



THE LORD BISHOP OF ST ALBANS  
The Right Reverend Dr Alan Smith

**THE BISHOP OF ST ALBANS' PRESIDENTIAL ADDRESS**  
**DIOCESAN SYNOD**  
**OCTOBER 2016**  
**CHRISTIAN DISCIPLESHIP IN A CHANGING WORLD**

A few years ago I received one of those unsolicited phone calls from someone who was trying to sell me insurance. I am sure the charming young lady must have been breaking every single rule for telephone sales, because she launched into various scenarios, describing in lurid details all the things that could go wrong. Had I thought what might happen if I was badly injured in a car accident? Did I have dependents who might be left destitute? What happened if my house burnt down? Did I have sufficient insurance and assurance?

I stopped her in mid-flight and said “Now look, please stop playing on my fears. I don’t need you to describe all the terrible things that could happen to me. I can imagine all those things perfectly well by myself without your help. Anyway, I have brilliant insurance already. I am absolutely sure it’s better than anything you could possibly offer”.

“Well who are you with?” she asked. Well, I wasn’t going to miss that opportunity. “I’m with Jesus”, I said, at which point she quickly brought the conversation to a close. I have since discovered, incidentally, that this is an extremely good way to deal with such unwanted phone calls and I commend it to you.

So the question I want to ask is “How do we live as Christians in a changing world which is so full of risk?” I first became interested in the question of risk when I heard Professor Anthony Giddens’ Reith Lectures on the subject some years ago and then later when I came across the work of the German sociologist Ulrich Beck, who wrote the seminal book *Risk Society: Towards a New Modernity*,<sup>1</sup> which has become a classic.

It’s significant that in many different eras our predecessors had to live with far greater risk than most of us have ever had to cope with. Each year our forebears gave thanks to God for the harvest, because unless you had a good crop you may not survive the coming winter, it was as tough as that.

Or reflect, for example, on living in those centuries when you did not know if the marauding Danes were going to appear over the horizon one day and slaughter everyone in the village. It happened on many occasions. Think of living in the 14th century when, in four years, the Black Death killed half the population of Europe and people simply didn’t know what the cause was.

**Going Deeper into God** • **Transforming Communities** • **Making New Disciples**

Yet Anthony Giddens argues that there was no concept of risk in any culture in the world until the late 16th century when explorers, setting off in ships into the unknown, began to use the word. Gradually the concept was extended to refer to banking and investment. From there it has now spread into every area of our lives. For example:

- There is an entire industry built around Health and Safety which affects every public space
- Every organisation, including this diocese, is now required to undertake 'risk analysis'
- Risk is an academic discipline, taught in our universities. There is a Winton Professor for the Public Understanding of Risk at the University of Cambridge.
- Society has spawned new profession, the role of 'futureslogists', whose job is to predict what is going to happen, so we can minimise risk. Indeed, the latest genre of such books to arrive on the shop shelves and libraries is by Philip Tetlock and Dan Gardner, called *Superforecasting: The Art and Science of Prediction*<sup>ii</sup>. It's telling, however, that Tetlock has concluded that in a wide range of subjects: "There was very little difference between the accuracy of so-called 'experts' and guesses made by the man in the street".

It is fear and our assessment of risk which has been - and continues to be - one of the most significant factors in the Brexit debate, for example, focusing on either the risk of having more migrants and therefore questions about community solidarity and a whole range of issues or the risk of economic meltdown when we leave the Single Market. What has been so fascinating is to hear eminent people, such as present and past Chancellors of the Exchequer, totally disagreeing about what the result of Brexit will be. We simply don't know.

Underlying the risk industry is fear and the desire to create a world in which there is little or no risk. But there is no risk-free world, just as there is no risk-free church. Our choice is reckless, mindless risks, or sensible, thought-out risks and as Christians, prayed through risks.

In response to living in a world of risk, the biblical material addresses directly the twin themes of fear and the need for us to have courage. Perhaps the most famous passage in the Old Testament is at the beginning of the Book of Joshua where Moses has died, the people of Israel are feeling lost and God calls Joshua to lead them into the Promised Land. Three times they are told "Be strong and courageous; do not be frightened or dismayed, for the Lord your God is with you wherever you go."

Jesus addressed these same issues in the Sermon on the Mount: "Do not worry, saying, 'What will we eat?' or 'What will we drink?' or 'What will we wear?' For it is the Gentiles who strive for all these things; and indeed your heavenly Father knows that you need all these things. But strive first for the kingdom of God and his righteousness, and all these things will be given to you as well. So do not worry about tomorrow, for tomorrow will bring worries of its own. Today's trouble is enough for today." (Matthew 6. 31-34)

This is where the values from the Living God's Love prayer come into their own:

...to live your love  
with generosity and joy,  
imagination and courage

I have previously spoken about 'generosity and joy' in a Presidential Address, so let me comment on 'imagination and courage'. As many of us have learnt from Ignatian spirituality, the imagination has immense power. It can either lead us courageously into the future in faith but alternatively the downside is that we can use that same imagination to allow fear to take root and grow in our hearts and minds. Probably all of us have woken in the dead of night and allowed our imaginations to run wild, until we are gripped with anxiety. Conversely, we can use our imagination, rooted in prayer and meditation, rooted and grounded in the Scriptures, to picture the coming of 'the Kingdom of God and his righteousness', we will learn what Jesus was speaking about in the Sermon on the Mount.

This autumn we are launching *Living God's Love 2020*, which is the second phase of our diocesan vision. Many of you will have attended one of the events already. Last year Kathryn Alford helped us prepare for the relaunch by leading a year of listening and reflecting. Various themes came out of that process and since then other groups have been trying to crystallise what specifically we need to focus on in the coming five years.

In response we've boiled ten ideas have been boiled down which come to us from the parishes which are seeing growth:

*Across our diocese we want to:*

*1. 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*

*2. Make new disciples of Jesus Christ:*

- *Grow the faith of children and young people*
- *Offer courses for enquirers*
- *Reach out in hospitality to those unconnected to church*
- *Create fresh expressions and pioneer ministries*

*3. Transform communities by the power of the Spirit:*

- *Engage in social action that addresses local needs*
- *Confront injustice*
- *Protect the vulnerable and the environment*

This isn't a list of things I want you to go away thinking you have to implement exactly like that. What they are is ten things that are common to churches seeing growth. Therefore in our reflection, our learning, our discerning under God, in ways that will be unique for each of our parishes, chaplaincies and schools, these are jolly good things to reflect how will these be appropriate for our own context, but they will look very different in each context.

We want to support these priorities through mission action plans that set objectives and guide activities that are prayed for, up to date and regularly reviewed.

What has been so encouraging on our deanery visits has been to hear so many stories of where these things are already happening. Nevertheless there are still some congregations, who for all sorts of reasons, have grown tired or the vision has waned or people are afraid. It is here that we need to help one another, help one another to find courage and inspiration and that will involve taking risks.

Now I know that whenever I say I want people to take risks it can backfire on me and all sorts of odd ideas emerge which are justified because I said it's good to take risks. So let me put that comment in context. We are, of course, needing to step out in faith, taking risks as we seek "to proclaim afresh in each generation" the central, core truths of the good news of Jesus Christ. It doesn't mean we throw everything up in the air. It is actually drawing on our rich heritage, seeing how it needs to be lived out and worked out in this generation.

The other thing to say is we need to take sensible, thought out, prayerful, discerned, consulted risks. In other words we need one another. We need to be the sort of community which is genuinely trying to listen to one another, as hard as that is, to seek from our brothers and sisters where there is growth going on and to be curious. We also, all of us, need to be humble and open where things aren't working. I've often said, if everyone could come to every clergy chapter or indeed every synod with three things that have gone rather well in their patch and say this is what we seem to be learning and with three things where we feel quite defeated and we haven't got a clue what to do, and we ask honestly and openly our brothers and sisters what they're finding. I suspect we have enough information and insight and prompts of the Holy Spirit to give us all that we need.

The key is for us to reflect carefully and prayerfully on risk in the light of good information and after consultation with one another, for we are the body of Christ and we need to help and strengthen one another when either in our tiredness or sometimes exhaustion and certainly sometimes in our apprehension or fear, how we might take Godly risks in the name of the Lord that we might

... to live your love  
with generosity and joy,  
imagination and courage  
for the sake of your world  
and in the name of Jesus.  
Amen

+Alan St Albans  
12 October 2016

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<sup>i</sup> Ulrich Beck (2009) *Risk Society: Towards a New Modernity*, London: Sage Publications Ltd

<sup>ii</sup> Philip Tetlock and Dan Gardner (2016) *Superforecasting: The Art and Science of Prediction*, Random House Publishing