Bishop Ruth’s Presidential Address

Diocesan Synod

July 28th 2021

This past couple of weeks I have been in Scotland visiting family. Our son Jonathan lives in Avoch on the Black Isle on the edge of the Moray Firth. The power of the sea is very evident there. The early morning sea ‘haar’ or ‘fret’ can give the impression of gathering gloom and little vision and yet it can clear to a bright sunny day in no time. The changing tides bring challenges for even hardened sailors. And yet just taking time to sit by the sea allows for restorative moments when one needs reminding of the power and presence of God.

One late sunny afternoon, saw Howard and I take a quiet hour or two sailing a little Drascombe boat around Chanonry Point by Fortrose, where many go to spot dolphins. There were lots of people gathered on the shore but I am not sure they got as good a view as us, as at least 4 dolphins jumped and dived before our little craft out in the Firth. It was a moment of wonder in the midst of a gathering wind, as the seas were stirring and the waves and tide turning. And I found it a little parable for myself following a year of change, uncertainty and increasing challenge. Sometimes it is whilst caught in the centre of what can feel overwhelming, that one sees glimpses of God’s grace.

I’ve been reminded of late of the story of the little fishing boat which the disciples took out on to the Sea of Galilee after a time of busyness. Jesus wanted to take some time out to pray and sent his friends on ahead of him across the water. On the journey a storm blew up and threatened to engulf them. Even seasoned fisher folk like themselves, took fright, especially as they saw a figure walking towards them on the water.

We have heard lots of stories involving the threat of water in recent days. Six people lost their lives in water accidents in that same heatwave in Scotland over a weekend. There were floods in Germany, China, London where lives were cut short. As we approach the climate change conference in Glasgow in November, we are aware that the world is at a pivotal point in terms of unexpected weather conditions and the impact that has on us all. Many of us will have experienced the sudden downpours and flash floods of the last day or two.

And yet, we have also seen examples in these past few days of how water has played its part in enhancing life. Those of you who have watched Olympic sports such as the triathlon, diving, sailing, surfing, rowing and swimming, will have seen how our athletes have battled with the elements, expended their energies, to reach for goals beyond their current experience.

Water is both life-giving as well as life-threatening. Water is both a destructive and yet an essential part of the stuff of life. You cannot have one without being aware of the other. They are two sides of the same coin. And that is something of the nature of the whole of our human experience.

Here in the diocese we are experiencing something of the turmoil of change, the opportunities it offers, and the risks and threats that come with that. In seeking to respond to a changing world with the new experience gained from going through a pandemic, we as Christian disciples have been seeking to refresh and renew ourselves as we journey in unchartered waters. We need to be both realistic about what is possible and yet confident in the hope we have in Christ. That is not an easy path to travel.

Tonight we will be looking at a number of items which call us as a diocese to face the future with realism. It is important for us to recognise the fragility of the shape and size of ‘our small boat’ as we cross the sea to where God is calling us. And so we shall be looking at our resources, both financial and in terms of people. We need to take stock and make changes in how we resource what are the essential tasks of our calling as disciples. This requires care and attentiveness to God and one another. We are beginning our financial budgeting process and we shall hear something of what principles are being followed and what that will require of us.

This past year has seen change too in the people who have served alongside us. Bishop Peter has now moved into retirement and a number of other key people have, or are, moving on to other roles. There have been a number of farewells in recent weeks, including to Sharon Kindleysides our CEO at the end of last month. It is always sad to say goodbye and yet an opportunity to mark our gratitude. Tonight it is good to have Roland Callaby with us to whom we owe a huge debt of thanks having served us as Diocesan Registrar so faithfully over the past 9 years. Many of you will have experience of Roland’s wisdom across the more than 40 years he has been with Harris and Harris and I have been personally grateful for the way in which you have so graciously steered me through complex and delicate matters. Chris Jones is taking on the baton from Roland and we are already finding that he is seamlessly picking that up, having such an excellent tutor in you Roland. Thank you!

I also want to thank those of you who, as this term of Synod comes to an end, will be stepping down as elected representatives. Thank you for all you have given! A very special ‘thank you’ to Mary Masters who has served us as Chair of the House of Laity for the past 6 years and intends not to stand again. You have been a wonderful friend and diligent support to so many here, Mary, thank you.

Losing the experience, wisdom and gift of such excellent people will cause us to sense even more the fragility of ‘our little boat’ and yet we mustn’t lose sight of the fact that new people now step into the gap and bring their own talent and offering.

As part of our desire for a realistic vision we need also to grow our understanding of the nature of the climate in which we live, the prevailing winds as it were. It is part of the reason for our concern to listen widely to others as we seek to put together our profile for a new Diocesan Bishop and we shall hear more this evening about how we can join in with that process. What sort of Church do we need to be in order to witness to God’s love within the world as it currently is? Are we really hearing the questions asked by wider society or have we become too insular in the way we shape ourselves as Church rather than seeking to live the kingdom of God within the world? There has been much recent criticism in the media and wider world in regard to how the Church has responded during this time of pandemic. How will we live, tell, share that story of God’s love in ways that will be relevant and scratch where people itch?

Tonight we have the opportunity to hear something of the stories of chaplaincy, which will help us to see and hear how brothers and sisters are sharing faith in new contexts, networks and communities, often outside of traditional parish structures. And perhaps this helps us to understand something of how our Christian hope is the counterpoint to a realistic assessment of our fragilities.

We may feel the constraint of our small resource, ‘our little boat’, but we have faith in a God of abundance not scarcity. We need to seek to recover the story of what it means to be “chosen, holy, beloved”, as our Dwelling passage in Colossians has urged us. To remember to whom we belong, the One in whom all resources can be found.

Although we may feel the anxieties of those disciples in their ‘little boat’, wondering if they could withstand the power of the gathering storm, it is a moment to look out and notice the one walking on the water towards us. The one who stretches out his hand to invite us to join him on the precarious path. Peter so much wanted to do just that. But in stepping out he started to doubt as he looked at what was holding him up and felt the swell of the waves. He lost his focus on Jesus and started to see all the problems around him. It was at that point of crying out for help that Jesus reached out his hand to hold him.

I pray that we will find our faith grows as we too step out onto the challenging path ahead. That we might fix our eyes upon Jesus, the one in whom all we need can be found, and the one who holds out his hand to lift us from the fear and anxiety that might seek to trap us.

+Ruth