between these extremes!) 'God shows us what to do next- in His time' - one contributor said! Another mentioned aging congregations and the role of NSMs too, and the need to differentiate rural (and the wide spectrum) from urban parts of our Diocese! God and context! We all agreed that yes, the church has become too centralised!

Bishop Gregory welcomed us back to the main meeting. There was a short discussion about the nature of 'place' given our high-tech context. Is, for example, 'Facebook' a place? 'We have lots to think about and challenges to face.....' so, time for a coffee break!

The second presentation was by Miranda Threlfall-Holmes, Archdeacon of Liverpool. She gave us a brief overview of her varied career so far! She was ordained Priest 20 years ago. She described priests today as being generally 'tired, burnt out and hiding under the duvet'. They are struggling with the post traumatic stress of Covid and living in a rapidly changing context! Of parish ministry she said: 'It is like a board game with elements of strategy and randomness with no idea what will come out of it!'

In the context of Liverpool she sees the following longer term problems: 1. Generalised decline 2. Ageing: many will die in the next 10 years. 3. Volunteers reduced, but a rise in demand! 4. Victorian church buildings which are reaching the end of their lives. The parish system was based on 12th century land ownership: feudal landlords shaped the C of E! There has also been a major decline in giving, as the church was once paid for by 'patronage' which does not fit into modern systems. Covid has not helped either! So the question is 'How do you lead when you don't know where you are going?' Meanwhile we must put ourselves in the best possible position to move forward to?! One of the shadows for clergy is 'where do we fit in the world?' She mentioned a book: *Status Anxiety* (published 2005 by Alain de Botton) which she recommends. It is an examination of the stress and the reaction it brings to humans and animals. Miranda sees a mismatch between what we thought we were ordained for, and what we do. She suggested we should be educating people in reading and understanding the Bible at a level that fits their abilities and personal character. We could also help people whose experience of going to church has been very limited. So there is plenty to challenge us!

Bishop Gregory thanked Miranda and asked for questions. There were none initially! Then the Dean, Nigel Williams, talked about 'the elephant in the room' referred to, and asked where and what these were? We were told that Liverpool has serious diocesan financial problems. However they are improving things within deaneries, getting people to talk about what concerns them and see if they can build something more sustainable. 'Like using a kind Lego kit', she said, 'to build new and better things!' Getting clergy to be less isolated and working together is another move towards a better place, and takes away suspicion between people.

+Gregory asked for responses from the Zoom participants. Helen offered her thanks to the speaker, and likened it to a wilderness—referring to this theme in the Old Testament. In particular, the narrative of an old male being asked to get people to an unseen 'promised land'! The response to this was that we do indeed need to regain confidence about being 'lost in a wilderness' - in which the unexpected can happen! However it did take a while - 40 years !! It will be found too that, just as the original narrative, the wilderness has resources which we are not using! So while we are there, in the wilderness, we need to keep the flame burning, be faithful and learn from the history of the church.

We then split up into the same groups as previously. The question to answer was 'What do you personally find most helpful?' In my group someone commented that we must work out where to start and then act as 'caretakers', learning from our own history and the wisdom of scripture. Another person expressed the opinion that there was a 'mismatch' between what you were ordained for, and do now in your ministry. Also what practical resources have others discovered to help us build on what we already have? Another asked 'Where does one start? Is one a Caretaker? Is having a good mentor or Spiritual Director a good start? Can 'retired' clergy contribute in any way? One member pointed out that we were ordained into an Order, another said there is a sense of freedom to be found within the limitations of the structure. There is something about giving you a limit that sparks creativity: 'one can free oneself within the structure'! Another person said that good governance is potentially liberating, but too much 'red tape' is not! The impression gained was that the C of E is in a complete mess over many things—not that we don't face challenges in the C in W too!

Bishop Gregory's response to what was said today - although of course he could not hear what every group said. He told us that 'Growing in Faith' will be our theme this year. Diocesan energy will be going into church growth. We will be looking at possible Diocesan projects including 'Digital Disciples'.

There will be a focus on Rural Ministry—giving it enough resources to grow and sustain church life. ('This will of course include the use of Welsh?' someone had suggested hopefully, and this was affirmed. The diocese is committed to being bilingual. There are of course far more who use English but the two languages are treated as equal with geographical differences are recognised. Meanwhile we must not forget that church officers are essential volunteers—which is appreciated by + Gregory. Technology can be a challenge although there are areas of concern. **Finally the meeting closed with prayer led by Archdeacon Andy** based on 2 Samuel 7: 8 14 - 'Presence, Protection and Provision' !

HF 1/2/24



'An independent sheep is a dead sheep; it needs the protection of the shepherd' - a version of Psalm 23