

PRESIDENTIAL ADDRESS

Given at the Peterborough Diocesan Synod on Saturday 10th September 2016 by the Bishop of Brixworth

This time two weeks ago I was getting very wet at the Greenbelt Festival at Boughton House just a few miles from here. On the Sunday morning, when Archbishop Justin took part in the Communion service, I was thrilled that there were over 200 members of the diocese present. Some had camped for the whole weekend, some drove in each day, others just came on the Sunday morning, when entry was free. If you were among them – thank you.

Can I also say thank you to the diocesan team who voluntarily gave up part of their bank holiday weekend to staff our stall. We were involved in a number of life-changing conversations. The Greenbelt theme was "Silent Stars" and we had some real stars working on our behalf.

I've said before that I have a love/hate relationship with the festival. I love the buzz of so many enthusiastic Christians in one place, the music, the arts, the talks, the conversations. I hate the way it always challenges me. And what's really annoying is that they are always good challenges. I can't just ignore them! Essentially they are put me on the spot & ask "are you going to practice what you preach?" in other words: "Am I going to walk the talk" "Will I live with integrity, which means integrating what I believe and how I live?"

There were 2 particular challenges this year. The first was John Swinton talking movingly and helpfully about dementia which is one of the great fears and struggles of our time. His book "Dementia: Living in the memories of God" won the Michael Ramsey Theology Prize, awarded by Archbishop Justin.

And the other challenge was for me as a bishop and came from Canon Mark Oakley of St Paul's Cathedral who told a lovely story about meeting a shepherd whilst on a walk in Shropshire. He asked him about his crook, upon which bishops' croziers are modelled. "Do you really use the curved bit to hook the sheep and bring them into line?" The shepherd replied; "No. What I do is plant the crook in the ground. I lean upon it and my aim is to stand still enough for the sheep to come to me". Canon Oakley commented that he'd like to tell that story to lots of bishops! Being still is a challenge for many of us, not just bishops. There is huge pressure in a very busy world for the Church to be equally busy. But what many people are looking for is space to be still, space to reflect, to meet with others at greater depth and be open to the possibility of meeting with God.

30 years ago I went to St Paul's Cathedral for the consecration of a parishioner, Richard Harries, as Bishop of Oxford. It was an amazing experience and the highlight for many was the sermon by Canon Eric James which I've never forgotten and re-read it this week.

His theme was "only connect" taken from E M Forster's novel Howard's End. He spoke about the bishops' and the church's ministry of bringing things together, making connections, ensuring that those things which God hath joined together are no put asunder.

He talked of connecting the disparate parts of the diocese, rural & urban.

He talked of connecting rich and poor, the decision-makers and those impacted by those decisions.

He talked of connecting the Church and Young People – a generation who don't share their parents' atheism.

He talked of connecting universities and those whom education has failed.

He talked of connecting different Church communities – denominations and traditions within denominations. This week many shared in a glorious service in All Saints Northampton which brought together many traditional Catholic Anglicans and a significant number of our women clergy.

He talked of connecting faith communities – something I experienced most acutely during my time in Leicester.

He talked of connecting the Church with the "real" world.

He talked of connecting power and powerlessness – This was reflected in the presentation we've just seen from the Children's Society, for which I'm really grateful. There was a lovely moment at the licensing on Tuesday when just before the licensing, the church was totally silent when a lady came down the aisle, asking loudly for some water for her dog. The first person she tapped on the shoulder to ask directly was the Chief Constable! As they say; "once a copper, always a copper". He was brilliant, taking her quietly outside and helping her find some water.

He talked of connecting with everyone everywhere – I would add something about those far-from-occasional offices – weddings, baptisms and funerals – where we reach people beyond the regulars - the congregations at baptisms every week would fill Wembley stadium twice over. The other thing I would say about everywhere is that one lesson I'm pleased the archdeacon has not drawn from Team GB, is that we are not about to withdraw support from churches which aren't likely to win medals! We are here for everyone everywhere.

He talked of connecting the inner and the outer life, of prayer and action.

He talked of connecting gender. In a remarkably forward-thinking sentence, he said; "Recognise the masculinity and femininity in yourself, and you will want to see that masculinity and femininity in yourself recognised by the Church in the women and men who present themselves to you for ministry in Christ's Church".

He talked of connecting the nice bits of our personalities and the other bits!
Being honest with yourself when you don't feel like being nice to someone!

He talked of connecting the Church here with the church everywhere. I'm sure he would have had some pretty pungent things to say about Brexit. Behind much of the rhetoric of the last few months has been a sad desire to disconnect, to disagree with John Donne, former Dean of St Paul's, who said "No man is an island" – many want to say "O, Yes we are!" It does feel a bit like the old joke; "Fog in channel – continent cut off"! We are connected. We are part of Europe, we are part of a wider world, even if we do need to renegotiate our relationships.

In church terms – I'm proud of our overseas connections – Bishop Donald will visit Korea at the end of his sabbatical, I will be in Bungoma for their 100th anniversary celebrations and it's just been agreed that I will represent the Church of England at the 200th anniversary of the Church in South India. The first bishop of Kerala was from Peterborough and I will travel one of our curates, Shemil Matthew, the first priest from Kerala to serve curacy in England. We will also visit the worldwide leader of the Mar Thoma Church. Bishop Donald has close links with the Peterborough Mar Thoma community.

He talked of connecting the Church with the arts and with and with the great debates and issues of the day. Next week, the College of Bishops will be discussing human sexuality and my postbag suggests that we are anything but unconnected or irrelevant – people do care very deeply about these matters and care about the Church's stance.

He didn't talk of connecting our faith with our finance, the conversion of the wallet and the bank account! It's usually the last thing to come under the Lordship of Christ and so I welcome the "Giving for Life" campaign we're going to hear about from our Stewardship Adviser, Paul Adams this morning. As we look later at our diocesan budgets, these are not just financial statements – these are theological statements – they articulate our priorities and demonstrate our connectedness.

Finally, he talked of connecting the loneliness of leadership with the togetherness of the whole Church. I've been reminding congregations recently of the value of "sharedness" – being and doing things together.

That's what Synods are for; being connected, sharing one another's journeys and understanding, given expression to our common life ("you don't come to synod, you are synod"), taking counsel together and, hopefully, discern the will of God for our future.

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