

Peterborough Diocesan Synod 10 October 2009

“Become what we are”

Bishop Frank’s Presidential Address

“We are what we are – sons and daughters of God – by grace, not by right. How we enter into the reality of this is what concerns me. One part of our identity in Christ is being called to take responsibility for the governance of Christ’s Church.”

I’m aware that this address comes at the end of a string of political party conference addresses, but I’m hoping that it won’t be thought of as one of those. We’ve heard their hopes and fears as the party leaders vied with one another about the austerity of their ambitions and the hairiness of their shirts. I might protest that this is our territory rather than theirs, but I’m thankful that a realism is emerging among public figures who aren’t especially known for it. However, I want to suggest that we – God’s people generally and the Diocesan Synod here in particular – have a different ambition to that of people seeking election to government. At the beginning of a three year session of the Diocesan Synod I suggest that we should be thinking of the future we’ve already been promised and how we might enter that inheritance. I want to encourage us to become what we are.

Our agenda today sets out fresh work and also engages us with matters for which we already have robust policies and significant achievements in the diocese. For example, we’ll encounter questions on Fresh Expressions of faith and of church knowing we have a good number of pioneering projects in the diocese already. They’re breaking new ground in the community based on that age old longing that God’s kingdom would come and his will be done on earth as it is in heaven.

We will be considering the vital work that occurs in schools. They are a historic mission field in which the church has worked for many years. When I first came here in 2002, in the first meeting of Diocesan Synod that I attended, we reaffirmed our belief that church schools stand at the centre of the church’s mission in this country. Today we have the opportunity to deepen our commitment to that vision. Later, we’ll work in groups on proposals to modify the clergy pension arrangements to which the church set its heart many years ago, thereby helping put to rights a long neglected area of clergy welfare. These and other items on the agenda are areas of well established work where there is an existing vision and real signs of its fulfilment. They are matters to which we have set our minds and to which we have given our resources. Yet there is more to be done so that our work ever more fully honours the God who calls us and who challenges us to become what we are. To inhabit with greater intensity and integrity the place God has made for us. To enter more completely into what God has for us as his people here in the Diocese of Peterborough. To become what we are.

In his earthly life Jesus entered into the reality of the status he already had; he didn’t achieve his identity as the Son of God for that was his already. By giving himself fully to each person or task he explored the deepest meaning and expression of who he already was. His life is the story of someone pressing on into every dimension of his identity so that its richness was not hidden but revealed. If you like he turned his inside out. What was already there became increasingly visible to his contemporaries who had eyes to see and ears to hear. That’s true of us today as we look to him by faith not by sight. We are what we are - sons and daughters of God - by grace, not by right. How we enter into the reality of this is what concerns me. One part of our identity in Christ is being called to take responsibility for the governance of Christ’s church. It’s a high calling, to share in caring for the precious flock bought with the price of Christ’s precious blood, as we say in the ordination services.

We’ve offered ourselves for this work in Synod for the next three years. Years which will be important for the ministry of whoever has been called to be our next diocesan bishop. In the window of opportunity that has been given me to serve you standing-in for the diocesan bishop I want to commend a renewed and sanctified engagement with God and with each other particularly expressed in the life of the Synod. My ambition is that we explore the fullness of our calling, and in the light of that I have already asked that we make some changes to our way of working.

We have been blessed this morning in the worship led by members of the Synod from the Brackley Deanery. I trust that all of us will take our turn in leading worship and also in other ways assisting how Synod is serviced over the next three years. In the time I've been here I have seen the Diocesan Staff staying on long after everyone else has gone home, clearing chairs, picking up papers, and generally leaving the venue in a fit state for those who will come in next.

Couldn't we find ways in which we can all take responsibility for this, making the meeting environment our responsibility each time we come to Synod? We could do that by sending out lists and asking for volunteers, or we could just do it! One of the benefits would be that the diocesan officers were more available for conversations with Synod members.

In the past, people have been elected on to the Synod who haven't found it a sympathetic or supportive environment in which to speak. I hope we will change that. There are one or two of us who are prone to speak too often! And quite a few who don't speak at all. We're splitting into groups today for some of the subjects we're tackling this afternoon, and I hope this eventually will be more the norm than the exception, so that our contributions are reported back. By doing that, even the more reticent of us may feel we have made a contribution to the Synod. I hope that the more each of us feels part of the proceedings, the more we will want to attend each time. We will be keeping an especially close watch on attendances in the future and regularly asking for feedback from people about their experience of our work together. This is our calling together.

To that end I'd like to give honour to those who are making "maiden speeches", and we should find a way of doing this. Also I hope that each of us will take the opportunity to become much more acquainted with an area or two of the diocese's life about which we know little about at present. We can all make a valuable contribution to the Synod's work through its committees and councils. We elect a standing committee which also has the privilege to be The Bishop's Council.

The work of the Synod isn't confined to these occasional meetings on a Saturday. The work of the Synod goes on throughout the year. There are nominations to be made to subsidiary bodies and elections to conduct. The committees aren't closed shops but offer opportunities to all and especially to those who haven't yet felt able to contribute. Of course, for all of us, new faces and old hands, the work needs our dedicated and consecrated time. The time spent in preparation is more than rewarded in the quality of the debate and the considered decision which follows.

So as we set off today, let us become what we are. People called to express God's passion for life by the way we engage in it ourselves. The work of this Synod is as important an expression of our discipleship as any other in the day to day life of the church. It will be a great place of encounter for us with our new bishop and his with us. It will be an opportunity for some people to develop new areas of ministry – and serving on Synod and its councils *is* a ministry. Synod will be where we take stock of our diocese and set off into fresh areas of Christian service, and all the while seeking to be faithful to the One whose passion for the world remains unwavering. That world is where his beloved Son became who he already was, and in which we are called to become who we are. So let's become who we are and look forward to significant blessings from God as we wrestle with difficult subjects.

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