

Presidential Address – Diocesan Synod Nov 2024

Late on Wednesday afternoon, the Independent Learning Lessons Review into John Smyth QC was published after a long delay. Smyth was a prolific abuser and the Review brings into the light the horrific abuse he perpetrated over a significant period of time. It has further highlighted persistent failures in how the Church of England has dealt with safeguarding. In all of this, we need to remember the many victims and survivors of Smyth's abuse and all who continue to be impacted by church-related abuse today. So I want to begin this Address by acknowledging victims and survivors, and offering continued lament for failings that ultimately weigh heavily on all our consciences. I repeat my commitment to the very best standards of safeguarding in this diocese and following the INEQE Audit we are in the process of implementing its recommendations. I look forward to the restructure which will unfold over the next few months and am grateful to those who are helping us progress this work without delay. We do have an interim DSA waiting in the wings and we are still waiting for their DBS to come through and hopefully this will happen soon. In the meantime I am grateful for the support of the NST regional lead and I wish to pay tribute to parish safeguarding officers in particular for the work they do on the ground in parishes.

When I started to think about my Address for today, which was earlier in the week, I decided to search for a book on my bookshelf. The title of this book is *Ten Survival Skills for a World in Flux* published in 2022, and written by former diplomat and current Principal of Hertford College, Oxford Tom Fletcher. It's a book I like to dip into now and again, and its chapter titles give you a clue of what Fletcher covers: How to take back control; how to be curious; how to find purpose; how to find your voice;

how to find, grow and mobilise your community; how to coexist; how to be kind; how to live with technology, how to be global; how to be a good ancestor.

However my point is less about the book (and by the way it is worth dipping into) rather more about where I found it. The titles of the books on either side were as follows: *Stop Reading the News* (Rolf Dobelli), *Ways of Seeing* (John Berger) and I couldn't resist noticing one more in proximity *Messy Church Goes Wild!* (ed. Lucy Moore). Part of me is tempted just to leave it there.

I think probably every Address to Synod in my still relatively recent taking up of this role has been in the light of ongoing churn, and I am beginning to think it was ever thus. The things before us today on our agenda touch on many aspects of our life together as a diocese, the nuts and bolts of mission and ministry and how we resource it. And it's very tempting I think to exist in a kind of permanent survival mode. But is this, as I once heard a retired Antipodean archbishop ask: the crisis we are in or the opportunity we are at?

In the last two weeks we have had the Autumn Budget and its related fall-out. I am not going to get into the detail of the Budget. I am speaking in the debate on it in the House of Lords on Monday. There are 82 speakers and I think it's going to be a very long night. On Wednesday this week I was at the Northern Farming Conference at Hexham auction mart.

I drove through a picket line of protesting farmers unhappy about the APR situation and generally feeling that despite this was statistically a

big budget for farming, it didn't really feel or read like a budget that was for the rural economy and certainly not in the light of the horrendous flooding that farmers have had to deal with this year. And of course it doesn't take long before we are confronted by the reality of the climate emergency. Everything is related it seems. The last speaker at the Farming Conference, in a late afternoon slot that is clearly designed to give people a slightly different take on events was a sheep farmer from the Scottish borders who came on stage doing a Donald Trump impression (you may have been wondering when the US election was going to feature in this Address), a very convincing one I must say. Trump surveyed the 260 or so people before him and remarked (I am certainly not going to attempt the accent) 'so much tweed'. There was a serious point of course: the audience wasn't expecting the speaker to be quite like that. It just goes to show how much can change in a very short space of time.

Crises can attract our human predisposition to gloom and if aren't careful we will spend all our time in number crunching and figuring out new ways to do what we have always tried to but in ways that ultimately feed the survival instinct that is natural to all of us. The flip side of this, as seen in the work of John Paul Kotter emeritus professor of leadership at the Harvard Business School is how to thrive and to do that we need to cultivate our opportunity seeking radars that engage the body, emotions and mind in a positive way.

And perhaps this is all I want to say at this point with a provocative question: is parish Share the thing that we contribute once we have sorted everything out locally, or is it the outward demonstration of committing to life in mission and ministry together and therefore the

priority in our outlook? Please note I am being deliberately provocative here.

The Church is not a business. As the US humanities professor Alan Jacobs says: *Christians manage even such dramatic swervings by remembering that the way we follow is not, primarily, the way of a pastor or theologian, teacher or bishop, administrator or prayer-warrior. The Way is, simply, that of Christ. It is followed by those who were once children of Adam and are now co-heirs, with Christ, of his Father's kingdom.*

And that Synod is what I want to leave you with: as we seek our way forward together, please let us not forget our primary calling to be disciples of Christ and to live in love and humility together for Jesus' sake.