

Dear friends, let me start where we began. By which I mean, where this General Synod began almost 6 years ago, on a glorious November morning, as we walked up the aisle of Westminster Abbey, in carefully choreographed two by two formation, (Noah would have been extremely proud), and with no need for social distancing, preparing ourselves for the arrival of Her Majesty the Queen and His Royal Highness, the [late] Duke of Edinburgh and the start of the tenth inaugural service of the General Synod.Â

There is always a guest preacher, and in 2015 it was Fr. Raniero Cantalamessa, preacher to the Papal Household. His text was Haggai 1:1-8, "Rebuild my House", a passage which many of you will be familiar with.

It was a brilliant sermon; a call to build the unity of the Church, particularly memorable for his observation that in those "parts of the world where Christians are killed and churches torched, it is not because they are Catholic or Anglican or Pentecostal, but because they are Christians." And this was the line we all quoted: "In our persecutors eyes we are already one. Let us be one also in our own eyes and in the eyes of God."Â

This turned out to be quite a theme of our Synod and of our working together as one Church of England: how to improve the quality of our disagreements; how to face up to failures with honesty and humility; how to strive for what Pope Francis calls "reconciled diversities".

I read the sermon again recently, and was struck by something else as well: Fr Raniero's unwavering emphasis on the person of Christ as illustrated by the preaching of the apostles. They faced a pre-Christian world, he observed. We face a largely post-Christian world; and to quote the sermon again: "When Paul wanted to summarise the essence of the Christian message in one sentence, he does not say, 'I proclaim this or that doctrine to you'. He says 'We preach Christ crucified (1 Cor. 1.23) and 'We preach Jesus Christ as Lord.' (2 Cor. 4.5)"

As we approach the close of this Synod we believe "and by 'we' I mean that bit of the Church of Jesus Christ which is the Church of England and the fruit of much prayer, discussion and discernment involving hundreds of people " we believe that as we shape our life together in the 2020s and discern our priorities, God is calling us to a fresh and radical obedience to Christ: to be a Christ centred and a Jesus Christ shaped Church.Â

"We need to start again with the person of Jesus" said Fr Raniero, "humbly helping our contemporaries" to experience a personal encounter with him.Â

Even then at our beginnings, in that first sermon, it seems God was calling us to be a simpler, humbler and bolder Church of England.Â

Other matters have arisen and been discussed and acted upon during the lifetime of this Synod.Â

We have seen the publication of the Living in Love and Faith resources and it is now good to see how these are being discussed in parishes and dioceses.Â

We have started to bring in important new legislation following IICSA.Â

We have been doggedly trying to simplify legislation. (Later in this Synod we will thank that giant of synodical process, Peter Broadbent for his leadership in this and many other areas of our core business).

In the midst of the world's environmental crisis, we have expressed our determination that the Church of Jesus Christ should take a lead, and we made a bold and challenging decision to commit ourselves to becoming net zero church by 2030.Â

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The Church Commissioners have led the way with their impressive and game changing policies on green investment and shareholder power. At this Synod we will also thank and pay tribute to Loretta Minghella for her ground breaking leadership. Â In a relatively short space of time the whole public image of the Church Commissioners has shifted from being "those people who lost billions in the 1990s" to "those people who are using their investment power to change the world" and, in spite of severe financial challenges, still showing astonishing returns to invest in the ministry of the Church of England.

We have had debates and taken action on issues of racial justice, Windrush, the ethics of nuclear weapons, estates evangelism, advertising and gambling, Setting God's People Free, Growing Faith, Cathedrals, Clergy Wellbeing and much more besides. We have prayed together, met in small groups, plotted in tea rooms and, when we were able, sat late in the bar enjoying alternative forms of spiritual refreshment. In York, we even watched a football match together.Â

And on that subject, and mindful of a date most of us will have in our diaries for Sunday evening, I have turned to scripture for help, where I find, encouragingly, at Ezekiel 40.28 these words: "He brought me to the inner court" that is to the prize and victory we long for - by the south gate.Â This, surely, is the inspiration we are looking for as a nation.

We have also been the Synod who have lived through the first waves of the Covid pandemic. We have learned how to zoom. This has been hugely testing and I want to acknowledge the disappointment and frustration of some members who are challenging us to go further to make sure that no one is disadvantaged by the way we use or don't use technology.Â

But there have also been many wonderful stories of Christian resourcefulness, creativity and tenacity as in our parishes, chaplaincies, church schools and just about every other expression of church life we have found ways of sustaining the life of worship, built new on line communities of faith, and served our local communities.

As we emerge into the next phase of our learning how to live with Covid, we don't know how many people will return to worship; we don't know quite what will happen with the new communities we have nurtured online; we don't know the full extent of the financial challenge. I know how difficult this has been in parishes and dioceses where at every level of church life we have had to make difficult decisions. But I want to encourage you. I think what the Church of England has done in the past 18 months, especially in the local church, is magnificent.Â

Just this week the Bishop of London spoke powerfully about how inspired she was by the way churches have risen to the challenge, finding new ways of gathering to worship God, reach out and serve their neighbours in these difficult times. I too want to thank clergy and lay leaders for their faithfulness and perseverance. I am deeply sorry if anything that has been said from the centre ever caused anyone to doubt this.Â

Apparently, in some quarters it has been suggested that clergy are a limiting factor on church growth. I agree. A shortage of clergy wouldÂ really limit us. We need more vocations. That is my prayer: priests to serve a priestly people. It is the vision set for us in the Ordinal. It is also at the heart of the vision and strategy we will discuss on Monday; that, centred on Christ, the parish system of the Church of England will be revitalised in such a way that we will all discover the part we have to play in Godâ€™s mission and find new ways of serving our nation with the gospel.Â Â

I also want to emphasise again this Synodâ€™s deep gratitude to the NHS and other frontline workers, particularly those working in social care and schools.Â

I believe in the Church of England. As we emerge from Covid, I believe we will find a simpler, humble and bolder way of being the church. I know it wonâ€™t be easy. Harder decisions lay ahead. But I am spurred on by the call of the gospel and hugely encouraged by some of the research that is now emerging showing the impact of the ministry of the Church of England during this pandemic. Do look at that the recently published research from the Centre for the Study of Christianity and Culture at the University of York, entitled Churches, COVID-19 and Communities. It affirms the key importance of church buildings and the Christian ministry which flows from them as sources not just for solace and sanctuary, not just worship, but a whole host of other community uses.Â

As I conclude, it would be remiss of me not to thank on your behalf the team at Church House and the Corporation who work alongside us to ensure the meetings of the General Synod can take place, whether thatâ€™s in person or virtually. In spite of additional demands, they have remained professional, good humoured and resourceful. We are also indebted to William Nye and his colleagues in the Central Secretariat, the Legal office and all the other teams across the NCIs who staff our committees, offer advice and contribute so crucially to the work of the Church of England.Â

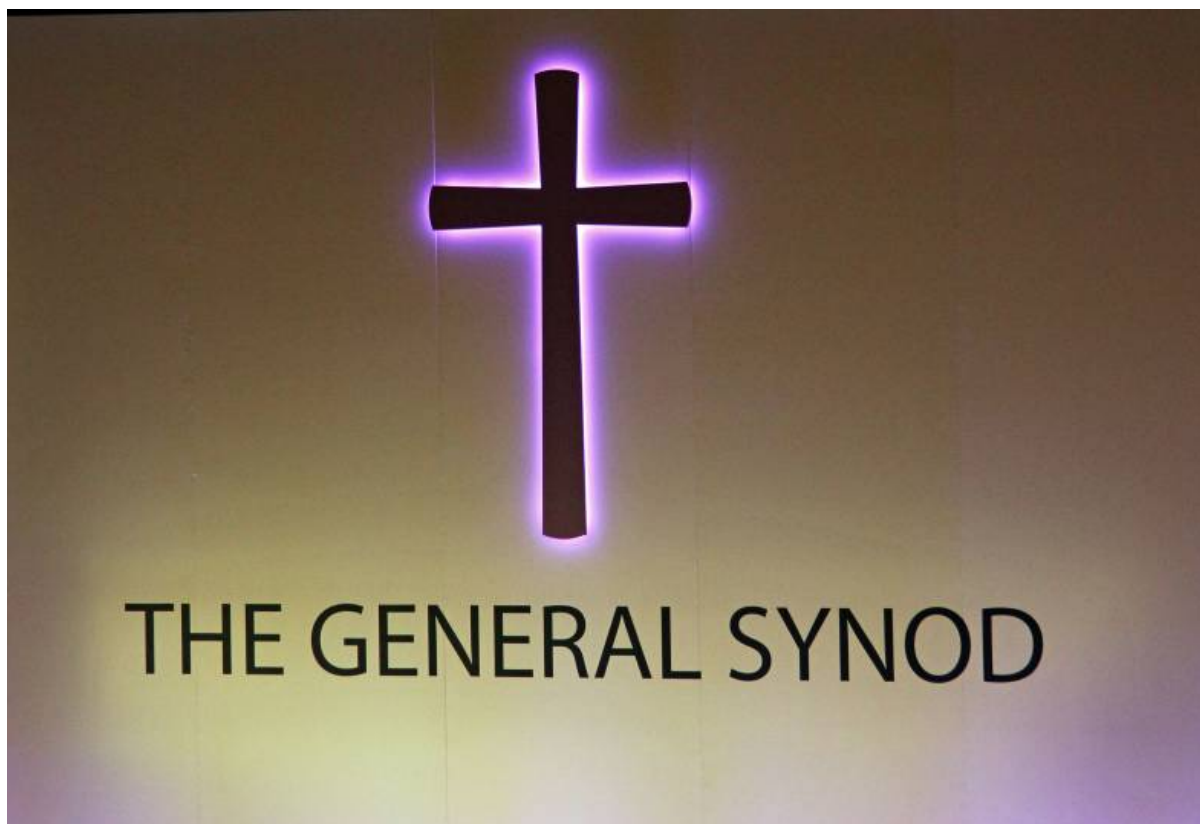
And having only just welcomed you to this group of sessions, I now find myself talking about farewells. Iâ€™m sure Iâ€™ll see many of you, hopefully in person, in this chamber come November, but for others who might not get re-elected or for those who have decided now is the time to allow others to have a go, a particular thank you. Our new Synod, will have some big shoes to fill. But of course, the work of the gospel extends beyond Synod and whilst the need to digest all the papers might happily disappear, or the fear of being given a room in Alcuin need never worry you again, Godâ€™s mission continues. Â It is our love and care for this mission which brought us onto Synod. It is this same love and care for the gospel, for the whole creation, and for every person fearfully and wonderfully made in the image of God that is the great Commission Jesus gives to the whole Church. It is Jesus we preach and Jesus we follow. It is his love we long to share with others through his Church. Â This is our vision and our strategy as we go forward. There is no other.

So, as some of us process up the aisle of Westminster Abbey, in two by two formation, again in November, possibly two metres apart, possibly masked, please be praying for us that we will carry on the work that is begun, and centred and shaped by Christ, enable our beloved Church of England to serve our whole nation well.Â

And however the new Synod looks once all the elections have taken place and whatever shape our churches and dioceses emerge into as we surface from this pandemic, I leave you with one final challenge laid down to us by Fr. Raniero six years ago. His, as it turns out also prophetic challenge, to be a bolder Church: âTake courage you bishops, clergy and laity of the Church of England,â he said. âTo work, because I am with you, says the Lordâ.Â

May those words remain with us as we continue our journeys from here and follow the paths of our loving Heavenly Father with simplicity, humility and boldness.

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