

## **Presidential Address to Chelmsford Diocesan Synod, 18 November 2017**

2017 has been our year of discipleship. The School for Disciples initiative across the diocese was well received and well attended. But I hope I am not so foolish as to imagine that a series of roadshows, however entertaining and instructive, can change the priorities of the diocese at a stroke. But I do dare to hope that in many of our churches, benefices and Mission and Ministry Units careful consideration is being given about the priority we give to catechesis and prayer, and the ways we might reorder all our priorities so that each worshipping community can really become a school for disciples, a place where we learn how to follow Jesus and serve his world.

We have also been doing some thinking about this at the diocesan level, and will give these matters further consideration at the Bishop's Council away day in January before bringing further thoughts back to the March Synod.

Fundamentally, what we seem to be learning is that those issues and priorities associated with – to use the Transforming Presence language – inhabiting the world distinctively must be at the heart and centre of everything we do. The Church is a community of disciples centred on Jesus that makes disciples of others and brings them to Jesus. In this way our lives are transformed, and the world is transformed. Our longing to share the gospel and our longing to bring God's justice to the world are part of the same longing to know Christ and seek first his kingdom. Therefore unless each of us is taking our own following of Jesus seriously and allowing the gospel to shape, question and penetrate all we are and all we do, everything else that we strive for will be diminished and starved of the breath of the Spirit that it needs in order to flourish. So the School for Disciples has taken us all back to school, reminding us of the ABC and the Doh Re Mi of Christian faith, discipleship and witness.

I hope to be able to say more about what this will mean for us at the March Synod, but suffice to say here there seems to me to be a need to refocus and refine our priorities and make sure that everything we do as a diocese is aligned around those things we have identified as our core vocation and business.

Many things are going well. Vocations to ordained and lay ministry continue to rise. Our Interim, Ministry is having a positive effect. Having now appointed a Director of Church Planting projects we look forward to a step change in our ability to plant new churches and develop new forms of Christian community. Many churches are growing in number and in confidence. And there are now 16 commissioned Ministry and Mission Units in the diocese and many more on the way.

However, there are still many churches that are struggling and we need to work more effectively to provide the encouragement and resource that will enable them to grow as well. And we certainly cannot afford the luxury of thinking that any of us have got this worked out. If the answers to the challenges we face were easy, we would have found them long ago. But we are in a new missionary situation and need to become a missionary church. This requires a deep rootedness in the traditions that have shaped us: a resolute faithfulness to scripture, a love of prayer, and the balm and nourishment of the sacraments. We need to be taken back to a new intimacy with God and a more determined dependence upon God; and we need to take greater responsibility for our stewardship of the church and its participation in the mission of God.

There is much to do. I am mindful of having been your Bishop now for almost exactly seven years. I realise that my own ministry could have been more attentive to God, more open to the needs and sorrows of the communities we serve, more prayerful and more intentionally focused on the few things that must be the priority for all of us. But God is gracious. God loves his Church, and, despite our shortcomings and failures, will stick with us if we are humble and penitent – with each other as well as with God. So I happily commit myself to the work that I believe God is still calling us to do over the years to come.

2017 has also been a year of sadness and the loss of many much loved colleagues who have died. Of course, each year each of us faces the reality of death as those we know and love are released from their earthly pilgrimage and gathered into the greater presence of God, but the death of Bishop John in July has, I suppose, focused us that bit more on the ultimate realities of our lives on earth and the new life we receive from Christ.

The Advent season is almost upon us. The traditional themes of advent are death, judgement, heaven, hell, and eternal life. As some of you know I made a commitment some years ago to always preach on these themes during Advent, for I fear that it may be the case that these important aspects of our Christian faith are not spoken of or preached about as much as they should be. So for those who have a preaching and teaching ministry, can I encourage you to do the same. And to those of you who sit and listen to the sermons, ask your preacher to unpack these great mysteries of our faith. For as I remember in my prayers those faithful clergy who have died in 2017 – Marionette Macaulay, Carol Palmer, Susan Ives, Chris Chambers, Simon Pothen and Bishop John – I know that they died in the sure and certain hope of the resurrection to eternal life; that they knew Christ in his dying and in his rising and lived and breathed and taught this Christian hope. Let us do the same. Let us not be abashed to talk about the reality of sin and its consequences in our lives, and of the joy and release of forgiveness. Let us not be embarrassed to talk about death. And especially in this year when we remember the 500th anniversary of the Reformation let us boldly and cheerfully proclaim that all are justified, all are acquitted, because of what God has done in Jesus Christ, and therefore, for those who know Christ, there is no fear of judgement but the hope of everlasting life. For as Luther wrote - "I think close to the end of his life - "I have held many things in my hands, and I have lost them all; but whatever I have placed in God's hands, that I still possess".

+Stephen Chelmsford