

Presidential Address - 15 October 2011

Let me begin by quoting some words of Jesus from St Matthew's Gospel, chapter 16 v.3 'You know how to interpret the appearance of the sky, but you cannot interpret the signs of the times.'

It was during a ferry crossing to France that I first came across a smorgasbord – it's the Swedish word for a large number of different dishes and you mix them up as you like. Well, this presidential address is a sort of smorgasbord as I reflect on 'interpreting the signs of the times' and attempt to pull them into some sort of unity. I want to say something about the disturbances over the summer, where we have reached with our diocesan strategy, and today's debate about women bishops, and link them all together by commenting on how we might live as Christians during a time of change and transition. So let me begin with August.

The Riots in August

The defining images since our last Diocesan Synod are of the riots that began in South London and quickly spread across the country. You will remember that they were triggered by the shooting of Mark Duggan in Tottenham by a policeman on Thursday 4 August. A protest march on Saturday 6 August turned violent and copy cat riots took place in various parts of the capital, spreading to other cities over the next few days. Richard Mannington-Bowes was killed in Ealing and three Birmingham men were killed by a car as they were attempting to protect their properties. After a slow initial response, a strong police presence quelled further disturbances and since then more than 3000 people have been arrested and charged, and the number of convictions continues to rise.

Those convicted range from a fourteen-year-old lad from Waltham Forest to a seventy-year-old man from Leeds. There has been much talk about 'mindless thieving and destruction', but perhaps the most bizarre episode was one middle-class lady who indignantly denied the charge of stealing a television, explaining to the magistrate that when she got into the store they did not have the model she wanted. If ever there was a 'sign of the times' it is encapsulated in that exchange.

A vigorous debate about the causes of the riots is continuing. Some argue that it was opportunistic, pointing out that over 75% of those convicted have previous convictions (although it has also been noted that those with police records are the most easily identified). Others lay the blame at the door of the Metropolitan Police because of the shooting in Tottenham and for their subsequent inadequate response. Others claim the problem lies in endemic gang culture, although only 19% of those arrested so far are known to be involved in gangs. Still others believe the problem is rooted in the widening disparity between rich and poor in Britain. The Home Office is sponsoring research into the riots. Whatever your views, one thing is clear. Our Western society, based on mutual trust, is fragile. We cannot take it for granted. None of us is as civilised as we like to think, particularly when there are flat screen televisions available for the taking.

So how does all this relate to our priorities as a diocese and our work in our parishes, schools and chaplaincies? Before answering this question, let me remind you of what we have been doing this year across the diocese.

The current state of play in the Diocese of St Albans

Last January we launched our new Diocesan Vision: *Living God's Love*, with its three priorities of:

- Going Deeper into God

- Transforming Communities
- Making New Disciples

These are not three separate activities. You cannot pick one or two of them, and ignore the third. Together they constitute three overlapping circles. We have committed ourselves to making them the guiding principles for shaping our diocesan life and they form the basis of our programme of *Mission Action Planning* at parish, chaplaincy, school and deanery level. We must strengthen what is happening at grass roots. The idea of Mission Action Planning is for each group to discern prayerfully how to engage with these three themes and to develop them according to the sort of communities they are living in, their churchmanship, and the resources they have available. Mission Action Planning also needs to be rooted in what is actually going on and events such as the August riots need to inform our thinking and our acting.

Originally I asked that everyone send in a copy of their Mission Action Plan by Easter next year. However, a number of parishes were quick off the mark and have already sent theirs in. I have to say how encouraged I am by the seriousness and imagination that lies behind the ones I have seen so far.

At diocesan level our aim is to get our structures onto a long-term sustainable footing, so that we are not driven by finance or by the availability of clergy. I have already said publicly that I would like us to get to the point where we are not cutting the overall numbers of parish clergy. This is why I and my colleagues are working hard on a strategy for young vocations and ministry, and the more effective deployment of clergy. However, even if we achieve this there will still have to be some further pastoral reorganisation simply because the population of the diocese continues to grow, with large areas of new housing being built. We need to plant new churches and to deploy clergy there, and sometimes this may mean that clergy posts will have to be taken from elsewhere.

This has financial implications. In recent years we have been collecting in 93-94% of the parish share. There is no way that we will be able to stabilise our staffing on that basis. Unless this changes we will have no choice but to continue cuts in stipendiary posts. However, it is highly significant – and very encouraging – that last year, 2010, we collected in 0.8% more of the parish share than in 2009; and this year we are currently 1.07% ahead of last year. This is a magnificent achievement and comes from a great deal of hard work and an increasing level of generous, sacrificial giving. Nevertheless, to stabilise the structures of the diocese and to free up time and energy to undertake our mission and ministry we will have to collect in excess of 98% of the parish share annually and also to collect much more of it in monthly payment throughout the year. As in our domestic finances, cash flow is important.

Now let me turn to the debate that is going to take up most of today's synod:

Women bishops

In a few minutes we will debate the motion that has been sent down to us from General Synod. The debate about the role of women in ministry has been going on in the Church of England for decades now. Many of you will have been involved in a similar debate prior to the vote in General Synod in 1993 which gave the green light for women to be ordained as priests. I thank God for the gifts and insights that women have already brought to the priesthood, and today I want to support the legislation that they can be ordained bishops.

However, I am also acutely aware that there are some who are profoundly troubled by this development. Indeed, some have left the Church of England believing that we cannot make such a fundamental change alone. As a result several of my friends have become Roman Catholic priests or lay people. One of the questions that we are looking at is how we can find

maximum accommodation for those who do not agree with this move, so that they can remain as Anglicans. This is proving complex and time consuming. Nevertheless I hope we will do all we can to be a church which seeks to keep as many people as possible on board.

I do not want to rehearse any aspects of the debate that we are going to have in a few minutes, but I do want to make two points.

Firstly, this is not the first time that Christians have navigated difficult waters. There have been many times in the past when fundamental differences have been faced and resolved. For example, should Gentiles have to be circumcised (Acts 15)? Should Christians ever go to war as soldiers? Is slavery compatible with the Christian faith? These matters were hotly contested in their day.

Secondly, as the church of Jesus Christ we do not debate like a secular legislative assembly and then just vote. We are not a democracy, as if God's will is declared by whom or what gets the most votes. We are called to do something more profound and that is to seek to *discern* what God wants us to be and to do. If this is to be reality rather than a pipe dream, then it will require humility from all of us. As we enter this debate, no matter how convinced any of us may be of the rightness of our opinions, we do have to bear in mind that we may just be wrong. The debate also calls for charity. We should impute the highest motives to those who take a different view from ourselves. When there is mutual trust, we are more likely to hear God's voice. Arrogance makes us deaf to others and to God.

Living in a time of liminality

When we face social dislocation such as we witnessed in August, and when we come to debate controversial changes such as the ordination of women to the episcopate, it is good to reflect on the experience of past generations. History records similar periods of turbulence when change has come along and swept aside inherited ways of seeing things, challenging the certainties and assumptions that sustained previous generations.

Scholars use the word 'liminality' to describe such periods. The term first arose in the disciplines of psychology and anthropology, but is now used to describe what it is like for individuals and societies to live through a time of transition. In the words of one anthropologist, liminality is where you have "in-between situations and conditions that are characterised by the dislocation of established structures, the reversal of hierarchies, and uncertainty regarding the continuity of tradition and future outcomes".^[1]

The arrival of the Romans, the Norman Conquest, the upheaval of the Reformation, and the Industrial Revolution all created seismic shifts in this country. Old world views were challenged and people had to learn to live in a different way and in new contexts. We are not talking about superficial changes, but things that fundamentally and irrevocably affected the culture, outlook and perceptions of the entire population. I believe we are witnessing another one of these seismic cultural shifts, and it is both scary and exhilarating to be part of it.

If I am right, then as Christians we need to revisit our creedal and cultural roots and re-examine them. And we can do so with a high degree of anticipation, because in the providence of God it has been precisely in these periods of liminality that some of the most exciting new movements of the Christian faith have emerged.

There is no escaping the choices that have to be made – and we need to remember that in previous generations some Christians, I believe, made bad ones. So we need to pray earnestly for the guidance of God's Holy Spirit, if only to protect us from our natural timidity. The instinctive reaction of some people is to pull up the drawbridge, retreat into lament about how awful everything is (even when it is not that awful) and hope it all goes away. For better or for worse, God has placed us where we are. Our job is to enter into the debates, the

problems and the issues of our day, whether the causes of the riots in August and/or the future role of women in the church, and in all things to seek God's guidance.

Conclusion

In conclusion, how does all this relate to our life in Christ and Jesus' call 'to interpret the signs of the times'?

First, we must join up what we are doing in the church and in our diocese with what is going on in the world. We cannot live in a spiritual bubble, retreating from the challenges and opportunities of the present moment into a religious ghetto. We need to be deeply immersed in our local communities if we are to read and respond effectively to the 'signs of the times.'

Secondly, we need to re-think our attitude to the present time of liminality. We have a real opportunity to witness to Christ. We must not give into fear and retreat behind the barricades. We need to hold our nerve. The God who raised Jesus from the dead is still alive and active in the church and in our world. Our task is to spot what he is doing and join in, which incidentally might be a good description of Mission Action Planning – discerning where God is at work in our communities and joining in.

'You know how to interpret the appearance of the sky, but you cannot interpret the signs of the times,' says Jesus. Well, it's a brave person who claims to be able to predict the weather in England. But at the risk of being way off beam, let me say finally that I think we need to rediscover and reaffirm our shared life in Christ. In a fragmented world, with our current stress on individuality and 'doing your own thing', I believe that as Christians we need to reaffirm God's call to a corporate life and to mutual service. We need each other and we need to hold onto one another resolutely as God's people, and demonstrate to others by our shared life the presence of Christ in our midst. In so doing we will be his authentic witnesses, and effective 'signs of the time' to our contemporaries.

Alan St Albans 12 October 2011

[1] Horvath, A., Thomassen, B. and Wydra, H. (2009) *Introduction: Liminality and Cultures of Change* (International Political Anthropology).