Presidential Address to the Governing Body

September 9th 2020

The Archbishop of Wales, John Davies

The prophecy of Isaiah at chapter 42 verse 10 and the Book of the Psalms at Psalm 96 exhort the people of God to do one and the same thing: to sing unto the Lord a new song.

My understanding of this exhortation is not that those who received it should go away and compose something new, something from scratch, as if the old song was no longer credible. Rather it urges the people of God to renew the old song, modifying it to retain the eternal truths about God, His love and His purposes, but setting those truths in a new context. The eternal truths and present circumstances side by side.

The context into which Isaiah spoke was one of coming liberation, freedom and a joyful emerging from the darkness of exile; the promise of the coming of a new beginning, the start of a new chapter in the life of the people. This does not mean to say that renewal and refreshment were guaranteed. It appears that there were around at the time, those who viewed the possibility of the challenge with a degree of reluctance, not to say apathy and cynicism. Some might prefer to remain in exile because at least they knew where they were. Hardly, however, a recipe for hope and growth. Then and now, staying put and changing nothing might feel the safest thing to do in challenging circumstances but, as a strategy, it brings no joy and the fear which drives it is unattractive to others.

Psalm 96 also has a context of new beginning, its words forming part of the great rejoicing centred upon the return of the Ark of the Covenant to Jerusalem and the hopeful and joyful establishment of the Davidic dynasty - also an emerging, by the people of Israel, from a kind of political and irreligious exile. No doubt not everyone who shared the vision felt captivated by the mood. But, such is human nature.

Putting aside the reluctant, the apathetic and the cynical, in each instance God’s people were charged and called to do better and to enable them to do so, they were presented with specific opportunities:

* to reflect upon the past,
* to extract lessons from the past,
* to understand mistakes made in the past
* and to commit to a new, faithful, and joyful future, living and journeying in close co-operation with God’s will and God’s ways, and being an example to others of justice, love and truth which such others might not only find admirable but which they might also come to mirror. A journey informed by the lessons of the past but not enslaved or constrained by them. A new beginning; a chance to assess what to carry through the door into the new future and what to leave behind.

You and I, and much of the world, might currently think of itself as emerging very slowly and with some hesitation, and with justifiable and abiding anxiety, from a dark exile, the exile caused by the COVID-19 pandemic. You do not need me to rehearse for you the radical and frightening components of that exile, but it will serve our purpose if I affirm that it has provided and continues to provide us, as a church, with unexpected opportunities to reflect upon our life and to renew our song. There has been much talk in many quarters of a new normal, including within the church, and it affords us the chance to recognise what it might mean for us and to be excited by it. I might describe this as a happy accident, an unforeseen benefit of potential good emerging from a highly unpromising set of circumstances.

To do what the people of God were called to do in the two examples which I’m using and to apply these to our situation, we can learn much.

If we reflect upon our past, we ought to recognise two specific truths: first, that there has been much faithfulness, much commitment and much achievement – and that is good and it is something to celebrate. Less good and less worthy of celebration, however, is the truth that, from time-to-time and in some places, there has been inertia, a refusal to contemplate, let alone engage with, change, and attitude defined by a willingness to only continue our life in the ways in which we believe it has always continued. Some just want to get back to the old normal – but believe me, bits of that have had their day.

We should, properly and honestly, extract from the past, the plain truth that things have not always been the same. Change within the church – not just our church - has happened with some regularity, over centuries, in terms of liturgy, ministry, structures and witness. So why not now?

In terms of mistakes made in the past, we should recognise with a degree of both embarrassment and sorrow, that we have not always been as open and welcoming to the marginalised and the outsider as the Lord would have us be. We have sometimes been inwardly focussed, structured exclusively towards self-preservation at all costs. And there have been occasions when the behaviour of some individuals and our church itself has caused offence and harm to others, and reputational damage to the Gospel message.

But there is also cause for hope and joy. Despite the evident adversity of our COVID-19 exile, opportunities have presented themselves, and continue to present themselves, for us to renew our song. And some of these opportunities, already emerged, are already being grasped.

None of you can be unaware of the innovative ways in which worship, pastoral care, prayer, study and reflection have been carried on and developed, despite the closure of church buildings. It would be naïve of anyone to believe that every hit upon every church website or Facebook page represents an individual participating from beginning to end of what is on offer, but it cannot be doubted that, in such ways, we have been in touch with thousands of people whom we might not otherwise encounter; we have touched their minds, hearts and lives, and in different ways we have revealed a church that is capable of walking alongside them, welcoming them and teaching them. This is newness in our song. This must last.

We have learned that we have not really been talking to each other or listening to each other. Closure of buildings, turbulent stock markets and economic uncertainty have, inevitably, resulted in a loss of income – although many have found new and generous means of continuing to give – but the Representative Body has stepped in, despite itself suffering a significant financial hit, to support the local church. And, in the discussions which led to this welcome intervention, there has emerged among the dioceses a remarkable and welcome spirit of real listening and real unity of purpose; an articulated vison that we are not six kingdoms or fiefdoms, existing in isolation, and dislocated from one another, but one church family called to work, share, support and co-operate across diocesan boundaries in revealing the one Kingdom that really matters, the Kingdom of and the ways of the Lord Jesus. This too is newness in our song. This too must last. It may lead to radical and extensive changes in our provincial way of life, but why shouldn’t it?

I now add a personal note. I realised earlier in the year that, although I met the Chair of Standing Committee, the Chair of the RB, the Chief Executive and the Senior Bishop at different times and in different places, we never actually met together formally, as a group, for the specific purpose of co-ordinating our church’s strategy, planning for the best use of resources and the like. We are supposed to be among the key players in the life of the Church in Wales, but we didn’t often have time for proper, strategic conversation – the agenda was too long; we’d miss the train if we weren’t careful. So we’re now part of the newly-established Archbishop’s Consultation Group, meeting regularly, focussing on what the church ought to be trying to do better, interrogating some of the structures which we have and which could be more sharply focussed, being realistic about quality membership for many of our provincial bodies, and finding opportunities to come alongside some of the institutions in our nation with whom we can work for the good of the people. This is another bit of newness in the song, and it, too, must last.

So, here we are, emerging from exile having, I hope, recognised that, far from being the calamity which it might be – and let me say clearly that I do not underestimate the personal calamities which coronavirus has visited upon so many, too many – it has given us the time, the space and the chance to renew or to plan to renew our song in ways we might never have envisaged or, perhaps, wanted. And as we sing, harmonise, hopefully, with the song God sings over us. From the book of Zephaniah:

The Lord, your God, is in your midst,

a warrior who gives victory;

he will rejoice over you with gladness,

he will renew you in his love;

he will exult over you with loud singing

as on a day of festival[[1]](#footnote-1).

Are you singing loudly, exalting in God or are you a bit more reluctant, uncertain, hesitant? It’s always easier to start singing when someone else starts first. Has the time come for those first, uncertain notes from some of us? I challenged Governing Body, with a different metaphor, in my address in April 2018 (and I have reminded you of it since then) to be the first brave pilgrims to dip a toe in the waters of the river between where we are now and the promised land of renewed life. Whether it’s starting to cross or renewing the song, the challenge is the same, and it has to be faced.

For places and instances where our song has been already wisely, creatively, imaginatively, hopefully and faithfully renewed, we must rejoice, and we must preserve and develop what has emerged and been learned for the good of the church. And where we have learned that we don’t need to or have to simply get back to the way things were, in the places where and at the times when they always happened, and that there are things that we have prized but which have had their day, that too will be for the good.

I really do have a growing sense that new things which we have hoped for, some of the impetus which we have lacked, have been forced upon us by present circumstances, and that far form lying down and allowing such circumstances to overwhelm us, we are emerging with a fresh spirit and a growing ‘can do’ conviction which is renewing our song rather than a ‘no way’ one which simply leaves it being relentlessly repeated.

For this I rejoice; and I commend wholeheartedly all who are contributing to the renewal. And, to the reluctant I urge just two things: please trust and please try.

1. Zephaniah 3 vv 17 – 18a NRSV (Anglicized Edition) [↑](#footnote-ref-1)