

Diocesan Synod

Presidential Address

June 25th 2025

Today has been an interesting and varied day thus far, starting with prayer; continuing with a rehearsal for the Ordination service on Saturday, and with hosting a lunch for 15 priestly ordinands and their loved ones before packing the ordinands off on Retreat; making a quick visit to Westminster, where I led prayers in the House of Lords and stayed in for the opening questions; and getting back in time for our Synod this evening.

And reflecting on the day, and especially on the rehearsal this morning, there are two phrases from the ordination liturgy which invariably bring a tear to the eye.

‘Priests share with the Bishop in the oversight of the Church, delighting in its beauty and rejoicing in its wellbeing’. That’s one. And the second is like, namely this: *‘Remember always with thanksgiving that the treasure now to be entrusted to you is Christ’s own flock, bought by the shedding of his blood on the cross’.*

Delight. Beauty. Joy. Wellbeing. Thanksgiving. Treasure. Christ’s own flock. We could hardly imagine a more positive or powerful Word-Cloud, when it comes to describing the Church of Christ. And were we to get out our mobile phones now and to produce a Word-Cloud of our own, in response to the question, ‘What words would you use to describe the Church of England?’, I wonder how *that* cloud would compare with the words of the ordination service. Would the terms Delight, Beauty, Joy, Wellbeing, Thanksgiving, Treasure, Christ’s own flock be front and central in our responses? Would they feature at all? And if not, how we might recapture that sense of the Church as a beautiful thing – a Transforming Church, Transforming Lives - without displaying either a ridiculous naivety on the one hand or a debilitating cynicism on the other?

It's hardly surprising, perhaps, that beauty may not be the first word that comes to mind when we think of the Church of England right now. Because there’s been so much ugliness on show in recent years, most heinously that succession of safeguarding failures that came to a head at the end of last year. There’s been so much division too, and anxiety about our future; so much talk about the Church being institutionally racist, sexist, homophobic and unsafe. Her money is dirty money, generated by proceeds from the slave trade. Her governance is obscure and dysfunctional.

Parishioners feel the need to ‘save the parish’. Question time at General Synod is frequently toxic. And meanwhile, of course, the grass is always greener on the other side, whether that’s Church Growth among the Pentecostals or the speedy election of a new Pope.

The media doesn't always help here. A press that is generally very sensitive in its portrayal of other religions, and even treats other *Christian* denominations with kid gloves, tends to go for the jugular when it comes to the Church of England. Occasionally attacks are mounted on religion more generally: Esther Rantzen, for example, complaining of Parliamentarians who oppose assisted suicide on the grounds of, quote, "*undeclared personal religious beliefs which mean no precautions would satisfy them*". The boring old cliché that religion is the cause of most of the world's problems continues to be trotted out, despite the obvious counter-narrative that most people in the world *have* a religion, so that a more accurate cliché would state, '**People** are the cause of most of the world's problems'. And meanwhile we may well be embarrassed how our Christian faith is deployed for political ends, whether in the form of unquestioning evangelical support of President Trump in the USA, unquestioning Orthodox support of President Putin in Russia, or Far Right groups displaying the sign on the cross outside the asylum hostel in Aldershot.

But back to the Church of England more specifically. Because it's not, of course, that our Church should slow down on improving our safeguarding culture, or addressing continuing issues of racism, sexism, or homophobia within our ranks; and I for one give thanks for the vision of Project Spire as a prophetic step towards righting historic wrongs. But if someone gets told that they're ugly too often, they start to believe it, and a general sense of gloom descends, which robs them of the humble confidence that should be theirs and ironically militates against real change: because real change comes not from condemnation – as St. Paul put it in our Morning Prayer this morning, 'There is now no condemnation for those who are in Christ Jesus' - but from the conviction of the Holy Spirit, and the repentance, absolution and appropriate restitution that accompany it.

Now when the ordination service speaks of delighting in the beauty of the Church and rejoicing in its wellbeing, it may be going a little bit beyond scripture. Christ loves the Church and gave himself up for her. That much is clear. But the language of beauty depends rather more on an allegorical reading of the Song of Solomon than on the language of the New Testament.

But there *is* extraordinary beauty in the Church – not just the radiant eschatological Bride of Christ that Paul envisages in Ephesians chapter 5 but in the lived-out reality of the People of God today. There is beauty in the many stories I have heard in just the last week – the stories of those thirty I confirmed on Sunday evening, or those 13 I will be ordaining as deacons next Sunday – even beauty emerging from the darkest and most challenging of places.

One of my confirmands last Sunday is an extraordinarily courageous man, who read the epistle reading on Sunday just a few feet from here he was first abused as a child several decades earlier. '*Blessed be the God and Father of our Lord Jesus Christ*', he read, '*who has blessed us in Christ with every spiritual blessing in the heavenly places... In him we*

have redemption through his blood... according to the riches of his grace that He lavished on us'.

His abuser, a former choirmaster, is now in prison for the crime when it came to light decades later. And having personally walked alongside this man for the past couple of years, as has his vicar and his PSO and Jackie our Diocesan Safeguarding Officer, it's been quite extraordinary to witness the journey – a complete miracle, as his partner told me on Sunday night – or else, as the prophet Isaiah put it, a '*crown of beauty instead of ashes, the oil of joy instead of mourning, and a garment of praise instead of a spirit of despair*'. It's an unusual and profound story. But all over the place – and in churches of all traditions - I'm constantly being reminded that *Transforming Church, Transforming Lives* is more than a slogan. It's actually happening. In fact, it currently seems to be happening more than ever.

That's the conclusion of the Bible Society in their report, 'The Quiet Revival', that some of you will have read, with its particular focus on young adults, the so-called Generation Z, who seem much more open to spiritual reality than their parents or grandparents. And while some of the report's statistics have been met with some scepticism – though there's no questioning the huge rise in the sale of Bibles over the past five years - there's plenty of evidence around the diocese of younger people suddenly turning up in Church with a deep hunger to know more: indeed, both +Paul and I have baptised and confirmed a good number in that category over the past few months.

Covid woke us all up to our own mortality. Wars and rumours of wars, and our current climate chaos, are waking us up to something more dramatic still – the possibility that humanity as a whole has a limited shelf-life. So that Churches that live out a humble confidence in the gospel message - Churches of both word and spirit, creation and redemption, cross and empty tomb, worship and service, courage and compassion – are beginning to experience something quite remarkable. We so easily forget the sheer Goodness of the Good News, or take for granted what our churches have to offer. But instead we're called to stand back from time to time: to delight in the Church's beauty and rejoice in its wellbeing – and yes, to acknowledge her faults too, which are many, but not in a manner that blinds us to the beauty of Christ's bride. Love Jesus. Love his Bride. That's the challenge.

So here's what I love about the Church of England. I love her vision to minister to the whole community and not simply the faithful remnant. I love the holistic nature of her mission, with evangelism and discipleship taking their place alongside care for the poor, care for creation and a commitment to social justice. I love the variety of her worship styles, and the way she takes seriously St. Paul's vision of being 'all things to all people so that by all possible means I might save some'. I love her extraordinary history of global mission, which continues to bear such remarkable fruit in the world today. I love the rich theological, liturgical and musical resources with which she has furnished the wider

Church. And I even love her costly attempts to hold together unity-in-diversity – attempts that were originally designed to stop Christians from killing one another, and have achieved that and more! – even if we remain a quarrelsome Church, and seldom more than now.

In past generations it's matters of liturgy that have fuelled those quarrels, then matters of creedal orthodoxy, then matters of gender. Some of us have lived through all three. And now it's issues of human sexuality and behaviour that are consuming huge time and energy, with no very satisfactory end in sight.

Do keep the September Diocesan Synod date in your diary for the time being, in the hope that the fog might have cleared a little over the summer. And do remember too that this is an us-and-us matter – something that together we need to seek to resolve before God – rather than othering progressives or conservatives, General Synod or the House of Bishops or (worse still) our gay, lesbian, or same-sex-attracted sisters and brothers themselves.

So in the midst of all that – and in this ordination week – let's be encouraged afresh by that challenge to *delight in the Church's beauty and rejoicing in its wellbeing*, And as members of this Synod, let's *'Remember always with thanksgiving that the treasure that is entrusted to us is Christ's own flock, bought by the shedding of his blood on the cross'*.