**DIOCESAN SYNOD, March 2019**

**PRESIDENTIAL ADDRESS**

It won’t surprise many of you to know that preparations for the ordinations of deacons and priests at Petertide are already underway. This year for the first time the Admission of Readers will also take place a couple of weeks later so that we have a season, as it were, of licensed ministry inauguration. So we are making arrangements for those three services and the retreats for the candidates beforehand. In a sense, these preparations have been underway for years, through the work of discerning the call of God, training and formation for ministry in one way or another, leading through the ordinations themselves and on into continuing public ministry.

But there is another ordination that occurs in the life of the Church, one with a very different kind of preparation, and one that is in some ways far more significant. It is an ordination in which all Christians share, clergy and lay, and one in which we celebrate the life of God and the grace of Jesus Christ. This ordination is our baptism, in which we respond to the call of God to follow Christ, are renewed through his grace, and sent out into the world bearing the light of the gospel. So do not make too sharp a distinction between ordained and lay people; we have all been called to one hope in Jesus Christ, and all called into the world as his witnesses, as ministers of the Gospel.

It seems to me that as we gather in this Synod to discuss a range of matters, including a fresh consideration of our diocesan vision ‘Live׀Pray׀Serve’, it is good to be mindful of our baptismal calling and commission. In turn, the grace of baptism reminds us why ‘live’ comes first in the sequence. We are called as living beings to life in Jesus Christ now. Before we do anything, we are given the grace of life, and so before we give anything to God or the world, God gives to us. As John writes, before we loved, God loved us. So our diocesan vision is rooted in mindfulness and thankfulness of the revelation of God’s gift to us, in life, in Jesus. Everything that we are and do is rooted first in awe, wonder, and gratitude to God, and baptism draws us into that continuing reality.

This, to my mind, is to root of my response to Revd Carrie Thompson’s question regarding the House of Bishops guidance on using the reaffirmation of baptismal vows for transgender persons. It was tabled as a formal question to me for this Synod but, falling outside our standing orders, I am happy to address it now. For those who may not have followed this, the House of Bishops recommended that the use of the existing reaffirmation of baptismal vows would create a liturgical space for transgender persons who have already been baptised to be welcomed into the Church and recognized in their identity, including where applicable to use a newly taken name in the service. I supported this decision in the Delegation Committee, of which I’m a member as well as of the House of Bishops, who were responding to a request to Bishops made by substantial vote of General Synod to consider this. This seems to me to be an important statement of affirmation and inclusion, but in focusing on our one baptism also allows for a couple of key points to be taken into account.

The first is that because baptism is, among other things, a sacrament of welcome into the Church, and into that shared calling, the reaffirmation of baptism reminds us that gender transition does not call that belonging or vocation into question, during or after. The person reaffirming their vows belonged to the Church and to Christ before transition, and their transition has not changed that. Their belonging and vocation continues, and the service of renewal of baptismal promises affirms that. Our belonging and calling are not contingent on where we are at any given moment in our journey and life, but comes through the grace of Christ to us all.

This leads to a second point, that transgender experience is not uniform – as with all human experience – and the use of this service reminds us of common bonds in Christ that remain central to our being, whatever stage a person is at in transition and wherever we find ourselves in life. Baptism does not set a seal on where we are as a person, but what reaffirmation does, as with all who undertake the rite, is to state very surely that this person here now is loved by God as they are, is a full member of Christ’s body in the here and now, and is fully accepted and welcomed by God in the Church.

That remains true for us all, and is perhaps why it is good at times to reaffirm our baptismal vows. I can confidently say that I participate in the affirmation of baptismal vows more often than anyone else in this diocese. It is part of every Confirmation service. Baptism remains a one-off never-to-be-repeated sacrament, and it is precisely in its singularity that we hear of the grace of God. While in a real sense we are continually moving through death to new life in Christ, our baptism marks the once for all work of grace in Jesus that means we are accepted, called, heard and sent, whatever the turns of our life. We are ordained as Jesus’s followers and disciples, and are so at the moments where we are most keenly aware of it, and also on the days where experience relieves us of that awareness. Because God is gracious.

Prayer and service that grow out of life then, and life in Jesus, are not duties but fruits of our calling. Indeed the very fact that calling is most properly rooted in our hope in Christ reminds us that while we often speak of vocation in terms of our work and action, what we do, that emphasis is misplaced. We are called to God as much as by God. And as we find ourselves alive in God, what we do just begins to happen. As we know God, we pray; how could such knowledge produce any other reaction? As we learn of God’s love for us, so we serve our world; how could the discovery of such love lead anywhere else? It is precisely when we are most heavenly-minded that we are of the most earthly use, because the God of heaven is also the God of earth, and the God who loves both with a perfect and unfading love.

And if all of this is beginning to scratch the surface of truth, then it means that our Diocesan vision must be, first and foremost, God. It is God to whom we look for our life, because it is God who first called us to hope in Jesus. And we trust that such vision does not stop us from being active in the world, precisely because of who God has shown himself to be. No, as we become accustomed to that vision so we will be drawn into the world just as God is in Jesus Christ.

That is why we begin with life, out of which grows prayer and service. And it is also why when we speak of growth, we speak first of growth in depth before thinking of growth in impact and numbers. We talk quite a bit about growth in numbers, and I don’t apologise for that; the numbers aren’t an end in themselves, but because we are about people discovering life in God, numbers we hope will be a corollary of our openness to our community. But even in the way that I frame that you can see, I hope, that numbers can only be secondary to depth, because what matters most of all is that others come to experience the life of God revealed in Jesus Christ, and the inexhaustible nature of that life means that growth in depth is simply another way of describing our journey as Christians. But more than that, our hope for growth is actually then that the whole of creation would grow in depth, that each and every person and part of creation would deepen in awareness and joy in God. Growth, seen like that, may well translate into people deciding to come to Church services, but also in broader forms of living, in relationships with neighbours, in the fruit of lives lived in grace.

And as we move to business, it is that that connects all our work from the most inspiring to the most mundane, because of the hope and promise that God will be all in all, and that the whole of creation caught up into the divine ecology of blessing.