

Presidential Address

Yesterday the Independent Commission into Child Sexual Abuse produced its report on the Church of England. It is a damning report of the Church's failure to deal with abuse in the past and our slowness in putting adequate structures in place to uncover abuse and to support survivors. There is much in our culture which still needs to change, not least a culture of deference towards those in authority. We now have a good culture of safeguarding in this diocese, thanks to Rebecca Boswell, her team and all our parish safeguarding officers. There can be no room for complacency. Our culture needs to change further. That needs to start with penitence and a profound apology to all those who have discovered that the church is not a safe place for them and whose trust has been betrayed. When the Church fails in this, we are not solely failing in our moral purpose and duty of care, we are betraying the Gospel we seek to proclaim. Safeguarding is a gospel imperative, and is fundamental to our common life and witness. I am really grateful that Rebecca is here this evening.

It seems strange that the last time we were able to meet as a Synod was in October last year when we had our friends from Rwanda with us. Since we last met, we have experienced the acute phase of the pandemic. We have gone through an unexpected revolution in the provision of online worship. But we have missed receiving the Holy Communion and we still have some closed churches. We will all know people who have suffered badly or fatally from the virus. You may be experiencing being furloughed yourselves or have faced unemployment. Our parishes have been magnificent in sustaining Ministry Share payments so far; but our investment income has been devastated because no dividends are being paid. Cashflow has been sorely

affected, which has led to a temporary moratorium on clergy appointments. None of us is unaffected by this crisis.

Abuse flourishes in the dark and robs people of their future. It could not be further from our godly calling to be generous and visible people of Jesus Christ. We have three imperatives in our strategy – ENGAGE, GROW, DEEPEN. I am interested to know from you how you have engaged with your communities through the pandemic so far. I would also be pleased to know more about how your leadership has grown and refined through the challenges of the lock down and how your faith has deepened and has been challenged.

We may feel as though our faithfulness is being tested like gold in the fire; but we are learning new ways to reach people and to be renewed ourselves, even if we feel rather exhausted. As I said to all our new deacons last weekend, the best posture to engage, grow and deepen for the world's sake is to be on our knees, because that is the closest we shall get to how Jesus sees the world from the Cross. Seeking to be fully alive in lockdown and in a prolonged period of anxiety does give us pause and has made us review our own spiritual resources and where our priorities lie.

Being committed to purposeful Christian living and radical discipleship makes us look afresh at our capacity and our courage to manage change and transformation. As a Church we will be facing significant questions about our identity and shape in the next couple of years, not least through deanery planning, our approach to clergy well-being and wider discussion about human identity and flourishing through the *Living in Love and Faith* materials.

The Spring of 2017 feels like a different age now. I was on sabbatical in Oxford, undertaking guided reading on character and virtue education. This was to undergird my work nationally and in the House of Lords, promoting holistic education in all our schools. I am reflecting on that learning I did back then because it has a real bearing on how we are as we continue to live under the scourge of the pandemic.

St Paul takes the virtues of the ancient world which only wealthy and aristocratic people were supposed to be able to live and identifies them as fruits of the Spirit. He follows the example of Jesus in democratising virtue in the power of God's love. It is not only our children who need to have their character formed. All of us need to be renewed in such a way that the fruits of the Spirit are evident in our lives. This is what enables us to missionary disciples and effective leaders in our communities.

Right now I don't suppose any of us feels very free, when we face restrictions of contact even with loved ones. And yet, Paul tells us in the same chapter that we are called to freedom in Christ. When a friend is described as a free spirit, we think of someone who sits light to the rules and may be irresponsible. That is not the kind of freedom Christians need to be revealing now or at any time. Our freedom in Christ is freedom to be like him in any situation.

When Jesus speaks the Beatitudes at the beginning of the Sermon on the Mount in Matthew 5, he is not issuing an ethical programme. He is describing attributes of himself that we are invited to live into ourselves. Even or especially in a time of suffering, people are blessed who have been sought out by the love of God and who yearn for the coming of his kingdom. The Beatitudes only make sense to those who believe that Jesus is the promised Messiah. In that way, we can trust that God's blessing is not pushed away or postponed by disease or by bad

government or by our own sadness. We all have reason to mourn the loss of loved ones and the loss of opportunities; but those who mourn are blessed, too, because the Word is very near us.

The 'poor in spirit' was very quickly adopted after the Resurrection as the title of followers of Jesus. They sought radically to live the qualities of the kingdom in the here and now. They began to transform the world by promoting humility and peace against arrogance and violence. They fed the poor who were previously no one's concern. They made slaves their equals in Christ. And all this only because they proclaimed Christ and Him crucified.

I have been proud of all that parishes have done to sustain worship and pastoral care. I am particularly proud of our church schools for the way they have supported our most vulnerable children all through the lock down and how they, with maintained schools, too, have responded to having all children back in education in spite of the challenges. They have lived out our belief that our church schools serve the common good.

The Bible contains within it apocalyptic elements, to be found in the teaching of Jesus himself, in Daniel and in the Revelation to St John, for instance. This often reflects the tough circumstances of the communities receiving this teaching about the end of things. As we face such tough times for our health and for the sustainability of our planet, we are made to think about ultimate things. We live the hope for this every Advent – not so far away now. It strikes me that we are an extended Advent mode at the moment. The IICSA Enquiry reminds us that we must be open to judgement. We are actively waiting on what renewal of the church, community and the economy might look like and feel like for all of us, but especially for the poorest in our midst. We have a good vision and

strategy to work with; but we are aware of so many unknowns. As we wait faithfully on God, we are not waiting in a vacuum. The kingdom of God is still growing and we are called to be the people of peace who tell others that God's kingdom is very near.

In re-setting diocesan priorities within Ely2025 I need to hear from you vignettes of the experience of your parishes during the pandemic so far. I would like you in your break-out groups to gather evidence of how you and your parishes have managed against our three imperatives – ENGAGE, GROW, DEEPEN – during the pandemic so far, What has gone well? What have you lost that you want back? What does not need to come back at all? Please appoint a someone in your group to take notes which can be sent to me for further reflection and consideration.