



THE ARCHBISHOP
OF YORK

The Archbishop addressed York Diocesan Synod today. The address follows in full:

Earlier this week I found myself slightly admonished by someone who said to me – in case I didn't know - that things grow and bear fruit from the roots up. I think the person in question had decided that, being an archbishop, I was a 'top-down' sort of person. I'm not. But I'm not a member of the 'bottom up' brigade either.

I responded that of course things grew from the roots up, but wasn't it also the case that flowers, before they fruit and as they grow, turn their faces and reach towards the sun; and don't seeds lying dormant in the dark for many years, need the rain that falls from above to release them into life?

As I'm trying to point out: it's a silly discussion. It must always be both. In fact, if I could, I'd never speak about 'top down' or 'bottom up' ever again, but rather use the language of the whole ecosystem of the church where we all work together in a complex and beautiful mixed ecology; or even better, didn't I read somewhere that the church is like a body and we all have our part to play? And the elbow can't say to the pancreas, I don't need you.

The real situation is this: those of us with responsibility for oversight and the alignment of resources cast the vision towards which we aspire, and provide, hopefully, refreshing rain to water the actual work of ministry of the church which is done at the local level in parishes, chaplaincies, schools, multiply and mustard seed pioneering ministries and help bring the whole thing to life? Though, of course, it would be a serious mistake to think the radiant light of vision nor the refreshing rain of resource only come from the so-called centre. Renewal often come from the edge. But this is also another unhelpful distinction. For us Christians the centre is everywhere; or rather, it is where Christ calls us and gathers us, 1000 different centres; all those places where we live out our vocation to live Christ's story. The important thing is to work together according to our different gifts and responsibilities. And be surprised as we continually find the best ideas come in the most unlikely places.

Or put it another way, who and where is the Diocese of York? It is us and it is everywhere we serve. The more we work together, the greater the likelihood that we will find the right ways forward.

This is particularly important because we are approaching an important strategic juncture in the development of our life together as a Diocese. Sam Rushton has taken on the role of Director for Strategic Transformation for a season and in order to make this happen John Day is interim Archdeacon of York. I am hugely grateful for their flexibility and creativity in taking on these roles to enable us, the whole Diocese, find the way forward for the transformation of our finances and structures that will, in turn, lead us to find ways of growing and bearing fruit in due season.

We will begin to share some of this with you later this morning. But what we're sharing is not yet a highly crafted, totally thought-through plan.

We are sharing where we've got to with the story so far. But we need your help. We are going to shape this together. As a Leadership Team, we think we have the broad outline of the plot so far – we know how the story starts and a pretty good idea of where it needs to end. We've begun to see who the key characters are and how they need to grow within the story. Now, with you, we need to work out the chapter headings and the pace of the narrative. Then we can begin to inhabit this evolving and changing story together, which is our story, and Christ's story in this place. Some of that we will do today. Some we will do in the New Year.

Five things are clear.

1. We cannot carry on as we are. Our current models of ministry are unsustainable and selling houses to balance the books can only take us so far.

But it isn't just about money. In fact money is secondary, a symptom of the wider problem not the problem itself. The real issue is that over the last 10 years, probably going back further, the number of people actively engaged in our church life – people able and willing to serve rather than to be served – has declined by around a quarter. We have got older and smaller. We don't reflect the diversity of the communities we serve.

This is an issue because we believe that knowing Jesus is better than not knowing him; that belonging in the gathered places of worship which we call church, is the most important, life giving way of being. So if we are not growing as worshipping communities, we are not growing as the body of Christ. In some places we have all but stopped drawing people into that saving relationship with God that Christ has won for us through his death and resurrection. This is not okay. Something needs to change.

2. We need a compelling vision – the radiant light of Christ for us in this situation – something that can bind us together and help us find the right ways forward, however painful.

This is beginning to emerge, and it comes top down, bottom up, upside down and inside out! It is the simple restatement of what it means to be a follower of Jesus Christ; what the national Church calls being a Christ centred and Jesus Christ shaped Church, what we are calling **Living Christ's Story** – becoming more like Christ; reaching those who do not yet know Christ; growing churches of missionary disciples; and transforming our finances and structures. This is our foremost vocation. We put it and must put it before anything else.

But let us also be clear, we love, and will continue to love the heritage of our church, our buildings and our parishes, and we are committed and will continue to be committed to every person and every place. But how we sustain this ministry, and even more importantly, how we reach out to those who know little or nothing of the gospel, requires us to put first things first.

3. We need to be a more generous Church. We need to call out from ourselves, and from those we serve, and with those of goodwill whose attachment to the Church may be slender, a greater generosity.

We do face financial challenge. But the spiritual challenge is greater still. As we become more like Christ and as we allow the gospel to shape our life, I believe we will find ourselves able to be more generous with our time and our resources.

We will discover that ministry belongs to all of us; we are members of the body. When we give to the mission and ministry of the church we are, as it were, giving to ourselves and what is best in us: our life in Christ that we long to share with others.

The outward and visible sign of this inward and spiritual grace will be that we leave behind the 'top down' and 'bottom up', 'diocese this' and 'parish that', false distinctions of a 'them and us' world. It will just be the glorious topsy-turvy, upside down world of the gospel of Jesus Christ where the widow's mite is the greatest gift of all, the lowly lifted high, little children exemplars of the kingdom, and, as I've said elsewhere, the key performance indicator to which we aspire is the number of feet we have washed and our service to the poor. Only a generous, Christ-like spirit will enable us to be a Church where those who have resources give them generously for the ministry of the Church, and then on top of that give again for those who have no resource.

4. The Church is for the world. Everything we do and all that we long for is to make Jesus known and work for the building of God's kingdom in the world.

In a world where just this week we have seen the tragic death of asylum seekers in the English Channel, the government drawing back on its promises to the north and the inequalities this will perpetuate, not to mention the larger challenges of the climate emergency we are living through, the Church is called to live out the story of the goodness and purpose that we see in Jesus. We do not long to grow the church as an end in itself, but so that God's peace and justice may be known the world.

5. And one thing is abundantly clear: however our strategy maps out next year **we need to see in the Diocese of York a huge growth in vocations to ministry in the church, both lay and ordained** and also a great proliferation of how these ministries are expressed to serve the local church and help it grow. Sisters and brothers, I believe God gives to the church all the gifts the church needs, but sometimes those gifts are the seeds that are lying dormant.

Years ago, I heard a wonderful sermon by a Swedish bishop, a wise and godly man, who said that we often get things round the wrong way. He said that in times of challenge we find ourselves crying out to God and asking for more of God's Holy Spirit, that if we had more of the Holy Spirit we would be able to do the things that are before us.

But he turned this upside down. He said it wasn't that we needed more of the Holy Spirit, but that the Holy Spirit needed more of us.

This is where I have ended up in my prayers: and I know none of this is easy, I am daunted by the gravity of the decisions that lie before us. Yes, of course we need a strategy and of course we need a plan and we are working hard on this; but most of all we need to make ourselves more available to the Spirit of God that God may use us in the service of the gospel.

As we move into the season of Advent, wait upon God afresh, and cry out for God to come among us, let us pray that we make ourselves and our resources - our time, our energy, our money, our gifts, our passions and our concerns - available to God. When this happens, the Diocese of York will flourish and grow.

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