

The Archbishop of York gave his first Presidential address to the virtual York Diocesan Synod on 29 September 2020. This follows in full...

Like most clergy I have a standard wedding sermon that I can rework for most occasions. I haven't used it much recently, but it goes a bit like this: never get married when you have fallen in love. Wait till you land.

What I mean by this and what I go on to elucidate in the wedding sermon is that falling in love, that romantic infatuation or even physical desire, can happen easily and frequently. But it isn't love. Because love isn't a feeling. Love isn't just desire. Love requires commitment. Love takes time. Love the real thing - starts to grow when falling in love is left behind. Sometimes the greatest test of love, is when hardship and challenge rear their unwelcome head. But in facing and overcoming these things, love is deepened.

It doesn't always work out. It is never easy. But it is worth pursuing.

St Paul, when he was searching for the right image to describe the relationship between Christ and the Church, says that it is like a marriage and that we belong to him who has been raised from the dead, so that we can bear fruit for God (see Romans 7.4). This analogy is taken further in his second letter to the Corinthians and in the Book of Revelation where the Church that is us, the redeemed people of God are referred to as the bride of Christ (see 2 Cor. 11.2 & Revelation 19.7).

Therefore, there will be times in our Christian life particularly at its beginnings which will be like falling in love. But in order for our Christian life to deepen and mature we have to land. It is in those times of trial, hardship and challenge times like these - that this happens.

I am delighted and humbled to be the 98th Archbishop of York, but I know I begin my ministry at such a time of hardship and challenge. Many of the familiarities of our life are being stripped away and this, of course, affects the church as well. Many, many people in our diocese and our nation have not been able to gather for worship, not received the comfort of the sacraments, have had to have weddings, baptisms, confirmations and ordinations postponed; even funerals have been affected and sometimes bereaved families have had to sit in separation from each other or not even be able to attend the funeral at all. All this is enormously hard and the church itself has had to make painfully difficult decisions about how we order our life and respond to both the coronavirus itself and the regulations imposed by government. We have not always got it right. But I would like to make my first act as president of this Synod to thank the bishops archdeacons, Peter Warry, the diocesan secretary and his staff at the Diocesan Offices, and the clergy and people of this great diocese for their resilience and creativity in sustaining the life of the church in these most difficult circumstances, and particularly for the hundreds and hundreds of initiatives, large and small, where the church has reached out to its local community to alleviate suffering, be alongside people in isolation, and offer the healing medicine of the gospel.

But I also want to say, that painful and challenging though these times are, this is also an invitation for us to deepen our faith. For when all the familiarities of our life and worship are stripped away, what we are left with is Christ, and only Christ.

As some of you know I am heading up a process for the Church of England, discerning vision and strategy for the next 10 years. At some point I hope to share this with you more fully. However, I note that at the heart of this vision and strategy are two phrases which I believe are very relevant for where we are at the moment as a diocese and as a national church: we believe God is calling us to be a *Christ centred* and *Jesus shaped* church. On the one hand, this is a perfectly obvious and unsurprising thing to be saying; on the other, it is an invitation to a radical re-aligning of our life around that which is most basic to our vocation: the call to be a Christ centred church, is the call to a renewal of prayer and worship; a declaration that both the highest doctrine of the Church and the most basic way of understanding the Church is that we are the women and men whose lives have been so impacted by the life, death and resurrection of Jesus Christ that we are formed into a community around him, and it is his life, his values, his teaching that are the pulse and yardstick of our lives. Therefore – the second phrase at the heart of the vision – we are called to be Jesus shaped. This is actually a phrase that is widely used around the Anglican Communion and it flows from what are known as the five marks of mission, that is to –

- To proclaim the Good News of the Kingdom
- To teach, baptise and nurture new believers
- To respond to human need by loving service
- To seek to transform unjust structures of society, to challenge violence of every kind and to pursue peace and reconciliation
- To strive to safeguard the integrity of creation and sustain and renew the life of the earth

Or in their more popular and memorable form: *to tell, teach, tend, transform and treasure*.

But these five marks of mission are not just a description of the witness and ministry of every Christian community, they can also be a descriptor of the Christian life itself, the life of missionary discipleship that each of us is called to.

We already have a strategy in the York diocese, usually summed up in the three words *reach, grow, sustain*. In the few weeks that I have been your Archbishop I have been working with my colleagues in the York Diocesan Leadership Team to think how we can reboot and re-express this strategy, mindful that the circumstances in which we now minister, and the very focused challenges we face, not least financial challenges, require us to look at this afresh. I don't imagine the strategy will change much. We still need to reach. We still need to grow. And we most certainly need to find sustainable ways of maintaining our life and mission. But we may need to *develop* our strategic thinking and we are certainly going to have to face some hard questions about resourcing. We face a huge financial deficit. It would be irresponsible for me as your bishop and for us as a Synod if we did not face up to this with vigorous Yorkshire candour and find ways forward, however tough.

We are committed to addressing these questions in the next few months and I very much hope we will be returning to this Synod early next year with some specific proposals about our vision and the strategic priorities and other decisions that flow from it. Synod, I do ask for your prayers as we go about this work. We have some important decisions ahead of us.

In my own thinking about this, alongside the vision and strategic priorities the Church of England is discerning, I have been deeply moved by some of the things I have observed God doing here in the York diocese, and especially the *Multiply* and *Mustard Seed* projects. These tiny new beginnings and new ministries are not only sources of hope, they may also provide initiative and impetus for the other things we need to do. It would be wrong to say too much more at the moment, since we are still at the stage of renewing our vision and strategy is a priority, but I do want to affirm as a first principle my belief that we must continue to be the Church for every community in this diocese, even if the shape and ordering of ministry changes. This commitment is fundamental. Furthermore, in saying this, we also acknowledge a particular commitment and therefore a priority of resources, for our poorest communities and those facing the greatest need. This will require an expansive vision and a generous heart. This can only come about by the spiritual renewal whereby we draw close to Christ and learn from him, recognising that the Church is his not ours, his beloved bride which he is committed to and loves. Each day God asks us to make a fresh commitment to follow Jesus, to learn from him, and to find the ways of using our time, at energy and resources for the building of his kingdom here. This is the way of love, the way we see in Jesus, who loved us and gave himself for us.

Finally, all my instincts as a minister of the gospel is to want to get stuck in by getting out and about in local communities, meeting people, getting to know them and sharing the good news of Christ as best I can. This is hard to do in these constrained times, and I'm doing the best that I can on zoom conferences and in whatever actual meetings are safe and possible. But also, as Archbishop of York, I have responsibilities for the northern province and for the nation that mean I cannot be bishop to the diocese of York in the same way that I have been bishop to other dioceses. That is why I am delegating and sharing episcopal responsibilities with my colleagues. This, I hope, will itself be a sign that ministry is shared and should always be collaborative. But it also means change for the diocese as you get used to more things being led by the other bishops. I believe my role will be much more about casting an expanded vision, reminding us of our core vocation as disciples of Jesus, and then giving my time and energy to very specific projects and initiatives within the diocese. Its day-to-day running will be in the hands of my trusted colleagues.

But do not think this means I will be any less committed to the diocese than my predecessors and, I pray, a great deal more committed than some of them who in the distant past spent very little time in the diocese at all! But some of my great heroes in the Christian faith William Temple, Michael Ramsey, David Hope, who was my principal at theological college, and my immediate predecessor John Sentamu were archbishops of York. I am humbled to be following in their steps. All I can promise you is that I will give my best powers of wit, energy and creativity to making Jesus known in this diocese and in this nation so that the world may believe and Christ's kingdom be established. More than ever, our nation needs the stability that comes from faith in Christ.

And that word stability feels to me to be an important one for our life together at the moment. It is one of the three vows of the Benedictine life which, of course, has had such an influence in shaping the Church and culture of Europe. Benedict's rule opens with his clear intention to establish a school for the Lord's service. In this school of discipleship, we learn how to navigate our way through the chances and challenges of life by holding onto Christ and following him, and also, because we have our security in him, being sent out to do his work.

Stability comes when we order our lives according to the way of Christ. In the early catechumenates of the Church this was achieved by receiving and shaping one's life around key biblical texts, particularly the Lord's prayer and the Beatitudes. With my work in the National church, and here in the York diocese, I hope that we can begin to look very closely at these texts and how they shape our lives and deepen our commitment to Christ, enabling us to joyfully inhabit this troubled world and, by our example, offer the world the help and indeed the stability which is in Christ.

At this, my first Synod, I pledge myself to working with you to build Christian communities that are committed to Christ and therefore able to maintain their life and fulfil their vocation whatever the constraints, whatever the challenges and whatever the further suffering and privation we may have to face.

This is the message we need to bear to the world: echoing the words of the prophet Habakkuk who declared his delight in the Lord even though the olive crop fails and the sheep are lost (see Habakkuk 3.17-18): so, even though we cannot meet as we would like to; even though there is severe economic hardship; even though there is suffering and death; and even though we feel that we are being stretched to the limit of our resources; there is hope, hope that even in the midst of this pandemic, Christ is with us, bearing as ever the marks of his passion, which are the signs of his committed love to us and to the world.

We too will have to bear the scars of love as we commit ourselves afresh to Christ and to each other, and allow his Spirit to purge and refine us, so that, even with the tiny mustard seeds of faith, we may land and be planted and grow and prosper in love.

Sisters and brothers, let us love one another, that deep committed, self-forgetful love that we see in Christ. May it be ours. And through it and because of it, may we bring healing to the world.

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