

## The First Diocesan Synod of the New Triennium

The Bishop of St Albans preached this sermon at the Eucharist held at the beginning of the new Triennium of Diocesan Synod on 13th October 2012.

Luke 24, 13-35 and Phil 2, 1-11

Three weeks ago I went to see the new play *The Last of the Hausmanns* at the National Theatre, starring Julie Walters. It's a dark comedy about a dysfunctional family who have gathered at their mother's home. The son, Nick, has returned after an absence of years. His sister has been in touch with him because their mother is dying of cancer. At one point Nick's sister asks him why he left home unexpectedly and without warning. 'I needed to get away' he explained. 'I wanted to see the world, to travel to exotic places, to have new experiences and to find my inner self, somewhere with open skies, with sun and warm blue sea like Corfu or Crete'. 'So where did you land up?' his sister asked, fascinated by his passion and enthusiasm. 'Plymouth', he replied.

Nick's description of setting off on a journey picks up something of the excitement and the anticipation that we all yearn after – although like Nick we do not always land up at the place we had hoped for.

I well remember the thrill of travelling around Kenya for a month when I was 26. I was excited and expectant as I read travel books about the country and began to plan my itinerary. I was travelling by myself and I knew it was going to take me out of my comfort zone. I was going to stay with Kenyan families in their homes, so I had a sense of vulnerability – what would it be like? How would I cope? I was excited at the prospect of meeting new people, seeing new places, learning about new cultures. But I also had a sense of foreboding as I'd never been to Africa before. I imagine many of you will have had similar experiences.

Now what has all this got to do with the first meeting of our diocesan synod of this new triennium? Well, I guess when most of us think about a synod we picture something rather like a parliament - a discussion forum with a chair, where people stand up to talk and to debate, a bit like the MPs at Westminster.

But the Greek word *sunodos* (from which we get *synod*) is a word which has a richer and fuller background than simply a meeting. The word means 'being on a journey together' and it designates a fundamental part of the Christian life. Having heard the call of Jesus, 'Come follow me', you and I are invited to set out on a journey with him – a *sunodos*. It is a journey filled with anticipation, which invites us to move out of our comfort zone, to experience new things, to meet new people, to go to new destinations. Of course, it's not any old journey, going wherever the fancy takes us. Just as today we need guidebooks to help us plan our travels and holidays, so God has given us the scriptures and 2000 years of Christian tradition which sets the context and offers us guidelines.

So now to our gospel reading this morning – the account of the two disciples on the road to Emmaus. Cleopas and his companion are on a journey too, from Jerusalem to a local village called Emmaus. As they walk a stranger falls in step with them and joins them on the road. So overwhelmed are the two disciples with the recent events that have taken place in Jerusalem, namely the arrest, trial and execution of Jesus and the strange disappearance of his body, that they barely look at the stranger. They are caught up in their anxieties and worries and fail to recognise that it is the risen Christ himself who accompanies them on their journey.

Cleopas and his friend are not a synod because they have not yet come to see that they are in the company of Jesus. Instead they are troubled and anxious, not able to make sense of what has been going on. It is, I fear, a parable of much of what goes on in synods today. Too often we lose sight of what a synod is meant to be – a place of encounter and discernment. Instead it becomes simply another parliament, with its parties and factions, its three line whips and tactical voting. Too often standing orders are used not to help everyone to have their say, but as a means of manipulating the process, with clandestine meetings trying to fix the way a debate should go. So let me return to Cleopas and his friend walking to Emmaus. At the end of their journey they are still as much in the dark as when they set out. You might be tempted to say that sounds just like the Church of England! They haven't even begun to understand what has happened and that God is in it. They question the stranger and we are told that Jesus explains things to them. In St Luke's words, 'beginning with Moses and all the prophets, he interpreted to them the things about himself in all the scriptures'. But still they don't get it. When they arrive at their destination the stranger indicates that he needs to travel on somewhere else, but they press him to stay. So he does, and at the table when he takes bread and breaks it and gives it to them, we are told that their eyes are opened and they realise that the stranger is none other than the risen Christ.

Emmaus does not become the place of encounter and revelation until the disciples turn away from their own petty concerns and open themselves to Christ. They have to get beyond their obsessions and ask Jesus to come to stay with them. This is something about hospitality – opening ourselves up to the Other in our midst – and that is as much an intellectual movement as a physical one.

So sunodos - becoming a synod – happens when we move beyond our hobbyhorses and concerns, and consciously invite Jesus Christ to be at the heart of our deliberations. It happens when we ask him to come and eat with us. It happens when we make intellectual room for the stranger and listen to his questions. It happens when we reverence the Other in our midst and extend hospitality.

It is why every synod begins with prayer and why, at the start of this triennium, we gather around the Lord's Table at which God extends his hospitality to us. At this Eucharist we pray that Jesus Christ may be at the very centre of our common life, that he may walk with us on every step of the journey and that, like Cleopas he will open our minds and give us spiritual understanding.

A final thought. The village of Emmaus is today known by its Palestinian name of Abu Gosh. If you were to visit the village, you would find an ancient Crusader church built over the site which tradition honours as the place where the risen Lord appeared to Cleopas and the other disciple, and broke the bread. The church is in the care of a Benedictine community of monks and nuns. The community was established at the request of Pope Paul VI to pray for the reconciliation of Christian, Muslim and Jew, and to restore the church which had been abandoned and was semi-derelict. I know a little about this community because it was founded from the Abbey of Le Bec Hellouin in Normandy where I go on retreat most years.

When the monks and nuns first arrived at Abu Gosh they encountered aggression and outright opposition. The Israeli authorities were suspicious because they were being friendly with the local Palestinian Muslims. So they regularly sent groups of young Israeli soldiers to disrupt the worship. They would come into church during the singing of the offices or during mass, sit at the back with their guns cocked, smoking cigarettes and talking loudly. This went on day after day, week after week.

Meanwhile, the local Muslims were equally suspicious and turned the loudspeakers on the minaret to face the church. It blared out incessantly and loudly, so that the monks couldn't hear what they were doing. It seemed hopeless and useless.

But the monks and nuns kept going, steadfast in prayer and in their common life. They continued to offer welcome and hospitality to local people without expecting anything in return. It was quite some months before things began to change. First, the soldiers stopped interrupting their worship. Then one day the wife of the local imam returned their hospitality and soon after the loud speakers on the mosque were turned away from them.

I share this story with you because it shows how by God's grace our human divisions can be overcome, and how hostility and suspicion can be converted to a gracious hospitality and openness to others, and whole communities be transformed.

So at this first meeting of our diocesan synod, let us pray for the grace of perseverance that the monks and nuns of Abu Gosh embody. Like them, we are here because we have responded to the call of Jesus Christ who says, 'Come follow me'. He asks us to set out on a journey in his company – to be a synodus. If this is to be a reality, then we need one another because Christ speaks to us through our brothers and sisters. In this respect it is particularly good that we are going to sign a renewal of our links with the Swedish Diocese of Lindkoping, which itself is a testimony to our shared journey in the presence of Christ.

Let us pray that the risen Christ will be at the heart of our deliberations not simply today, but over the coming three years. We have nothing to offer the world, unless we first receive from him. So let us pray that, like Cleopas, we may know him 'in the breaking of the bread'.