

Bishop Trevor's Visitation Address **May 12th 2010**

If some pundits are to be believed, this address is like the 2010 General Election – it comes in two halves! But the good news is that both halves are on the same night and those of you who can currently only hear what I am saying will see me later!

The logistics actually help, because what I want to say centres on two texts:

Men of Galilee - why do you stand looking up towards heaven. Acts 1 10

and

When the spirit of truth comes, he will guide you into all truth. John 16 13

As I worked at this visitation Charge, with the added knowledge that it will be read by many more than the immediacy of our gathering tonight, one question has kept coming back into my thinking and praying.

What is the Church for?

While you might be forgiven in thinking “well, if you don’t know, who does?” It is not a question solely for the bishop regardless of how high or low a doctrine you might have of bishops and of this one in particular. It is a question for all of us as together we face the increasingly changing landscape, both of our common life in the diocese, and the wider society.

Because of this changing landscape, *What is the Church for?* is a question whose answers need to be continually reinterpreted if we are to respond to our calling to be the sort of Church of England that connects with and has something good to offer the people of our country. *What is the Church for?* is a particularly appropriate question at a visitation when together we not only recommit ourselves to be disciples of Jesus Christ, but willingly accept the call of the church to exercise a particular ministry within our shared life. I say “ministry” deliberately because I have always regarded those called to be churchwardens, as being a vital and necessary part of the church’s ministry, not only to those who worship with us but equally as we seek to serve in the world that God owns and loves.

The calling of our church is well captured in a declaration of assent which is rehearsed at every public licensing; a declaration by the way which is extremely useful in answering

those who sometimes dismissively ask “does the Church of England believe anything” as if the only possible answer can only be “no”.

The declaration reminds us that: “The Church of England is part of the One, Holy Catholic and Apostolic Church worshipping the one true God, Father, Son and Holy Spirit. It professes the faith uniquely revealed in the Holy Scriptures and set forth in the Catholic Creeds,

Then at its heart, as many of you will well know, are these words:

“Which faith – the faith of Jesus Christ – the church is called upon to proclaim afresh in every generation”

What have we to learn in our generation from those who heard the angel’s words - *Men of Galilee, why do you stand looking up towards heaven?*

If the disciples in tonight’s first reading could have answered for themselves, I suspect they would have spoken about fear; loneliness; rejection; uncertainty – the rollercoaster experience of discipleship. From the initial joy and excitement – the “come and follow me”; through the healing and the teaching into the darkness of human failure and betrayal – the agony of Good Friday – and onwards into resurrection light – and the restoration of broken relationships.

“Peace be with you” says the risen Christ. Then the invitation to those disciples to share afresh in his reconciling work.

“Feed my sheep”

But the rollercoaster goes on. Barely had this new phase begun before it is all change yet again...

“As they were watching, he was lifted up and a cloud took him out of their sight”

There is no comfortable and easy resting place for those called to discipleship and ministry.

What were they now to do? Who would sustain them and lead them into the unknown challenges which lay before them? It is only too easy to imagine why they gaze up into heaven, fearful, imagining and hoping that there would be some sort of further divine word or action, to calm their fears and answer their questions.

What is the Church for?

Since becoming your Bishop in February, as you will know I have travelled the length and breadth of the diocese in a series of sixteen deanery days, covering many miles and meeting over 5,000 people. Each of the days has been hugely varied and enormously enjoyable and stimulating. I am deeply grateful to everyone in every community who has taken the trouble to come and meet me and to care for me so generously (I will need to watch my waistline if such generosity is to continue!). Each day has given me opportunity to meet the local church, you, the people of God, witnessing the life-giving and life-changing gift of faith in Jesus Christ:

- A gift of faith worked at in faithful worship, prayer.
- A gift of faith revealing all the basics of Christian discipleship, the building of partnerships with the wider community, partnerships so vital and necessary for our common good.
- A gift of faith responding to human need be it through Cross-links in Dover or new housing developments in and around Ashford.

But I have also encountered and been challenged with some deep and searching questions about our continuing willingness or ability to be this sort of church: the sort of Church of England that connects with and has something good to offer the people of our country. The challenges in our way can seem immense: the challenges of buildings, human resource, and money. Challenges brought about by an increasingly sceptical and disillusioned society which seemly wants to replace the word of faith and hope with new commercialism, relativism and resignation. For some of our communities, the gulf between what they are about in worship and witness and those with whom they are trying to engage with is becoming increasingly wider. As someone said to me during the course of one deanery day, "we know we are out of touch but we don't know what to do about it".

As the first disciples discovered, gazing up into heaven was no way of finding the answer to their problems. The answers would not be found gazing up, but in looking out towards the world and its needs.

The simplest reading of the Gospel makes us aware both of the calling of the church and of its priorities. If it is to be faithful to the God who calls, the church is to be that gathering of disciples whose life together is so attractive that it draws others into his number. Yet at the very same time, that gathering of disciples avoids the risk of becoming an institution which exists solely for itself.

The God who calls us is a God of mission whose outgoing and extravagant love is always directed towards the needs of his world. The extraordinary reality is that he calls us to be agents of that love, even though he knows only too well that each and every one of us will fail both to understand and live out such a calling. So the Monday to Saturday ministries in which we are all engaged – ministries in work, in school, in leisure, in caring for others – that's what the body of Christ, his church, is called to look like. This body, diverse in its mission, witness and discipleship yet united, is actually, in the words of Bishop John V Taylor, "making Christ visible".

So what we do week by week in our worship and life, administration, doing things for the building, handing out books, reading lessons, loving pastoral care, effective preaching and good nurturing, all matter deeply. Please let me thank you and your communities again for all that shared and vibrant life – but the things we do week by week only matter if they enable us to reach out and connect to the needs and hopes of the world. The reason why so few teenagers and younger adults want to engage with us has something to do with the fact that they don't find us, the Church, to be of any use. We don't connect - and that's the fundamental challenge which lies before us as a diocese.

A Church rooted in God and for his world – that's our calling. But how are we to be that sort of Church? I will turn to that in part two.

When the spirit comes, he will guide you into all truth

We need to be a church deeply rooted in God and for the world. But how?

John describes the work of the spirit as declaring all that Jesus has received from his Father.

All that the Father has is mine.....he will take what is mine and declare it to you.

All that the Father has – the desire to draw people into a new relationship with him; a love which offers itself freely and without cost to every human being; the gift of reconciliation; the life lived in community which reflects the joy of his kingdom.

All this and much more is the gift from the Father through his son Jesus Christ to the church. Little wonder therefore that the early disciples wanted to domesticate such a gift, to bottle it, to limit its power to the life of their own community. But the spirit will never allow such self-limiting. The history of the church is the history of the spirit breaking down and breaking through every human desire to limit or control his Power. The spirit has always raised up new witnesses, new movements, new opportunities for growth and service.

This is as true now as it has ever been. But if we are to receive and respond to the spirit's gifting, we need ears, eyes, hands and hearts that are open to such out pouring. It is a life long process of listening and learning. But the change has begun. The spirit has been given to us as the first fruits of the Promised Land. It is just the beginning: the spirit is poured out and we begin to live life in the spirit; we begin to get on with what Christ began and what he left us to do.

The only thing we really have to do is to show what God is like. It is as simple as that. The only reason why we are the church – is to show other people what God is like.

To show him in ways which people can readily and joyfully recognise.

- The recreation of the world
- The healing of relationships
- Justice as in Christian Aid week

- Mercy as in supporting those who are hungry, thirsty, homeless and on the very margins of society
- The fellowship and love and forgiveness which we offer to those who come into our churches

When recognise these things happening in ourselves and in the world we begin to see the face of God. And that's what this admission to office as churchwardens is all about. Your desire and willingness to see the communities of our diocese live in such a way, learn in such a way, be generous in such a way can help those who come to us to indeed begin to glimpse the face of God. At times being a warden may seem to you to be a hard and thankless task, challenged as you are with the fabric of building; the cost of ministry; and the need to draw new people into increasingly complex and demanding leadership roles. But the way you simply live out the ministry or your office can lead others to that face of love and forgiveness that we have each known in the death and resurrection of Jesus Christ.

In these next few years we shall need each other even more. We shall need to learn new methods of collaborative ministry. We shall need to let go of some of those things of the past that shackle our ability to think and act differently. But in all of this we must never lose sight of the fact that it is God who calls and God who gives us all that we need to fulfil our calling.

In a prayer which follows your admission, we pray that this God will grant all who serve in the local church the gifts of patience, discernment and love, that we may care for what is entrusted to us, and encourage all in their daily Christian lives.

May the living God pour such blessing upon you.

It is unfinished, yes, but it is also unstoppable.

When the spirit comes he will lead you into all truth.