

God is love

Bishop Donald's address to the April synod focused on the nature of God

I want to think with you, albeit briefly and inadequately, on a massive and wonderful biblical and theological truth which underpins everything we do and say and stand for. Three words which convey more than words can, which make us what we are and what we can be, which fill heaven and earth and explain the past, the present and the future. Three words which should mould and shape and form us, which should thrill us with confidence in this world and the real hope of glory in the next. Three words: God is love.

I'm not talking about the fact that God loves us or others, or the commandment for us to love him, one another and even ourselves. This is not about God's attitude or behaviour or what should be our attitude and behaviour. It is about God himself, his very nature and being. Not what he does but who he is. And derivatively, because we are made in his image and have become his children and are being conformed to his likeness, it is about who we are as well.

This love which characterises God and should characterise us,

is not, as human love so often is, a means to an end, but is itself the end, the goal, the perfection of life and being. We're more used to love as a means to an end and that's not necessarily a bad thing. We may act in love to others when we don't feel love for them in order to please God or even to demonstrate our love for him. That's often better than nothing and indeed may often be the best we can do. Some good



marriages and human relationships, including relationships within the church, may remain strong and stable because people act on the principles of love even somewhat against their nature or their feelings.

There is that strange but oft-

repeated command in Scripture to love: neighbour, fellow believers, husband or wife, children, enemy, stranger and the one who persecutes us. Loving in this way as a means to the end of following our Lord and his teaching is admirable and good. But the perfection we are called to, the likeness of Christ, is to love for love's sake because love is our nature as it is his. Love of this sort is not a means to an end but the end itself. It's love of this sort to which we're called. When we talk about God's love we may mean his love for us or for his creation. That is part of the truth; he does love us and his creation. But the truth is much deeper, because God's love existed and was perfect, complete and self-sufficient in itself before anything was created. The perfection of a loving nature demonstrated by loving relationships was there within the Trinity before the ages began.

Naturally though we look to the way God relates to us and to his world to see what it means that he is love. Sometimes it's said that at the heart of God's love is his self-giving. Yes, he gives himself to his creation, but also he receives from his creation. That's just as remarkable. We're familiar with the

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language of God giving himself; this focuses in the cross but is also seen in the Bethlehem stable, on the Day of Pentecost and indeed right through Scripture and Christian experience.

But the idea of God's love being seen in his receiving from us is less well understood, but it deserves attention. God does not need our love but he invites it. He does not need us as friends, but he offers us that status. He certainly does not need our money or our time or talents or anything else we can bring him, but graciously he seeks and receives those gifts. He doesn't need our striving for justice or peace in the world, or our standing with the poor and marginalized, the broken and the weak, but he loves to receive those offerings from us.

Perhaps above all he does not need our worship, our offering of praise and prayer, our sacraments and fasts, our churches or our liturgies: he needs none of this, but he deigns and rejoices to receive it all. All our offerings, polished and pathetic, half-hearted and half-baked, imperfect and sinful, he loves to receive. Just as a good parent delights to receive a gift from their child, so God delights to receive from us. It's his nature to receive as well as to give.

This giving and receiving is at the heart of God's love, and it makes him vulnerable. God's love is self-sufficient. He is complete in himself. He does not need us.

Sometimes people say that God made us because he was lonely. That's complete nonsense. He does not need us. But ironically and wonderfully his nature as perfect love makes him vulnerable. By his loving choice he becomes vulnerable to our ignoring him, our rejecting or sidelining him. He becomes vulnerable to our hatred of him, our despising him, our persecuting and torturing and crucifying him. And in his expressed desire to receive from us he makes himself vulnerable to our refusing him worship, or our abusing him by mean-spirited giving.

By identifying himself with us and looking for our commitment he makes himself vulnerable to the world's mockery at empty churches or uncommitted Christians. By citing our love for one another as proof of our discipleship he makes himself vulnerable to scorn when the

world sees how we can actually behave within the church. By marking us with his cross, washing us with his water, feeding us



Diocesan Synod was held, for the first time, at Malcolm Arnold Academy, Northampton.

with his bread and wine, anointing us with his oil, he makes himself utterly vulnerable when our lives do not demonstrate the holiness on which his reputation depends.

For centuries theologians have disagreed over the extent, if any, to which God can be said to suffer. Clearly in a sense if he is God, perfect, complete, infinite, all-powerful, he can't suffer or be harmed. But because he is love and that is his nature, he opens himself to us by giving and receiving, opens himself to our rejection or mockery or scorn, then until he comes as Judge he can be belittled, slandered and humiliated. It's in his nature to open himself up in this way, to make his reputation and his work in this world depend on the likes of us, and our commitment, our loyalty, our integrity, our giving, our holiness. He makes his reputation, his work, depend on us.

And if we are to bear his image and grow in his likeness we are to love in the same way, to give and receive without counting the cost, to make ourselves vulnerable, to become love as he is love.



Mission and Pastoral Committee changes

John MacMahon, on behalf of Bishop's Council, moved that the synod adopts the revised scheme for this committee which had been set out in a previously circulated paper. The committee, which is required by law, had been made up of the same members as the Bishop's Council and meeting at the end of its meetings.

In order to provide better strategic oversight to the mission of the diocese, it was proposed to form a smaller, separate

committee with a new constitution. Its members would be appointed, not elected, Bishop Donald said, in order to ensure a careful balance of necessary skills and to be properly representative of the spread of the diocese.

During the discussion, several queries over the details in the proposed constitution were raised and some changes were made. The proposal was carried nem con. The full four-page constitution can be seen on request to the Diocesan Secretary.

General Synod reports

Andrew Presland and Veronica Heald gave personal reports of the November and February General Synods held in London. Andrew pointed out that while a third of all general Synod members were new, half of the Peterborough contingent of six (not including himself) were new. The Synod, far from being a rubber-stamping body, had flexed its muscles on a couple of occasions by rejecting proposals put to it.

He added that a report recognised that the national church can seem to get in the way of mission locally, and that a huge amount of Christian activity

in the country goes on outside of, and without reference to, the national structures.

Veronica (new to the Synod) noted that the tone in the chamber was usually respectful, and she highlighted a maiden speech by Andrea Williams which championed the cause of Christians who feel threatened in the workplace because of their faith. She referred to the "vicious onslaught" from secularists and noted the need to avoid further division among synod members.

"Divided we shall only be weakened," she said.

Women in the Episcopate

Diocesan Secretary Richard Pestell reported that General Synod had referred two matters to the dioceses: one on women in the episcopate, and the other on the proposed Anglican Covenant.

Diocesan Synod will debate women in the Episcopate in October, and there will be an open meeting addressed by Bishop Donald on 6 July at St Andrew's Kettering, in which he would state the case for the various views "but I won't be telling you how to vote," he stressed. His notes will be available after the meeting both on the Diocesan website and also in paper form.

Deanery Synods are being asked to debate the motion referred

down by the General Synod before 31 August so that their votes can be taken into account in the Diocesan Synod debate. PCCs can submit comments by 31 August.

In answer to questions, Bishop Donald said that the Code of Practice will not be available ahead of the debate for legal reasons. He said that because no-one knows how people would react after the final vote in general Synod (many have yet to make up their minds), it was impossible to predict where the Church of England will be and what it will look like at that point.

The motion on the Anglican Covenant will be debated by the Diocesan Synod in spring 2012.

New bishops



The Synod was told that Canon John Holbrook (left) will be consecrated as the next Bishop of Brixworth on 2 June at Westminster Abbey, and installed in Peterborough Cathedral on 29 June. The diocese is in the process of buying a house for him and his family in Mears Ashby.

Bishop's Council had approved the appointment of Rt Revd Lindsay Urwin (right) as an honorary assistant bishop in the diocese. Bishop Donald stressed that while Bishop Lindsay's appointment was partly to provide Episcopal oversight for parishes which were formerly cared for by the bishop of Richborough, who had resigned, he was willing and available to minister in any parish in the diocese.

Not retiring!

To the amusement of the Synod, Archdeacon Christine said that she had heard rumours that she was about to retire - and they were totally unfounded, she stressed.

Dates of next meetings

There will be an meeting open to all church and PCC members on **Wednesday 6 July at St Andrew's Kettering, at 7pm**

The next business meeting of the Synod will be on **Saturday 1 October at Peterborough Cathedral, at 10am.**

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