Presidential Address to the Governing Body

The Bishop of Bangor, Andy John

Friends and colleagues, as we begin to emerge from the Covid pandemic, today provides the bishops with an opportunity to thank those who have cared for others in this period: in our nursing and care homes, in our hospitals and those who have been the “Good Samaritan” and taken time to check that people are safe. We want to thank the NHS in particular: cleaners and managers, nurses and consultants, caterers and ancillary staff. What you have given with enormous commitment has been heroic and the nation owes you a debt it will not be able to repay. But we also want to thank our churches: clergy who have held their nerve, become light on their feet discovering new and innovative ways to care for others and congregations who have shown the power of love in action at a community level. We want to thank you from the bottom of our hearts and say how proud we are of what you have given in the service of Christ. Thank you.

I also want to mention the Provincial Team at this point. The levels of professionalism shown by colleagues in 2 Callaghan Square, especially when national regulatory clarity was not consistently forthcoming, has been exceptional. Those who have provided us with latest guidance on how to stay safe are owed a particular debt of thanks.

This has been the most significant event to affect humanity since World War Two and the most serious pandemic since the Spanish flu outbreak of 1918-1920. The impact on our economy and national well-being has been profound. It is perhaps too early to understand and describe completely how life is being reshaped, whether in the workplace, our communities or even the effect on the global economy. The landscape of life is changing and, to use the words of St John, admittedly entirely out of context, it is not yet clear what we will become (1 John 3:2).

And so the context within which our churches minister has also changed. We have seen the emergence of new ways of being church, such as online worship. We are wondering what to take with us on the next stage of our journey and what to lay down. We are conscious that the numbers of those who worship in person might be fewer than was the case pre-Covid and that a diminished base of support will ask new questions about our mission, property and finance. But external stimuli have always shaped Christian purpose and polity: the persecution of the early church led to the first missionary journeys and the demand of new tasks led to the calling of the first deacons. What is significant has never been the size of the challenge but the scale of the faithful response.

With this in mind, I would like to reflect on what “responding well” to the challenges might look like.

Max Weber the German Sociologist coined the phrase ‘”the authority of the eternal yesterday”. His thesis was that societies with a strong and inherited understanding of authority derive their legitimacy from that tradition or custom. We can relate to this because we have such sources – Scripture, tradition and reason. These are the sources of authority which anchor our mission and ministry in God. The apostolic character of our faith is vital to us – continuity with Christ’s teaching and that of the first apostles is irreplaceably important.

But any organization which operates with inherited authority and this alone, runs the risk of fossilization. Being incapable of responding to new challenges means a lack of freedom to discover what God is doing all around us. We can imagine what kind of church we would have been had our forebears remained ambivalent about slavery and not developed a fuller understanding of the value of humanity made in the image of God. Or what would we have been had we not grasped the matter of women being called to the priesthood and episcopate?

A church which cannot develop, which is not light enough on its feet, is unlikely to have a language with which it can communicate with the society around it.

We have an opportunity to travel further on and further into what God is calling us to do and be. And our task is deeply missional. Even our debate today is fundamentally about whether we want to shape that life to be bigger and better so that fewer feel unable to believe and more feel invited to truly belong. I love the Diocese of Liverpool’s strapline: ‘A Bigger Church to make a Bigger Difference.’

I want to say something to colleagues who are extremely concerned about this debate. I understand any change in our polity will be painful for some: such a novel development will be regarded as an aberration, a departure. And thus regarded, it would be considered an act of disobedience. To depart from Christ’s word is to depart from Christ.

But every development is to some degree a departure; something changes whenever there is a new expression of practice. And even when such a change appears consonant with a stated position, it is nevertheless a change. When the church changed its position on forbidding meat with blood in it or saw that slavery in all and any form was wicked, there was change.

The “authority of the eternal yesterday” must not be a millstone around our necks but provide a basis for a courageous embrace of what God is doing in the world around us. Mission always lies at the heart of faith. And being alive to God, to what might happen next, is part of remaining curious and open to new opportunity.

I have recently been introduced to Benedict Anderson’s work on “Imagined Communities”. His thesis is that a nation is a socially constructed community, imagined by the people who perceive themselves as part of that group. Imagined communities are also created by others, such as the media or even dispersed groups online who may wield images or ideas to create identity. People will choose which images or ideas they most relate to and so reinforce their relationship to that imagined community. Online interest groups are a prime example of this.

In this context the Bench of Bishops have recently requested work be done on whether the life of the church is truly arranged for mission and is fit for purpose. Some of the questions which are emerging are around structural change. Others relate to the systems and culture within which we operate. Still others are profoundly spiritual and existential: will we plan for a future believing that the gospel is the power of God for salvation? Will we frontload our finances and priorities with the transforming power of God at the forefront of our thinking? And will we align our finances to our hopes?

The point is that we are addressing deep questions of what our church might be in the years ahead. What kind of church, community might take shape in and through our worship, our service and our witness to Jesus Christ? Will we as a church demonstrate a life together which is authentic, spiritually alive and committed to serving Welsh society?

Colleagues will have been conscious that other provinces are debating the future of the parish system. Strongly held views on whether to move in one direction decisively or retain the classic Anglican model have been well articulated in the press. I want to suggest the via media we have in the Church in Wales offers us a way of approaching this matter. The Mission and Ministry Area platforms allow us to utilize all that is good in the parochial model - the local, the importance of buildings, diversity of worship, and teams of lay and ordained co-operating. But to embrace new expressions of church too - the pioneering models, the church plants, the festival churches or social enterprise initiatives.

As diverse expressions of church become more normal, there will be new questions still about how we grow vocations - to the priesthood, and also lay leaders who will offer the support and direction needed. But we ought to be in no doubt that the hybrid, mixed ecology (or economy) of church life is here to stay and is across the whole of Wales.

In his book *Beyond Duty: A Passion for Christ, a Heart for Mission* Tim Dearborn says, “God’s church falters from exhaustion because Christians erroneously think that God has given them a mission to perform in the world. Rather, the God of mission has given his church to the world. It is not the church of God that has a mission in the world, but the God of mission who has a church in the world.” (p 2)

It is liberating to realize that the Missio Dei does not depend on me. A church which exhausts itself in attempting what is good but, perhaps, not essential, will be as dispirited as it will be fruitless. And the Covid pandemic has asked questions about the essentials perhaps as never before. The theology of this is profound because it flows from a belief that God is in the mix: the prophet Isaiah spoke of the way God will not be contained by the past. He wrote, “See, I am doing a new thing. Now it springs up; do you not perceive it? I am making a way in the wilderness and streams in the wasteland.” (Isaiah 43:19)

In his work, *Epistles*, Mark Jarman draws on the conviction that God is at work in the world. He writes, “Eternal life may be coming back to this world, perfected and without your permission.” (‘History’, p 64). If we believe that the wind blows where it wills, we hear its sound but do not know where it comes from or goes (John 3:8), we need to be alive to God anew. Where are the new things God is doing and how are we catching up with the God revealed in Jesus Christ?

To see our task like this is to be open to what God has prepared for those who love him. It is to see the task through Christ’s eyes and to be set free to do what is truly important. I want to end this address with some words I used earlier because they seem to me to set both the tone and direction we need as a church: what is significant has never been the size of the challenge but the scale of the faithful response.

And for strength to respond well we ought to commit and pray in the name of our Lord and Saviour Jesus Christ. Amen.