**Diocesan Synod**

**Presidential Address, 6th March 2021**

**What is the Church for? What *is* the Church?**

Things are not the same as they used to be – if ever there was a mantra for the current moment that might be it. ‘Things’ are certainly very different. In the course of the last year each of us, in a variety of ways, has had to discover new ways of doing just about everything.

There are a range of serious questions both being asked, and waiting to be asked about patterns of behaviour that we had previously taken for granted. They range from serious questions about the nature of the economy, the provision of health and social care, to patterns of home working, online learning and of course for the church how to be a body that gathers together, even when we cannot meet in person, and actively proclaims the Gospel.

Some aspects of our existence prior to the pandemic will return as if nothing had happened, others will undoubtedly be changed for ever.

What is the church for? is an even more critical question than before. We can rehearse our usual stock responses and remind ourselves that the church is not a building, not a venue, not a heritage asset but, though true, that skirts the question. When we ask what the church is for, we ask what *we* are for?

We know only too well that patterns of church life (including the pattern of how this Synod functions) have changed very dramatically. A body of people – the followers of Jesus Christ, who normally gather together have for nearly a year now not fully gathered physically. Words and concepts like hybrid, mixed-mode, and virtual that we used in the church just a little are surely here to stay.

For the most part the act of meeting, of gathering at one table, of singing our faith together, is something that has been denied us, and it has had an impact on all aspects of our common life. How do you visit the sick, bind the wounds, feed the hungry, care for the sorrowful when you cannot be close? Well, there are all manner of examples of how the church has adapted and done remarkable things, keeping alive the rumour of God’s love by feeding, by caring.. Acts of grace that give expression to the command to love our neighbours.

It is inevitable that in light of all we are experiencing the Church, this Diocese, each Parish, every follower of Christ will need to pay close and careful attention to what we now do, how we form ourselves for worship, mission and service. As we know only too well difficult decisions have had to be made and more will need to be made. Things are not as they used to be; they will not be as they used to be.

So what is the Church for? What is the church when we cannot do in the same way the things we have done for so very long, the things that we considered core to our existence? Whenever we look at our structures, patterns of ministry and worship we need to pay attention to just what the Church *is*.

We start answering that question by reflecting on our duty to offer worship to God. And of course that immediately brings us back to one of our contemporary challenges, how to worship when we cannot meet, how to share in the breaking of the bread when we must keep our distance. That is a practical matter though, and we are finding ways to be as faithful as we can. What we have discovered is the place and value of our own individual patterns of worship and prayer.

Of course, worship is a corporate venture, but perhaps one of the things we have found is that it is corporate even when we are physically apart. Our worship does not depend on being in one place. Why? Because our worship is part of a deeply profound relationship that is at the heart of what we are for. Our business, our task, our total existence is about being in relationship with God through Jesus Christ.

We have learned that we find fellowship and our security in God and in the community of faith, whether or not we can physically meet in the church building. We have found that we can be nourished sacramentally by spiritual communion even if we cannot physically receive the sacrament of the eucharist. We have been reminded that none of our parishes serves only the people who live within its boundaries as we have been joined for worship, prayer and study online from near and far away.

Things will never be the same again. That is the opportunity we must willingly and joyfully embrace.

One of the things the Church is, perhaps the thing we need to spend more time reflecting on at the moment, is that the Church is a community of people made in the image of God seeking closer union with God, the source of all goodness, and longing for others to know him.

In thinking about that we learn a good deal from the reading we heard in our worship. It is the gospel set for the Eucharist today, that we would have shared together. It is a profound and a powerful story not about some family in history, but about us.

It is about God waiting for us, and lavishing upon us grace and mercy when we come, as we are, seeking to be closer to him. In the familiar story of the Prodigal Son is honesty – the father’s honesty in giving so freely, the prodigal’s honesty about needing to come home, even the honesty of the elder son who has kept working hard while his brother had fun. All is laid bare here and all is caught up in the generous mercy of the Father, ourloving creator.

In this passage is part of our answer. What are we for – we are for God. We are a community of those whom God loves generously and as such we can do nothing other than proclaim God’s mercy, God’s compassion, and God’s interest in and solidarity with all that God has created. We have met mercy; we know that Jesus is Lord and therefore we express something of God’s concern for the world by our own actions. That is what we are for – agents of mercy, agitators for the gospel.

That is why we need to be as honest as the members of that biblical family. Can we be honest to say that we are anxious about the prospect of change, we are anxious about our post and stipend, we are fearful of realising that things can never be the same again? Can we say that we will turn in trust not to what we have and hold it tight but turn to God, whom we proclaim to others as lavishing grace and mercy and so is to be trusted more than anyone or anything else?

In my address to the Synod in November I said, ‘Let solidarity and generosity be our watchwords in the coming weeks and months….’ I did not imagine then that we would be faced with another national lockdown and all that goes with it. We have needed to draw on the deep wells of generosity these past months, and we will need to do so in the months ahead.

Of course, solidarity and generosity should be our common currency, the things we do. They are the hallmarks by which we live and by which are known – what a challenge that is. In the parable of the prodigal son generosity defines the father, generosity is at the heart of the embrace. Solidarity flows from mercy, God calling us into closer union, and our taking the whole of creation seriously. That is why we take an interest not just in our parish, church, or congregation but in all that goes on in our communities.

Not for the first time a story told by a Galilean preacher shakes us in our complacency, in our anxiety about structures and finances. And he speaks not to a congregation in some historical age, but he speaks to us. He speaks to us now, his community in this Diocese, his household.

The certainty of God’s love, the depth of mercy and the constancy of grace remain and will, after me and after you, but for the moment we are the people who God has lavished with mercy and called to reflect that mercy in our very being as members of his household in this small part of his creation. It is vital to remember that for all the personal nature of the father and the prodigal, the church is not about private religion. We do not – we dare not restrict our mission to the private sphere – our church, our parish, our post, ourselves. Our solidarity is with the whole of God’s people, with all that God has made because that is what God is about.

What is the church for? It is a community of people, who know mercy, and who seek to live in that knowledge, who celebrate it, who share it. It is a community of people who confess Jesus as Lord and live with the consequences of that – mercy, hope, the pursuit of justice, feeding the hungry, binding up the wounded, comforting the sorrowful, and above all being deeply, deeply courageous.