**Presidential Address, Portsmouth Diocesan Synod**

**12 June 2021**

Yesterday we celebrated together the feast of St Barnabas the Apostle. Barnabas is our friend, and what a legacy he has - a Levite, a native from Cyprus called Joseph, to whom, in Acts 4, the Apostles gave the name Barnabas, which means Son of Encouragement. Barnabas is seen as the encourager.

Encouragement is so needed in our churches and in our wider society, so I wonder, who is your Barnabas, and to whom are you a Barnabas? Encouragement can be in short supply, as we each grapple with our own responses to a global pandemic, with all the disruption that this continues to bring. Disruption especially relating to issues of poverty, race, economics, education, and significant mental health issues. Disruption also in our churches for whom this past 18 months has not been a marathon, but a series of significant short sprints, with no recover time in between.

Who for you is your Barnabas, and might I suggest after this synod, you dare to pick up the phone, and let them know, and say thank you?

Yesterday morning’s reading from Jeremiah at Morning Prayer is also poignant. The prophet declares “*Thus says the Lord: Do not let the wise boast in their wisdom, do not let the mighty boast in their might, do not let the wealthy boast in their wealth; but let those who boast boast in this, that they understand and know me, that I am the Lord; I act with steadfast love, justice, and righteousness in the earth, for in these things I delight, says the Lord*.”

This is a very helpful reminder to why we are gathered here, in this Zoom room, this morning. We are here because God has called us here, to be Barnabas to each other. God delights in our partnership for love, justice, and righteousness. In doing so we dare to think that together we might discover something of God’s truth for the Church in Portsmouth. That is for the sake of all those who live, study, work, and travel through this Diocese. That together, our communities may look more like the Kingdom of God, and together we act in the Lord, who himself acts with love, justice, and righteousness, for God delights in these things.

In my short time in the Diocese so far, I have already discovered many Barnabas’s, for which I also delight. One of my frustrations of being a commissary Bishop is that I am not immersed in the worshipping life of our churches. I am deeply aware that a Bishop’s calling is to know his or her people, and be known by them, and as a Commissary Bishop, it is inevitable that I will fail in my duties. However, like in any Diocese, what crosses the bishop’s desk is by and large the wonderful and celebratory news, and also the concerns and complaints. Already, I have had my fair share of both. This coupled with the matters for prayer that I have requested from our Area Deans has given me a wonderful picture of the life of this Diocese, and I want to thank you. Thank you for your honesty, thank you for your welcome, thank for you kind farewell to +Christopher, and thank you for being passionate and caring about our shared life together. There is much encouragement in the life of this Diocese.

Our shared task of mission is very clear. To just take the Diocesan figures of church attendance, we could well find ourselves colluding with the pervading culture that says that Christianity in on a downward spiral, and the only way is down. Across the Diocese, this is true, our attendances have reduced by 45% in the last 30 years, and now at least a third of our churches in this Diocese have no children as part of the worshipping community. Now, as members of this Synod, I do hope that these figures make us feel uncomfortable, but we must check that we are also not colluding with that pervading culture.

Already I have seen glimpses of Jesus, at work in this Diocese in the way we have responded to the pandemic: serving our neighbour, washing feet and feeding the hungry, celebrating online and in person - visiting and confronting isolation, and seeking that joy that Jesus promised in John’s Gospel the night before he died. That my joy may be in them, and that joy be made complete, just after Jesus washed the disciples’ feet, and told them to love one another.

Live | Pray | Serve is our shared response to this challenge. There are mixed feelings, I am fully aware, in this synod about Live | Pray | Serve, and some emerging proposals. Your mixed feelings have dominated my Portsmouth postbag, which is why our conversation this morning is timely. I pray that we shall come to this discussion in the spirit of St Barnabas.

I am so grateful to Victoria, the Archdeacons, the Area Deans, Lay Chairs, and entire team for their shared desire and hope to get this right, to continue to listen - to remain in the room, even when there is disagreement. As Pope Francis reminds us in his excellent book, *Let us dream*, conflict is natural and necessary if we are to discover something of truth together. No one in this room is completely right, or indeed completely wrong. Opposing opinions may seem contradictions- but this is very binary and makes for mediocre and shallow debate. The Pope reminds us that we must frame such discussions and deliberations as contrapositions, in tension with one another. We have been here before. For the Christians in Galatia, of course, it was about whether men should be circumcised before they become Christians, and such debates have taken place throughout church history.

As Anglicans, our debates should be ones which listen deeply to those in the room and those outside the room; to our tradition, to our history, to Scripture, to lived experience, to informed reason and scholarly thought. These voices help to shape our own understanding of mission. To help us live lives, liberated in Jesus Christ who has defeated our death, and won for us hope. Opposing opinions may, in fact, be marks on a spectrum, contrapositions in tension with one another. It is the task of this synod to navigate - no winners or losers, no vanity projects or bruised egos, no tanks on the lawn, only glory to God in the process.

Of course, this applies to both of our significant conversations this morning. The way we organise our resources to give to every person in this diocese an encounter with Jesus Christ needs to be a wise one. Resources are limited. No, resources are diminishing, exacerbated by the pandemic, and so need to be used in a different way - mindful of the liturgical words from 1 Chronicles: “Yours, O Lord, are the greatness, the power, the glory, the victory, and the majesty; for all that is in the heavens and on the earth are yours; all things come from you, and of your own do we give you.”

Our LLF conversation is also very needed. For a few, we are a denomination which has turned its back on the scriptures, and therefore to be feared for our unorthodoxy. For many others, we are viewed as toxic and homophobic, as well as misogynist, racist and unsafe. The reality, it seems to me, again demonstrates our need for a wise conversation which listens to a variety of voices- voices we find in the scholarly work of LLF. I’m aware though that this discussion will make many of us deeply vulnerable, and I pray that we shall live out the pastoral principles in the process. The conversation is not about changing views but is to help us as individuals and as a church to become more accountable and transparent, and not to hide behind labels which are understandable for those on the know but bewildering and potentially abusive for those who are not.

Friends, this is our task today. We pray that God will speak through us, and that we begin to trust each other a little more in the process. This, I pray, is a good space - a synodal space, which Pope Francis reminds us comes from the Greek, meaning walking together- and this is our goal. Creative tension leads to “overflow” and we find ourselves in a place of significant grace. The Lord is here, his spirit is with us.

My friends, my prayer for this synod is that we will meet Jesus together. Jesus will guide our conversation, and we come together as leaders exercising powerlessness and humility, to quote Henri Nouwen, or indeed to be “blinded by grace”, to quote Stormzy.

Let us be St Barnabas in Portsmouth, and let us boast in this, that we understand and know God, that God is the Lord; God acts with steadfast love, justice, and righteousness in the earth, for in these things God delights. The people of Portsmouth demand this of us- especially those who will come to know Jesus, because of our conversations this morning.

Amen

+Robert Edmonton

Commissary Bishop of Portsmouth