

Read the text of Archbishop Justin Welby and Archbishop Stephen Cottrell's shared presidential address to General Synod today

Archbishop Justin Welby said:

Cast the Net on the Right Side of the Boat (John 21:6)

As I have said already twice, it is a great pleasure to be at this new physical synod. Thank you to all of you for all the time you are giving, for your commitment and for your passion. If you are new to the Synod, this is a moment of change, in which your contribution, your wisdom, your thinking, your prayer and your insight is going to be invaluable and indispensable.

There has never been a moment, though, when the church was without change. Change comes from society, from culture, from the context, above all from the command of Christ – to transform, to be a synod, to be on the way together, to be travelling.

In John 21 the disciples go fishing. There is no sense that they are doing the wrong thing. Like many here they have to earn a living - put food on the table - so they pursue their trade. In fact, the presence of Jesus hallows the pursuit of what they are doing. Nor is there any suggested rebuke in their failure to catch fish. It happens.

But to us reading, other stories of catching fish come to mind. Above all there is Luke's account of a catch of fish in Luke chapter 5. More than that, in John's gospel itself we think back to John 15:5: "apart from me you can do nothing". Failing to catch is annoying. The answer to the question from the stranger on the beach is curt. "You have caught nothing, have you?" "No".

The irritation is clear, but the obedience is also clear, and the result is that in a few moments they go from no fish to more fish than they can handle. They cast the net on the right side of the boat, which is my text for this talk.

The greatest danger of a Synod is that it encourages us to think we are acting on our own, or in any case, that somehow we can do something without the intensive listening that is characteristic of the disciples after the resurrection, and is the call to all disciples today.

As disciples of Jesus Christ, our first and foremost task is to listen to Christ, above all in careful meditation on the scriptures and in prayer. But also in listening to each other and in seeking to discern the voice of the Holy Spirit. The Synod is thus not only a parliamentary assembly, but also a place for encounter collectively with the Living God. Which brings me to the outlook at present, and our context in which we listen.

Numerically, the number of regular church goers has shrunk in absolute terms every year since around 1952, 70 years next year. As a percentage of the population of England, the Church of England was at its high point, when there were accurate records, in the 1851 census when we were about 20% of the population, roughly a couple of percentage points less than what were then called the non-Conformist churches. We are today around about a little less than 2% of the population.

Institutionally, in the intervening years since 1851, we have gone through waves of change. And while we are currently in the midst of such a wave, and this Synod will be crucial in how we ride that wave and how we are shaped by it, in each one there has been a fear that we would lose our tradition, our history, our past. Ever since before the Norman Conquest, indeed going far back before that to the Synod of Whitby in 664, movements of population and the evangelisation of the nation have led to change.

The parish in which I served was a church plant from the Priory at Coventry in the late 13th century. A record of the 1280-1285 General Synod shows that the notetaker reported “a most noisome uproar by those of ye movement to preserve our Priories”. (That last sentence is of course entirely fictional.)

In the 19th century there were creations of huge numbers of new mission churches and new parishes, or daughter churches to cope with expanding populations in urban areas. In the 20th century liturgical reform led to great protest and discontent. The parish communion movement altered much. There were profound changes in dress, habits of church going and models of church. I think it was as late as 1942 that women were permitted to attend church without wearing hats. In this century, as in the 19th, alterations in the nature of society demand change. But change is not, must not be, cannot be, should not be, will not be, abandonment of our past.

An extraordinary, courageous and compelling indigenous Australian pastor, Pastor Ray, whom I met at Glasgow the week before last and had met previously on Zoom calls – he worships at an Anglican church in Sydney Diocese – has struggled remarkably for indigenous rights in Australia. He is the seventh generation of indigenous people, of his family to be ordained, to be a pastor in Australia – and think back that it was only in 1967 that the clause in the Australian constitution that said that indigenous people were not recognised as human beings or citizens was removed, so generations before that.

He said to me a couple of weeks ago, that his people talk about “walking backwards into the future”, so that they can see their past and retain that deep sense of what that past means to them. That is essential. They do move towards the future, but they do not lose sight of their traditions, their wisdom and their inheritance.

The Disciples are fishing, and yet they need the call of Christ, and the equipping of Christ and the work of Christ to tell them where to fish. They preserve fishing, but they have to listen to Christ for their fishing technique.

The reality is that a huge amount of work is being done at every point of this extraordinary Church for England of which we are a part. People talk too easily of decline but miss the energy that is spurring us on.

Internally, we will be looking at reforms and changes aimed at focussing resources where they are most needed, at enabling support for anywhere and everywhere that shows signs of the blessing of the Holy Spirit.

Discernment and obedience, casting your net on the right side, requires decision and action, and they need vision and strategy. So internally, the Church of England seeks to have a clear sense of what it is and where it is going – Archbishop Stephen will speak to that in a moment.

We have gone through the greatest peacetime challenge in 400 years and emerged forging ahead. Effectiveness is being transformed, training is being rethought to work well in the very different patterns of population that we see today, and even more different that we see in the future.

The way in which dioceses work together and share resources is being challenged, and will change slowly and gently and consensually.

Our failures in safeguarding, in racism, in the way we treat those with disabilities or anyone we see - anyone - we see as other are being tackled, not nearly as well or as quickly as we all want, but we know that we go wrong and seek to do better. There is a self-awareness that is real in this church. We are a church that can admit it is wrong, say sorry and try – at least try – to do better.

That's all internal. Where we get to that border between external and internal: the Church has a clear and powerful vision for education of its more than 1 million people in schools and is expanding. It is planting churches in new places, casting the net in unlikely places and ways, perhaps, God-willing, as many as 10,000 new congregations in the next 10 years. And essentially, because it is the foundation of this Church of and for England, resources, fresh resources are being put into traditional parishes.

Take Top Church in Dudley, there for centuries, liberal catholic in tradition (though actually they cross every boundary); a deeply hospitable church which, with the help of an SDF grant is re-finding its civic tradition, serving the poorest, welcoming those most on the edge, especially those often excluded, growing in numbers and growing in depth of worship.

The Church of England is renewing ministry with Chaplains, also deeply part of our tradition and our history. It is including the laity – not so much part of our tradition and history - and it is challenging clericalism.

It has done the most theologically sophisticated work on human sexuality and identity of any global church (that's not my opinion, that is what others have said to us) and published a superb book, Living in Love and Faith. And we are seeking to work to discern how to act and how to love and how to include and to welcome in the model and image of Christ.

We seek to model disagreeing well, for we are all different and disagreeing is human, but seeking to destroy and reject each other and exclude each other is less than human.

The Difference course was launched last year, piloted around the world, and is now being used in 26 countries, with the number going up.

Difference is a course developed not by me, but by colleagues working at Lambeth and other places, which encourages three reconciling habits - it enables us to disagree well, it enables us to live well together; it is based in scripture, it is lived in daily life.

The habits are to be present, to be curious and to reimagine. All these are gifts to the world and models for it. Every member of Synod will be sent information on the Difference course, and we are seeking to make opportunities for all who wish to, to participate in it.

As part of our contribution to changing the ethos in this church in which we work, at a time when disagreeing well in our country has seldom, in the last 100 years, been less strong, been weaker. I would encourage all members of the church, and of the Synod to take part in this.

I was, as I often am when I am asked to do a course, a bit grumpy about it, let's be honest. And while I was on sabbatical I was told I needed to do it, because I was writing a book on reconciliation and I was going to write about the Difference course and being me I sort of thought well, if I skim the booklet I should be able to put in a couple of quotes that look as though I know what I am talking about.

But I was told firmly by someone close to me that that was not how it was done, and I was to participate. So I did, and I have all the passion of the converted. It helped me see things in an entirely new way. I commend it to you very strongly.

All these things that we are doing are gifts to the world and models for the world. How to disagree well. On this day where I heard during lunch, that this morning there were attacks across the Armenian border from Azerbaijan. Another reminder of war, struggle and suffering.

And in mission we are working creatively to implement the excellent Coming Home report on housing and affordable housing, to tackle housing poverty with houses that, in the theologically based words of the report are sustainable, safe, stable, sociable and satisfying.

We are working with a commission under Paul Butler to see how to support modern families and households, and another one on social care. Health, education and housing are the three foundations of reform of our society.

But most of all, and here I speak to clergy and laity at the local level. Your extraordinary work through the crisis in which we still live has been exhausting, but it has been God shaped, Christ centred. The steady, relentless but wonderful work in parish and chaplaincy has just gone on week in and week out, and the challenge for this Synod is to support and to secure that ministry.

Our aim is to fish on the right side, to see people find faith in Jesus Christ, to proclaim the good news in word and deed. And it is happening.

Our choices and discernments are not binary. To choose one does not mean to exclude all the others. To save the parish does not mean to stop church planting. To church plant does not mean abandoning the parish. Far from it. If we take either of those binary decisions we will lose all of them – we will fail completely in every respect.

To support one place to fish, one way for fishing cannot mean rejecting all the others. It is all of them. And as we seek to see the most people possible caught up by the Spirit of God and finding the love which they are offered by God in Christ we must fish in every way, in every possible way we can, and we cannot look down on anyone as blocks, obstacles, or anything like that in any way at all, ever. To use the words used by Alan, they are sisters and brothers in Christ.

This church is not on the way out. It may be navigating shoals and rapids, storms and disagreements. We may often be foolish, we are always sinful, but at every point, including especially here, we are needing to learn to listen to the stranger on the shore, telling us where and how to fish. Cast your nets on the right side.



Archbishop Stephen Cottrell said:

It is often said that General Synod is the Parliament of the Church of England. This is not necessarily a helpful analogy. It is an elected representative body. It is a legislative body. But it is a synod, not a parliament. There is no government or opposition. There are no chief whips. We sit in the round. Synod means walking and working together on the way. As Pope Francis has said, “the aim is not to reach agreement by means of contest between opposing positions, but to journey together to seek God’s will, allowing differences to harmonize.... To meet each other with respect and trust, to believe in our unity.” The unity that we have in Christ because of our baptism, the baptism of the wonderful people of God.

Critically, as Archbishop Justin has outlined so powerfully, we walk together, responding to the great challenges facing our world. Synod, we have already met one bearded, balded man today – here is another one. The harvest is rich but the labourers aren’t few. We have a lot of labourers in the Church of England, the trouble is that the labourers are in the barn arguing what colour to paint the combine harvester. Like two bald men fighting over a comb. We are here because of our baptism to face the challenges of the world and then discerning how best to steer and steward the Church of England. We are here to find a way.

We work in this space and in this time, but as Archbishop Justin has also said, we walk forwards backwards, mindful of what has gone before us, where we have come from and what we decide to take with us.

This Synod, therefore, builds on the work of other synods. We welcome new members and we hope that you will soon feel at home. But we also welcome back old ones, who carry that story and who bring experience and great wisdom.

We are walking into uncharted territory -

- The uncharted territory of living with COVID-19.
- The uncharted territory of climate crisis
- The uncharted territory of rapidly changing cultures, and the questions those cultures pose
- The uncharted territory of our own continuing numerical decline and all the challenges, not least financial, that go with it.

We don't have a map.

There is a clue in the title. It is uncharted territory.

Our job together is to draw the map, to work out what it means to be the Church of England in and for this day and in this age.

But we do have a compass: an utterly reliable source of comfort and guidance, by the Holy Spirit, the one who has told us that he himself is the way (see John 14. 6).

This is the reason, drawn out in the darkest days of last year's lockdowns when everything else that was comforting and familiar about our discipleship was stripped away, when we were in isolation, when our churches were closed. It was in those days that we felt God calling us afresh to be a Christ centred church and Jesus Christ shaped church, which is as old Synod members will have heard me say before the most obvious thing that anyone could say about the Church. It is so beautiful and so profound that we will spend the rest of our lives learning what it means to know and follow Jesus Christ. We are simply trying to recognise what is most basic about us, what Bishop Michael Curry calls a Jesus people, and what Provinces as diverse as Canada and Kenya call a Jesus shaped life.

And at the heart of this we put the five marks of mission as the agenda for the Church's faithfulness to the call of Christ, remembering that we need all five. You can't do this as a Myers Briggs exercise on the five marks of mission – I'm a three sort of person, no it is a totality. And, if we don't attend to the first two – proclaiming and teaching the gospel - not much else is going to happen. As COP 26 has shown us, there is still much work we need to do to safeguard the integrity of the creation and sisters and brothers we really need the wisdom of the gospel the new humanity shows us in Christ, to be able to rise to this challenge and the church to take a lead.

As we have travelled, three words have emerged that seem to capture the heart cry of the church at this time: to be simpler, humbler and bolder in our walking with Christ.

These words, and the aspirations and agendas that will flow from them, build on the work of previous synods. We walk forwards, looking backwards to that work.

Simplification has been a grass roots Synod initiative for some time, challenging us to simplify and align all our resources around the life and witness of the church in the front line in our parishes, chaplaincies and other worshipping and witnessing communities. I pray it continues. There is still much work to be done.

To be humble, we must acknowledge, has also meant for the Church of England, being humbled. This has been unbearably painful for us, especially those of us who God has asked to carry responsibility for the leadership of the church. We have had to look at dark and terrible things about our history. And IICSA, The report From Lament into Action, to name only two, have revealed our failings. This Synod will work at these things. With the LLF process and working on issues to do with disability and inclusion, we have a bold aspiration and it is to be a younger and more diverse church. I want to stand here and say that this is something I am proud of the fact that the Church has said that we need to listen to the voice of the young, and let the young lead us. And we need to recognise our failures on issues of diversity and inclusion. But of course, these flow from the very heart of the gospel and the new humanity we have in Christ.

But to be simpler and humbler is also a description of the Christian life itself as we learn to live differently and distinctively in an age of climate emergency and to live and share our faith with authenticity.

Then, also, bolder.

Our vision and strategy is a vision and strategy for growth. It is not about managing decline gracefully. We want the Church of England to grow and even if it doesn't – then let our death be a grand operatic death, let it be fantastic and let's not crawl in a corner. Let us declare the good news of what God has done for us in Jesus Christ and do everything we can to align all of our resources, to make that happen in our local churches, whatever that local church is. We believe the Church of England can grow. And even if it doesn't, for in the end (and with some relief) God is the evangelist and God is the Lord of the harvest, not us, I am determined to play my part in leading the Church of England joyfully, without anxiety about the institution and with the song of the gospel on my lips. Synod, let's put this simple and joyful focus on Christ at the centre of all our discussions, especially from time to time when we do see things differently.

And if the five marks of mission continue to shape our life together, we will become a church of missionary disciples. This too builds on the last synod's exciting agenda of Everyday Faith and Setting God's People Free.

And because we live in rapidly changing and fearfully anxious times, and because we live our lives in very different ways and in very different places, in virtual as well as actual space, I think you all know this but no one size is going to fit all. We therefore need to care for the whole ecosystem of the one holy, catholic and apostolic church of Jesus Christ.

In the Anglican tradition place has always been very important.

All clergy are ordained to a title parish, that is to a place. Ordination is not a general passing out parade. We are called to serve in a particularity.

This is even more important today as the foci of these particularities expand and diversify. This is why we talk about mixed ecology. Not because we intend to downplay parish, but because place and all places and all people are so important.

We therefore honour the vital ministry of chaplaincy, one of our biggest growth areas in recent years. If we are going to grow younger, school, university and army chaplains, and I think that maybe that they will lead the way, and they have much to teach us. I have recently moved to Yorkshire and have received the gift of the Spirit, it is bluntness. Therefore, I want to say quite directly to those of you who have been elected on a save the parish ticket, I am with you and I, too, want to save the parish. As far as I'm concerned, you are not the loyal opposition waiting for your turn in government. The heart cry of your movement echoes in all our hearts and reminds us of the centrality of place, the importance of the local, of the continuity of tradition and service and why our resources must be focused on this, the local church of missionary disciples.

However, I must also say that from my observation of just about everything else in the world, and especially the story of the growth of the Christian Church from Pentecost onwards, things survive because they learn how to adapt. It is through adaptation to changed circumstance that new flourishing occurs.

Please, please, let us work on this together. Let us never doubt that we all want the same thing – the flourishing of the church so that the gospel of Jesus Christ may be proclaimed. This will mean different ways of being the church flourishing within the mixed ecology of a revitalised parish system and – as has always been the case – the most innovative new ways of serving and reaching people will almost certainly emerge from parishes.

The boldness of our vision is that we are praying and working for more church, not less, so that more people can know Christ. Sisters and Brothers, that's what you have signed up for in this Synod.

But the test of this work will not be the survival of the institution, not even the survival of the parish. Our vision must be bigger. It will, as Advent approaches and our thoughts turn to last things, be what did you do for the least of these, my sisters and brothers? How did you in this quinquennium and this latest manifestation of the General Synod, serve the poor, bind up the wounded, bring home the excluded, renew the Earth? Did you spend every penny you received and use your gifts and time wisely in the service of the gospel, for the building of the kingdom and so the Christ may be made known? This is what I get out of bed for in the morning. And it is because we often fail to do it, that sometimes I am kept awake at night.

Dear friends in Christ, let us work together for this. Put out your nets on the right side.

Earlier in the General Synod, the Archbishop of Canterbury Justin Welby also spoke about the [Church of Ghana](#)

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