**Presidential Address – Diocesan Synod 18 March 2021**

In this short Presidential Address, I want to say a brief word about each of the three main topics on our agenda – all under the theme of disagreements, and thinking differently about how we approach them.

One of the very first PCC meeting that I chaired as a brand-new, green behind the ears incumbent resulted in two of the older men, both former factory workers, squaring up to each other in the middle of my lounge, ready to begin a fist fight. The subject of the dispute, if I remember rightly, was the question of who had been responsible for installing electric sockets in the wrong place in the church. This was my introduction to conflict in the church.

However, I want to invite us, at the start of this Synod, to think differently about conflict. We’re going to be discussing subjects on which we know there are disagreements within the church. And some of these subjects are very personal and will elicit a strong emotional response. So great care is needed. We are, in a very real sense, treading on holy ground, and I hope that we will all take off our shoes and walk gently.

It was Alistair McIntyre, author of the excellent book *After Virtue*, who wrote: "traditions, when vital, embody continuities of conflict." So, the Anglican tradition, which has survived nearly 500 years of turmoil is this country and around the world, and which is, I would argue, as vital and vibrant today as it has ever been, is a living embodiment of conflict. Anglicanism was born in conflict and for much of its early history, that conflict was expressed in violence – not mere fist fights, but people being burnt at the stake – but Anglicanism also then learnt the art of reaching settlements between those of opposing views – settlements which didn’t just stop the violence but positively encouraged learning and Christian fellowship. From the Elizabethan settlement through to the ordination of women, we’ve worked hard to find ways of including people whose views vary greatly from that of the majority. This is part of our gift to the worldwide church, and it is central part of why I am an Anglican.

So you need to know this about me. Unity matters to me. Holding together the church in all its diversity matters to me. This is part of my calling as a bishop. So when, at our last Synod, I made rather an off the cuff remark about church planting being at the very core of my ministry – a remark which has been quoted back to me several times by different people – I also want to make it clear today that unity is also at the core of my ministry. Cut me down the middle and you will find a love for the diversity of the church and a concern to protect the church from the forces which would tear us apart.

This is why I was so pleased to see a video recently produced by a housing developer on the Lubbesthorpe estate – a huge new housing estate to the West of Leicester – where Churches Together have jointed paid for and employed a pioneer minister to develop a new Christian community. Her work has been so appreciated locally that the housing developer is now helping to pay her salary. Church planting and unity combined!

But unity comes at a cost. Some people see it as a threat to their convictions, asking why the unity of the church should matter more than truth. Others believe that calls for unity can perpetuate oppression, asking why unity should be more important than justice. But of course, these are false opposites. It seems to me that Jesus’ great prayer for the unity of his disciples recorded in John 17, is also a prayer that they would know the truth and work for justice in the world. He seemed to think that it is possible to hold these things together – truth, justice and unity are all part of our calling. But the whole reason for his prayer, is that we, as fallen human beings, struggle to hold things in tension and struggle to know how to love one another when we disagree.

A brief word then, on each of the topics of our meeting this evening. Firstly, to say that we have deliberately including these three topics in the same meeting. This is not to imply that the issues are the same, but it is to say that there is a degree of commonality between them.

So firstly, I want to underline very firmly that these are all topics which effect all of us. This is not just about women, or LGBTI+ people or black, Asian and minority ethnic people – this is about all of us. So even as the debate has raged this past week about the safety of women on the streets, so we know that this is an issue which all men must play their part in addressing – it simply won’t do to say that not all men are violent - we are all involved in shaping culture and expectations of good behaviour – and therefore we all have a part to play in making our streets and communities safe. And the same is true of women’s ministry in the church, and of racism and of sexuality, relationships and marriage – this affects all of us, and we are all diminished if some are made to feel unwelcome, excluded or second class.

And secondly, even though I have said that these are all topics on which there are disagreements within the church, sometimes that disagreement isn’t recognised by everyone. So, the 2019 ordinations brought to light the fact that many people in this diocese didn’t know about or didn’t understand or simply assumed that we had moved on from the settlement that was reached in 2014 when legislation was passed to allow women to become bishops. Yet that settlement remains the official position of the Church of England – it is enshrined in legislation. However, my own mistake was in not thinking through the full implications of that settlement in relation to ordinations in particular. And I have apologised for that, and I can assure you that I am committed to working this through in much greater detail for the future. Yet there is also work to do to ensure everyone understands the settlement that agreed and acknowledges that there are still deep disagreements about theology and church tradition.

Similarly, we need to acknowledge that there is a basic disagreement about the nature and pervasiveness of racism within the church. It’s one thing for bishops like myself to call out racism and issue apologies, but there are some people in our churches – I know because some of them have written to me – who deny that there is any problem and question why we are making such a fuss. Even today, I saw at article in the Spectator accusing the Church of England of replacing the Gospel of Jesus Christ with the woke ideology of race. Again, I want to say loudly and clearly that I completely disagree with this. Racial equity is part of the Gospel of Jesus Christ, and our response to the Gospel starts with repentance, not self-justification or blaming others. So again, one of the clear action points put forward in this new racial equity strategy, is to help people understand the nature of institutional racism and its impact on global majority Christians in our churches, and indeed, its impact on us all.

And when it comes to questions around identity, sexuality, relationships and marriage there is basic disagreement about what sort of questions we are talking about. Some people see these as ‘first order questions’, in other words questions which get to the very heart of our faith and our identity, and therefore, it is simply not possible to disagree and still be in fellowship. Others recognise them as deeply personal, yet also believe that our identity in Christ transcends such differences – for in Christ “there is no longer Jew or Greek, there is no longer slave or free, there is no longer male and female; for all of you are one in Christ Jesus.” (Galatians 3:28).

So in all three of these areas, we need to recognise and understand the nature of the disagreements that we are talking about, understanding that these disagreements are not something to be afraid of, but all part of the living tradition of Anglicanism which has the potential to help us grow in faith and trust in God.

Beyond this, we also need to understand that these three topics are being handled in very different ways within the national church. So for women’s ministry, we have reached a clear settlement and the question is how it is implemented.

With regard to racism, we are not looking for any kind of settlement - there is now a zero-tolerance approach to racism within the church and the question is more about how we bring about change.

And Living in Love and Faith is very different again. This is a resource for teaching and learning. The 468-page book, the raft of academic papers on the website, and the LLF Course are all intended to resource our conversations with a better understanding of the Bible, theology, science, changing social attitudes and people’s experiences. We’re not yet at the point of finding any settlement of our different views on these matters but I remain hopeful that we will reach that point before too long. In the meantime, we must acknowledge that this is a painful place to be, that some people are feeling that pain far more acutely than others and therefore we must recommit ourselves to love and care for one another.

And I do want to add that I personally found the LLF course very helpful though also very challenging. Two members of the diocesan group which did the course together did not feel able to recommend it on theological grounds, yet they remain committed to the group and to further conversations on the subject.

So, in summary, there are three different approaches to these three different but related topics. That’s far from ideal and probably not what any of us would want. But we can only start from where we are, and then consider how we journey together in our exploration of what it means to be disciples of Jesus Christ, and part of this thing called Anglicanism, a vital tradition which embodies continuities of conflict. My brothers and sisters, the conflict is not going away – there will always be disagreements in the church – but our calling is to love one another even when, or especially when, we disagree.

+Martyn Leicester