**Portsmouth Diocesan Synod, 6 November 2021**

**Presidential address**

Some years ago I visited Mozambique, as part of the London, Angola and Mozambique link- known as ALMA, meaning soul in Portuguese. The visit was poignant. I was I was there to celebrate the creation of a new Diocese, but as the plane landed in Nampula Airport, Cyclone Kenneth was making landside nearby. Not an easy journey. This adding to the destruction of the recent Cyclone Idai.

We meet this morning, just after the Feast of All Saints and All Souls, and at a time when the world has dared to create a moment for the cries of the poorest to be heard at COP26. Once again, it has been made clear the link between climate change, Covid, economic policy and the outworking of power dynamics seem to affect the poorest. And the poorest tend to be black and brown people, living a long way from the Diocese of Portsmouth. Yet we are the body of Christ, and not a bag of body parts, we are sisters and brothers with those most affected.

All Saints and All souls help us to navigate the reality of death and life. At All Saints we were treated again to the story of the raising of Lazarus, the brother of Mary and Martha. An amazing story, that I would like to make four brief reflections as we begin this synod this morning. I pray that this will help shape and frame the life of our new synod together, that we may be a truly synodal people. That we are intent on journeying together, and not using the synodical process to score points or win battles.

My four brief reflections relate to the people, Lazarus, Martha, Mary, and Jesus. Each of these people are alive and well in Portsmouth, even here in Synod. I wonder which person you relate to the best.

Lazarus. I sometimes wonder why Jesus felt that Lazarus was so special. Out of all the many people who will have died whilst Jesus was ministering, why did he choose Lazarus to raise? Well, some commentators reflect that Lazarus never speaks, and he lives with his sisters- no mention of work. Is Lazarus silent? Can he not, in fact speak? Does Lazarus have a disability or learning difficulty? Is this moment on a par with Jesus telling Peter, after the resurrection, once Peter had declared his love for Our Lord, to feed my lambs. Is this a clear imperative to search out the marginalised, the broken, the silenced, the wounded, the lost? If yes, this turns our ministry upside down in this Diocese. Who is the Lazarus in your community? Who is the silenced in the wider Church and world, and how do we live differently if this does demonstrate a Gospel bias to the poor- in the way we organise ourselves, pay our parish share, listen and respond to the gospel.

Let’s think about Martha. This Synod will be full of Marthas. The doers, the ones who get on with the tasks in hand. The one who serves, the pragmatic one, who gains their sense of self-worth by the actions and activities that they lead. And possibly the one who grumbles in the background- that they are doing too much, that others will not step up to the plate. We see this in her interaction with Jesus in Luke’s Gospel, when she complains that her sister is just sitting on her backside and here in John’s Gospel when she tries to warn Jesus not to do anything too rash: “Lord do not open the tomb, already there is a stench because my brother has been dead for four days”. We, as church leaders, love the Martha, Martha makes our roles much easier. We do not want to upset Martha, because we fear that Martha might leave, and who will pick up the pieces if Martha were to leave. Martha knows this. Yet, sometimes Martha misses God’s imagination, as they are so immersed in the everyday pragmatics, they miss the good news that is staring in the face.

Let’s think about Mary. Mary is dangerous. Mary has sat at the feet of Jesus and listened, and Jesus – in John’s gospel – dares to listen to her, give her space. In Luke, she chooses the better part to listen, and now in John’s Gospel, she confronts Jesus. Jesus has given her a voice: “Lord, if you had been here, my brother would not have died.” She, and a small crowd with her, kneel at Jesus feet, in their anguish and their pain. This is real, this is adult, this is honest, this is truth. Death hurts, Mary is hurting, as the world hurts, and especially the poorest, and often the youngest hurt. Like many mothers that I have sat with, who shout, sob, and shake when their beloved has died through needless knife crime – sometimes to feed the recreational drug habits of the middle classes – Mary is broken and lost. The only thing she can do is shout at God. But notice how this encounter with Jesus leads to the raising of her brother, and eventually such sobs, shouts, and uncontrollable anguish lead to joy – a precursor to the cross, where all of us here become part of the story, living out the words “Peace be with you”. Mary at synod is usually quiet at a synod. Heaven forbid that our church culture might give space for such reality. We love to encourage such outpouring privately, for the public proclamation of our joy when we are together.

Finally, reflecting upon Jesus. Now I’m not suggesting that anyone here is just like Jesus, but we are all made in his image, and we encourage each other to be good, with the Kalos shepherd, the good shepherd, as our guide. So perhaps there is something here for each of us. Jesus is confronted by Mary. Her grief, her story, her reality moves him. He does four things as a result. Jesus is vulnerable and lets himself be moved. He takes on her brokenness, he draws suffering to himself as a precursor to the cross. We then hear the shortest verse of the Bible: Jesus wept. This is God’s response. When the honest cries of the poor, hurting and grieving are shared, God weeps. But it does not end there. God then asks a question: “Where is Lazarus?” He is then given the response that he has offered so many times before: “Come and see”. God then prays- raises his eyes to heaven and speaks to his Father- all rooted in this living relationship in which we are all caught up. Jesus then acts. He commands Lazarus to come out of the tomb, and then utters the extraordinary words: “Unbind him and set him free”. Lazarus has been released, liberated, changed, but as a result, so has Mary, and possibly Martha too. God’s action affects the whole community, having been moved by honesty.

Friends, this is an important synod triennium – you have an important role here in Portsmouth, as we journey together as synodal people. Congratulations on your election win. We have some tough decisions to make, so let us never forget that we are here to serve the whole community – the people of this Diocese: Christ’s own flock, bought by the shedding of God’s blood upon the cross- most of whom are not connected to any of our churches. So, as we journey together, how will you respond. Will you be Lazarus, silenced? Will you be Martha, pragmatic? Will you be Mary, honest, having listened at the feet of Jesus? Will you learn from Jesus, as one who listens, weeps, asks, and acts? Who knows! But what I do know is that it will all become clear as we journey together.

Amen

*+Rob Wickham, commissary bishop, Diocese of Portsmouth*

*6/11/21*