**Diocesan Synod Presidential Address: March 2017**

‘Being Human, Being Church’ was the title of Robert Warren's book published some 20 years ago which outlined his understanding of a church with an authentic spirituality rooted in community, mission and worship. He observed that the areas where these three overlap was spirituality, and that where churches did not engage in mission, where they did not engage with their local context, they had a gaping hole in their spirituality. Analyses of the state of the church in a larger sense also come to the conclusion that the reason why it's frequently failing to grow is because it is out of touch with wider society, context and culture. For example, following the publication of the House of Bishops’ (and so my) paper on human sexuality, of which General Synod declined to take note, many voices cried out that this was the reason why younger people wanted nothing to do with the church, because of what they perceived as incomprehensible attitudes to LGBTI Christians.

What's interesting about Robert Warren's analysis of failure in mission, where we find that, is that the failure of church really to engage with context, society and culture could be not as much an example of where the church is out of step with the world, but where in fact the church is imitating the world. We must be wary of jumping to too simple an explanation. In my last Synod address I indicated that the changes in western culture towards nationalism, evidenced partly in the result of the referendum, would also make it likely that Trump would become president of the USA. I’m not taking credit for being right. As is so obvious for us looking across the ‘pond’, a nation with a strong national identity is not one that seeks to build walls to keep others out, but is one which in its conviction goes out to interact with the world. In the same way, a strong local church is not one where its theology and practice serve to exclude those who don't like what it does or questions and challenges it, but one where theology and practice speak of the convictions which enables all life to flourish. It is not that we don't have values, but that they are values that give us a life and joy which compel us to engage, which are attractive, real and potentially transformative for others. This is church life not so much rooted in building + congregation + priest + stipend but community + faith + action.

Of course I’d say that it’s a lot easier to write books about these things than it is to live them out. I would say that, wouldn’t I, speaking as someone whose never written a book in my life. And building + congregation + priest + stipend is perfectly able to live alongside community + faith + action. But it is also capable of carrying on, at least in the short term, where these things are weak or non-existent. And carrying on into decline.

Without a vision the people perish - and some may say that books like Warren’s have contributed to the culture of mission or vision statements found in our church. We have our own, *live – pray – serve*, which closely corresponds to the community + faith + action triad of Warren’s book. What is interesting is that in one recent survey of the reasons why Millennials (that's young people to the rest of us) aren't coming to church is that they are turned off by the hours taken to craft a mission statement that in the end indicates quite the opposite of the intention. What we wrongly and no doubt unintentionally, but appallingly can communicate is how much the church is focussed on itself. The thing the survey indicates millennials are looking for is the outward focus that Robert Warren said was so often lacking in Church life. So it's good to know that this morning is very much about that sometimes missing element. We'll be hearing about work among children and refugees; and hopefully taking away food for thought which can be applied at our local level.

This is, of course just one of the three aspects of vibrant church life; the *serve* of *live – pray - serve*. And so it's also worth looking at the living, and the praying. For us that *living* part is not just about our relationships with one another in church but about how we learn to follow Christ in our daily lives which of course necessarily includes our relationships with colleagues and neighbours, friends and family, some of whom don't go to church. It was a great delight recently to license Emma Racklyeft to the parish of Denmead, and  in addition to her parish role she has also been licensed as deanery lay development officer. This means she'll be engaged in teaching and learning across the deanery to help equip us all, the people of God, in our daily discipleship. We're very grateful for people like Emma, but the danger in giving her such a role is that it can somehow seem that this is a job that someone else is going to do for us, or to us, whereas discipleship - our own and that of others - is the responsibility of all Christians, and so of us individually and corporately. Jesus said 'Go, and make disciples of all nations'; and that means you and me.

Just as the worshipping life of the local church is the activity that underpins both its community and its action, so the remaining item of live, pray, serve, underpins the life of each individual Christian, called to make disciples. Without *prayer* we will eventually end up in a place where we are solely reliant on our own strength and intellect and work and plans to minister to a world which needs much more than all of these. Of course we all struggle with prayer. It can feel like a battle to make time for it in all the busyness of our lives. But actually we need to see it much more like we do our eating and drinking; something we make room, make time for because we know that it is essential, we need it. Prayer turns faith from being a cut flower in a vase to being a plant rooted in fertile soil.

So I hope that we don't view Lent, just begun, with its call to deepen our devotion, or see this year's 'Thy Kingdom Come' initiative between Ascension and Pentecost as yet more top down or imposed things to put grudgingly on the ‘to do’ list, but as a gift; a gift to remind us and enable us to push our roots deeper into the soil of prayer, the thing that sustains us not just to maintain our lives of worship and community in the local church but also the fuel to send us out in mission to serve.

**Christopher Portsmouth:**