

THE BISHOP OF ST ALBANS' PRESIDENTIAL ADDRESS

DIOCESAN SYNOD

JUNE 2017

FORMED AND NURTURED IN WORSHIP

Since our last diocesan synod back in March we have witnessed three terrible atrocities on our streets. First there was the attack on Westminster Bridge, when six people were killed, including PC Keith Palmer, and around fifty people were injured. Then on 22 May Salman Ramadan Abedi set off a bomb in the Manchester Arena, killing twenty-three adults and children and injuring a further 119 people. Two weeks ago today eight people were killed around Borough Market in Southwark and forty-eight injured.

What is so terrible is that these young men deliberately and willfully planned their attacks on innocent civilians and, even worse, claim to have committed them in the name of Islam. In response, large numbers of Muslims have joined with others in condemning the attacks and arguing that their actions were inspired and fuelled, not by Islam, but by a radical and violent form of Islamism.

This diocese is home to a number of Muslim communities, the largest one being in Luton, and I am grateful to Bishop Richard and Peter Adams, along with Bonnie Evans-Hill, and many of the clergy and laity in Luton, who responded immediately by getting out on the streets.

One of the notable features of each of these attacks was the response of many people of goodwill, not least from the Christian churches. Countless acts of kindness and support have been reported in the media. It is heartening to hear how complete strangers helped each other in practical ways.

One of the responses has been to point the finger at religion and say that it is the cause of such problems. In fact, the problem is not too much religion but not enough of the right religion. Sadly, in every generation some people have blatantly hijack the language and ideas of religion and used them for their own perverted aims.

It is easy for us to point the finger, but we need to remember that there have been occasions when people have committed violence in the name of Christ. Indeed, we also have to face the fact that all human beings are deeply bedded in a particular culture and it is all too easy for us to misuse our faith to support our own prejudices and agendas. This is why we take so much time and trouble to train our teachers and preachers in church. It's also why we *authorise* those who lead public worship, as it is in worship that we are nurtured in the faith. It's by reflecting on scripture and in teaching and preaching that we are nurtured not only in orthodoxy (which is about right Christian belief) but also in orthopraxis (which is about right Christian action).

An additional aspect of our worship is that it has the power to be profoundly missional or evangelistic. As part of *Living God's Love*, we have been exploring the ten areas or activities that are features of growing churches. These came from a variety of sources, including research from other dioceses and also from what you told us in response to our process of listening.

With regard to this specific area of prayer and worship, there are three aspects that we have invited every church, school and chaplaincy to explore as we *go deeper into God*:

- Improve the quality of our worship
- Help individuals grow in their personal faith and calling
- Encourage pilgrimage and times away that change lives

I want to reflect on these three things for a few minutes this morning.

Firstly, improve the quality of our worship. There are many different ways of worshipping God within our Anglican polity. There are the more formal liturgical services, often stressing the transcendence (otherness) of God; there are the more informal acts of worship, often stressing the immanence (closeness) of God. I am not suggesting that we need to aim for uniformity in style.

What we do need to do is to ensure that whatever we offer, it is done well and it is open and accessible. Few churches admit that their worship could be improved, yet often the experience of a visitor is that things are not always as good as they might be:

- Is there good signage about the times of service?
- Is the church web page up to date?
- Are there clear directions of how to get into the building?
- Are visitors given a welcome which is warm and personal yet not overpowering?
- Is there good access for those with limited mobility, are large print services and a hearing loop available?
- Are the music and hymns appropriate and well led?
- Are the readings and intercessions audible?
- Is the sermon relevant and engaging?
- Are the children's groups (and possibly teenage groups) well led and attractive?
- Is the 'after service' care adequate?

Now I know it is easy for bishops to go round asking hard pressed clergy and readers these sorts of questions, making them feeling even more pressurised. But we have to face the fact that not all our churches regularly review their worship.

This is our shopfront; it is our core business. All of us, including myself, have to keep on working away at this. One good way of doing this is to invite someone from another church to come and act as a critical friend, turning up as a stranger and experience the worship and then playing back what they experienced. It's best not to use a personal friend who might just be tempted to be nice to us. It's better to have someone who has the confidence to be truthful and realistic and really help us.

The second area was the importance of **helping individuals grow in their Christian personal faith and calling.** There is a danger that we simply presume that by turning up for Sunday worship members of the congregation are each growing in their faith and understanding. We can all get stuck in our faith journey and we all need help and encouragement. There are the well-trying and proven means of

Lent Groups, Home Groups and Bible Study Groups using materials such as the *Pilgrim Course*. There are also plenty of resources on how to run a retreat in a parish, for example, with a session each week on an evening or ideas on how to organise a quiet day.

There are also lots of other resources available, run by our Diocesan Prayer and Resourcing Group. For example,

- **Holy Listening – a two year course for Spiritual Directors/Soulfriends** which offers training for listening skills, spiritual discernment, different spiritualities and ways into prayer.
- **Will you take the Prayers? – Leading Parish Intercessions.** This is practical help with leading Intercessions principally at Sunday Services, as well as other occasions.
- **How to begin a Prayer Group – different types of prayer groups and how to set them up.** This workshop looks at various styles of Prayer Group – from Intercessory to ‘Exploratory’ – and how to begin them, continue them and resource them.

For further details, please contact the Reverend Deborah Snowball.

The third area is to **encourage pilgrimage and times away that change lives.** From very early on in the Christian era, pilgrimage became an important way to deepen our faith, our understanding and our trust in God. By the third century pilgrims were travelling to Jerusalem and Rome and then later to Santiago de Compostela. By leaving the familiarity and the routine of their normal lives, Christians created space to worship, to pray and to listen to God and in the process were renewed and deepened in their faith.

In this country, St Albans is probably the earliest site of Christian pilgrimage; other important pilgrimage routes are to Canterbury, Glastonbury and Walsingham.

Of course, today, there are many other ways of going away to deepen faith. For example, there is the Soul Survivor Spring Harvest or, if you want to go further afield, Taizé in France with Bishop Michael this summer.

I would urge every church to think about the possibility of going away together on a pilgrimage, retreat or a teaching week, as a way of deepening and nurturing our faith.

These three areas, all clustered under the heading of *Going Deeper into God*, are a useful checklist for us to reflect on and work at as we seek to *Live God’s Love* today.

+Alan St Albans

15 June 2017