Diocesan Synod November 2018

Presidential Address

As we gather as new Diocesan Synod it is good to welcome new members, elected for the first time from our deaneries, and with you those who are returners, ready to be lay and ordained leaders taking responsibility for the life of this diocese. It is a pleasure, too, formally to welcome Victoria James a month into her new ministry as Diocesan Secretary.

Here in Synod we are charged to agree the strategy and order the resourcing of the mission into which God calls us in our communities, parishes and chaplaincies, along with our schools, our outreach and our engagement. Here we come together to take the strategic decisions that are right for the mission of the Gospel across the whole Diocese, and here we decide how to enable the activity that flows from those decisions to be resourced. We are entrusted with the privilege of making the mission of the Gospel of Jesus Christ happen by effective ministry. Thank you for accepting your part in that high calling and for the decisions that need to be made. This is not a time or a place for the faint hearted. It was some years ago, before my time here, that this diocese notably said that things can’t go on as they are and change was essential. That’s as true now as then, and indeed it is always true for disciples of a Lord who proclaimed repentance and renewal, a turning around and transformation.

Each of you, except for those of us here ex officio or by appointment, belongs as well to your PCC and your Deanery Synod – that’s a requirement of the synodical system of the Church of England – so it is there that more local or immediate matters are discussed and determined. Here in this Synod we bear in mind the context from which we come and also that of the whole diocese spread over three archdeaconries. As I urge you to take that overall perspective I offer you the challenging words I read to parliamentarians when I’m privileged to lead prayers before each day’s business when on duty in the House of Lords:

‘…we thine unworthy servants, here gathered together in thy name…and laying aside all private interests, prejudices and partial affections, (pray that) the result of all our counsels may be to the glory of thy blessed name’

Today’s is an unusual Synod. There’s an important learning session through drama in the cathedral, to which we’ve invited parish safeguarding officers, and we are grateful to the team presenting that. There’s lunch too, paid for the diocese and served by some of the team from Bishopsgrove. I am grateful for those who are making that possible. As in your parishes please make it a priority to use the opportunity to meet those here whom you don’t yet know. Don’t bank on drama at every Synod, or lunch.

It’s to the wellbeing of children, women and me that I now turn.

At some point or other, everyone training for public ministry of any kind will have to write at least one essay on the subject of ethics, and it will either involve thinking about what a Christian approach to some specific ethical issue should be, or a more abstract discussion about how Christians ought to do ethics in the first place. The former allows them to think about something real and pertinent to life, while the latter allows them to use smart theological terms, words like ‘teleological’ for instance. But somewhere along the line they and we have to ask how we find out what to do, and how we should live. Two options that might be compared and contrasted are deontological ethics and virtue ethics. Deontological ethics is all about asking what we must do, because it is our duty, because it is commanded by God. Virtue ethics is all about asking what kind of people we should be, what characteristics are worth trying to cultivate. And, while students will have to examine the relative merits of each approach, they often provide different but complementary angles on the same questions.

Today with a particular focus on safeguarding it occurs to me that our language around safeguarding is often focused on duty, and rightly so. There are things we all must do individually and corporately, in terms of process and in terms of how we relate to people. But alongside this, I wonder if we can benefit from asking in this context what kind of people we should seek to be. To look at it from that angle is to see how safeguarding ultimately flows from our very being as disciples of Jesus and as humans in whose nature might echo, at least, or mirror better the character of God.

We believe that each and every person is made in the image and likeness of God. Whether we like them or not, disagree with them or not, it is our ‘bounden duty’ to honour and respect them, seeking for them the very best. So that is the sort of person we seek to be, and a church constituted of people like that, in relation to everyone. If we treat Safeguarding as a set of tasks to be completed, checks to be completed, training to be signed off – all of which are important – then we have not even begun to get the point. Until we wish to be people and a church where we treat everyone in the way that reflects God’s love for him or her in creation and Jesus redeeming love for her or him, we are falling short as disciples of Jesus Christ. Not ifs or buts.

God is described in scripture as safe, not in a tame sense, but in the sense of being one whose power is exercised not for the self, but for the other. It is a selflessness that is inherent to God’s Trinitarian being, a for-otherness at the very heart of the divine life, which overflows into the creator’s relationship with creation, and characterises the healing and saving love of the cross. It is the very essence of God whose prime characteristic in the Old Testament is *hesed*, not just love, but steadfast loving-kindness, loyalty, faithfulness. God’s love is unwavering, and it is from that that we understand the protectiveness of God, described in terms of shelter, refuge and safety.

This unwavering love is revealed to us in Jesus Christ and in particular through the failure even of death itself to undo the love of God. In Jesus’s resurrection from the dead, God’s loving-kindness is shown to endure all things, but we see that played out time and again through the character of Jesus’s earthly life, as he bats away the demands of self-focused power, and creates a place and dignity for all and especially the vulnerable.

So while there are things we must do, the motivation does not come from a sense of duty alone, but more fundamentally from the call to become Christ-like people. As we are formed more and more together into the likeness of Jesus, what power we have slowly rotates away from the self and towards the other, to empower and protect. So the love of Christ grows in us and moulds us, and instead of asking minimally what it is we have to do to comply, we find ourselves asking how we as a Church can do more to be a rock, a refuge, a place of safety and flourishing for all.

As Christians we fall short of the perfection God wishes for us, and today we reflect on our failures as a church and repent. Over many decades we have failed to protect children in particular from sexual abuse; and our failures as a Church to listen and respond well to the voices of those children, whether contemporaneously or as adults, in seeking justice and redress for the abuse they have suffered.

At the last General Synod in February there was a [safeguarding presentation](https://www.churchofengland.org/more/media-centre/news/safeguarding-presentation-general-synod) during which the four speakers clearly outlined the challenges we face as as a Church as we approached the Independent Inquiry into Child Sexual Abuse, (‘[IICSA](https://www.iicsa.org.uk/investigations/investigation-into-failings-by-the-anglican-church)’). The Anglican Church in England and Wales is one of IICSA’s 13 focussed investigations and in March at IICSA there were three weeks of public hearings about the Church, focusing on the diocese of Chichester as a case study. The Church of England as a whole will be the subject of further public hearings at IICSA in the middle of 2019. Archbishop Justin was one of those who originally called for this Inquiry. This investigation is a necessary examination that the Church fully supports.

It is difficult for all of us in the Church when survivors, who have been brave in coming forward, share their stories, and church officers are called as witnesses. We must listen to survivors’ voices, acknowledge and repent for where we have got it wrong in the past, seek to learn lessons for the future, and change, whilst also focusing on the important safeguarding work going on in our churches every day of the year. This is, I need hardly say, for our prayers and our action.

I thank all those who are leading that work in our churches, chaplaincies and worshipping communities, including all the volunteers who support it, especially our Parish Safeguarding Officers. I would also like to acknowledge the immense amount of hard work carried out by our Diocesan Safeguarding Advisers and diocesan safeguarding teams to ensure that we continue to promote a safer Church for all. Thank you, personally as well as on behalf of the diocese. Thank you sincerely for the vital ministry you give.

If you have any questions or comments about the work of IICSA or the issues that it is considering, please do not hesitate to contact Ian and Mary, our Diocesan Safeguarding Advisers, or Neil our Communications Officer. There’s also, of course, material on the web, on our pages, the CofE’s and IICSA’s.

 If any of what I’ve said, or what follows this morning raises issues which you would value talking about, please be assured that there is someone to listen to you. Again, a Diocesan Safeguarding Adviser, or any officer holder in the diocese is a good first port of call.

Safeguarding children and vulnerable adults is not an ‘add on’ issue. It is about the Kingdom of God and about us, as followers of Jesus Christ, joining in with God's mission of transformation, reconciliation and justice.