

RICKMANSWORTH DEANERY SYNOD: *'We are the body of Christ'*

SYNOD OFFICERS

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Minutes of the synod in St Mary's Church, Rickmansworth at 7.45pm on Tuesday 2nd February 2010

Present: About 100 people were present.

Apologies (5): Ann Badhams, Sally Morgan, Margaret Millar, Brian Smith, Margaret Roberts

The synod was in three parts.

A EUCHARIST SERVICE FOR CANDLEMAS

Led by the Revd Deborah Snowball, vicar of St Mary's, and the Revd Phil Osborne, Methodist minister at St Mary's.

AN ADDRESS BY THE RT REVD ALAN SMITH, BISHOP OF ST ALBANS

The bishop referred to his welcome service in the Cathedral when he shared some of his passions and concerns that he hoped would feed into our thinking for the next incarnation of *Vision for Action*. There were three in particular.

1 Going deeper into God.

He considered this by far the most important thing for us as individuals or groups - how to go on that spiritual journey to deepen our knowledge and our love for God, once described as a call to intimacy. There is, however, a paradox. We live in a society that craves for intimacy yet fears it. We prefer the less costly experience of skating on the surface. We have the experience but miss the meaning; superficiality is the curse of our age. God's call is always to go deep, and the bishop gave three reasons why we need to go deeper into God:

a. We have been created to worship. Worship is about attending to what we value and treasure most, but much of our worship is of the superficially attractive, unable to deliver what we most desire. The great temptations are to worship money, sex and power, which is why, in many parts of formal religious life, people take vows of poverty, chastity and obedience (the opposites). A perennial temptation is to redirect our worship away from the one focus who can meet us in the deepest level of our being. Only worshipping God can ultimately bring profound contentment. It comes through a redirecting of our passions. St Augustine found that the more his will was directed to God, the greater was his longing to go deeper into God;

b. Going deeper into God transforms us. When our egos are displaced, we are slowly but surely turned outwards to others. Impoverished worship brings self-centredness and God is enlisted to back that up. True worship of the living God, however, doesn't make us partisan; it gives us an inner strength and confidence to seek the stranger, the marginalised and the poor. Doing that makes us into rounder and fuller human beings;

c. Going deeper into God is good for society. Western governments are concerned at the growing lack of social cohesion and decline in social capital - the glue that holds a community together, with people willing to play a part in building a healthy society. There is a vast literature on social capital and what fascinates Bishop Alan is the direct correlation between it and churchgoing that has emerged from the research. Churchgoers are more likely to be involved in politics and their community eg as school governors or in Neighbourhood Watch Schemes. They are also more likely to give large amounts to charities. When questioned, they are also more likely to be willing to trust strangers and help them. In other words, churchgoing is good news!

It's easy to knock churchgoing, he said, but the truth is that it profoundly transforms both individuals and society as a whole. Churchgoing builds a strong civic society and we need to be more robust in saying so. We should stop apologising and instead give three cheers for our local worshipping congregations because these are one of the main means by which God is bringing in his Kingdom.

The bishop said it wasn't nostalgic to hark back to when Christianity was the norm. There was no going back to a mythical time when we think everyone went to church or when the Church as a whole was influential. But it is possible to dream of a future where we are making a more distinctive and significant contribution to the flourishing of society. We need churchgoers in order to do Kingdom ministry. And the only way that will come about is if we go deeper into God. The challenge is how to help people to pray and grapple with scripture. It is about the priority of continually helping those preparing and leading public worship to the highest standards, because worship is the shop front of the church.

2. The good news of Jesus Christ still has the power to transform communities.

Bishop Alan told how he was once given a weighty tome on the Church of England. When he came to a section on the Victorians, he was aware that, like most people, he had been put off the Victorians as they were portrayed as repressive, sometimes hypocritical. But within minutes he was gripped by the incredible story of an entire generation of Christians grasped with the conviction that God had called them to give themselves sacrificially to transform their communities, indeed the world. They built hospitals and schools and raised money to build churches and Sunday schools. Their legacy still exists in many of the urban areas that expanded during the eighteenth and nineteenth centuries. Also, they went to the four corners of the world to bring health and education. It was an exhilarating story.

The bishop said that we often miss its significance because we feel guilty about the colonial attitudes of some Victorians and the cultural baggage that went with that. We are always being told stories of how people followed in the steps of missionaries and exploited the countries and populations where they went. It's easy to criticise the Victorians, but Britain then was renowned as a country that took the lead in developing education and hospitals around the world at huge personal cost. Today Britain is seen as taking more than its fair share of the world's resources, a nation obsessed with consumption. Despite their faults, the Victorians were captivated with a sense that the world had been created by a loving God. They were the pioneers, explorers, iconic leaders, believing the world could be a better place, and they gave themselves fully and passionately to make it so.

Bishop Alan pointed out that there were now many good things going on. He mentioned Dollis Valley in Barnet, and South Oxhey in Watford; Open Door in St Albans (a night shelter and day centre to help those who are homeless); in rural Bedfordshire a vestry doubling as a village shop. In Luton is a breakfast club serving kids on their way to school; in Ware a holiday club for older people; in Stevenage the Living Room project seeking to release people from addictions; and in many town centres Street Pastors/Angels reaching out to young people. His questions were: How might such things become the norm in our congregations? How can we make a real difference for people of all ages and for the environment? How, can we, in partnership with others, be catalysts for change?

3. Making new disciples.

Jesus told his followers: 'Go and make disciples of all the nations'. Each one of us is here today, said Bishop Alan, because others have witnessed to the Christian life through their words and lives. A family member, teacher, vicar, neighbour - all passed the faith on, making us disciples too, to do the same. There were several dimensions to this.

a. The need for apologetics. This is the way that we, as Peter wrote, 'give a reason for the hope that is in us'. There are no knock-down philosophical arguments with which to convert a determined sceptic, but there is the need to explain when modern Westerners can believe with intellectual integrity. C S Lewis observed that 'nearly everyone I know who has embraced Christianity in adult life has been influenced by what seemed to him to be at least a probable argument for Theism';

b. The need to create opportunities. Through these, people can engage with the truths of the good news in a relaxed, reflective environment, eg through preaching and in discussion groups, Alpha or Emmaus courses;

c. The need to create space. Others need space to discover the truth of Christianity through experience; so spirituality courses, healing services, for example, are vital. Bishop Alan gave one illustration, alluding to the TV programme *The Monastery*, where five unbelievers joined the monks at Worth Abbey for 40 days. All struggled with the monastic routine and rebelled against it. Towards the end, however, a monk had been sitting with one of the men in silence for 2½ hours when he suspected that the truth of God was beginning to break into his consciousness. For the programme this was reduced to about a minute, in itself unusual. The unbeliever said afterwards 'Something happened; something touched me; something spoke to me, very deeply, very profoundly'.

There is no one way in which people become Christ's disciples. We are all unique, but the bishop said each church could benefit from a prayerfully worked-out plan whereby it sought to make disciples. *Mission Shaped Church* stressed the need to relate to people in their culture, listen to their concerns, and use the experience as a springboard for walking alongside them as they explore the faith. He longed for every church to be an increasingly open and welcoming community where a believer, a searcher or an agnostic, may find people who are on the spiritual journey.

QUESTION AND ANSWER SESSION

The bishop dealt with a variety of questions, the topics including education, Reader ministry, and social equality,

Gavin Collins thanked Bishop Alan for his address and his day-long visit to the Deanery, and the synod ended with the Grace at 9.30pm.

Distribution: All synod members, Nicky Pledger, The Ven Jonathan Smith, Jim May, Philip Lovegrove (General Synod link), Margaret Millar, Phil Osborne, and Gill Hulme (Methodist links),