

Diocesan Synod Presidential Address

1 Corinthians 12.12-26 and Luke 24.13-31

“If one member suffers, all suffer together with it” (1 Cor 12.26a)

This was the bible text quoted in a letter this week received from Bishop Åsa of our link diocese of Luleå. She wrote, “As members of the same body of Christ I pray for you, for the Diocese of Norwich, for the Church of England and for all the victims”.

I imagine everyone gathered at this Eucharist has felt a deep sadness over these last two weeks.

Sadness, first and foremost, for the survivors of abuse, for the way in which we hear time and again of our failures to listen to them, to believe them and to respond well.

Sadness for God’s Church we love and serve with all our heart and mind and strength, and the undermining of our ability to share the Gospel.

Sadness for parish safeguarding officers who do so much so well locally.

Sadness because it is as if the enormous amount of progress which has been made with safeguarding over the last eleven years, very much driven by Archbishop Justin, has not got us far. It is easy to forget the changes: all ministers and PCC members are now provided with safeguarding training; decisions are made not by individuals but by safeguarding case management meetings; there are volunteer

safeguarding officers in parishes; professionally qualified safeguarding officers are employed by every diocese; and there is a full national team. Eleven years ago, when I became a bishop, there was one national safeguarding officer, shared with the Methodist Church and she was on sick leave.

Sadness, too, for Archbishop Justin and Caroline.

Speaking from her own experience in the Church of Sweden, Bishop Åsa commented,

“Our experience is that speaking the truth about history is a crucial part of reconciliation, and I hope the Makin review can be part of a process in moving towards reconciliation and healing”.

These days have for many of us been more than sadness as the Makin Review has shone the light of truth on part of our history. We have felt a dislocation; a shame; a confusion; a sense of why do we bother to work so hard in our parishes with safeguarding; a time of anxiety about whether we have always done the right thing; a kiros moment of impact on our faith and our view of the Church; even an anger with different people mentioned in the Makin review or who have been involved in the commentary of recent days. We have shared in a sense of trauma, not nearly as much as the survivors, but a trauma which is going to have a long tail.

On the safeguarding pages of the diocesan website there are contact details if you, or anyone you know, needs support or a conversation.

On the road to Emmaus, two disciples, Cleopas and perhaps Mrs Cleopas (we do not know the companion's name) were full of sadness. They too were dislocated, confused and anxious. They were traumatised by the recent events in Jerusalem, so immense a moment in their world that they thought that surely everyone knew about it. As they walked, they were engrossed in conversation, or possibly having a full-blown row.

I remember Paula Gooder exploring the words that Luke used to describe the scene. First Luke tells us they were 'conversing' or as the NRSV translates is 'talking' (Luke 24.14). In the next verse (v 15) another word is added so it becomes 'talking and discussing', which can also be translated as 'disputing' or 'debating'. You can imagine that arms are waving, the volume a little louder. The temperature is rising. The NRSV then uses 'discussing' again when the stranger approaches them (v 17), but the Greek has an entirely different word *antiballo* which can mean throw at, or against, trying to hit a target. The implication is that there is now a full-blown argument between the two.

We have become an increasingly argumentative Church. The problem about so many contemporary debates is that if you are not on 'my' side, you are not on the side of the angels. We polarise debates and seek to demean, degrade and ostracise those we disagree with. The other becomes the 'enemy'. Well, I've got a surprise for you. We may as well try and find ways to get on with people on earth because we're going to spend eternity with them in heaven!

In our arguments, we need to be gentler and kinder to each other, to pray with and for each other, to see the face of Christ in the other, and to seek to model something different to a divided, fearful and conflict-torn world crying out for healing and peace. Only in this way will we build trust, only in this way will we be people sharing the love of Jesus, and only in this way will we break down the silos within our church that enabled a group of people to cover up horrific abuse.

To come together as a Synod is to live a Godly experiment in a different way of dialogue. To find a better way for our life together. The word Synod comes from the Greek *syn* meaning 'together' and *hodos* meaning 'road' or 'way', thus giving us a meaning of 'coming together on the way'. We are the people of the Way, and a people on the Way, as we seek Christ. Like on the road to Emmaus, he comes amongst us as we work out our sadness, our dislocation, confusion and anxieties. He opens the scriptures for us, and we, too, see his face in taking, blessing and breaking bread.

“Stay with us” (v 29) said the disciples to the stranger. Those words of invitation must also be ours. In a sense it is an invitation to the one who has already invited us to abide in him. An invitation to the one who walks with us the path from the Cross to the promise of Resurrection life.

In our present storm, we do well to remember that God is the Lord of the Church. Our church's foundation is Jesus Christ and I don't believe that he has finished with the Church of England yet. 'Stay with us

Jesus', is my prayer, to enable us to take every step to being a safer Church. Stay with us Jesus to purge us of the theologies that cause harm. Stay with us Jesus to ensure the groupings we gravitate towards are healthy places and never look inwards to protect self-interests. Stay with us Jesus to make us abandon the arrogance of clericalism so that the voices of all God's people might be heard. Stay with us Jesus to move us from not being curious or vigilant enough, because safeguarding is a shared responsibility.

To all parish safeguarding officers, thank you for all you do. Thank you to our church officers, licensed lay leaders, ministry teams, youth and children's workers, and clergy who model a positive safeguarding culture. Thank you to those of you who take responsibility for yourself and others to ensure we all have up to date safeguarding training. We do the work of safeguarding because it is Kingdom work and because we want the best for the Church we love and serve, and all with whom the church comes into contact.

"For just as the body is one and has many members, and all the members of the body, though many, are one body, so it is with Christ"
(1 Corinthians 12.12)

He who placed a child at the centre of things, he who sought out the vulnerable with love and compassion, and he whose body was abused on the way to the Cross, seeks his living body, the Church, to be safe for all who come to him. Lord, have mercy upon us.

+Graham Norvic:

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