

Synod 2025 Presidential Address

Around 2000 years ago, a disagreement about circumcision caused “sharp dispute and debate”ⁱ in the Christian community of Antioch, threatening to divide and destroy it. This unpleasant incident is recorded in Acts Chapter 15; but as the New Testament reveals, conflict has been a feature of Christ’s Church since its inception. It is no wonder that Nigerian theologian Gabriel Olutolaⁱⁱ describes conflict as “the hallmark of the church and its birthmark.”

The Church in Antioch appointed Paul and Barnabas and some other believers to seek the guidance of the the apostles and elders in Jerusalem. During what become known as the Council of Jerusalem – the first ever Christian Synod – there was much discussion but eventually consensus was reached, and a letter was sent to the Church in Antioch with the Council’s verdict on circumcisionⁱⁱⁱ. The letter contains the phrase “For it has seemed good to the Holy Spirit and to us...”^{iv} which has become a golden principle for all subsequent conciliar decision-making in the Church.

The recent episcopal interregnum was arguably one of the most difficult and painful times in the 49 year history of this diocese. It brought frustrations to the surface and sharp conflict between brothers and sisters in Christ. Exactly a year ago at Synod *it seemed good to the Holy Spirit and to you* that I should be elected as your bishop, and for the last 8 months it has been my great privilege and responsibility to serve this diocese as its shepherd.

We are now together for the first time at an in-person Synod. In such a dispersed diocese, this Synod is an important instrument of our unity, but it is costly in time and money and effort. I would like to thank all who have made personal sacrifices to be here, and to all who have worked so hard to arrange our gathering. In Scripture, sacrifice always precedes celebration, and my hope is that our Synod would be a celebration of our common calling and friendship in Christ at this crossroads of the world.

In the days ahead, I pray that despite the issues we are passionate about, we might be **most** attuned to what seems good to the Holy Spirit and to all of us, so that at the end of Synod we may have a clear sense that we have made decisions in line with God’s will rather than our own wills; and for the benefit of all, not just for the few.

The theme for this Synod comes from a well-known passage in Jeremiah:

‘For I know the plans I have for you,’ declares the Lord, ‘plans to prosper you and not to harm you, plans to give you a hope and a future.’^v

We begin this Synod trusting in God's good plans for our diocese, our parishes, and our very lives.

In our own planning, we have made this Synod shorter than usual to allow those who have Friday services to return home. But more time in our agenda has been given to discussing challenging issues, and efforts have been made to present them in different ways.

These changes reflect the requests of clergy and laity I have listened to during my travels arounds the diocese. In our attempts to do things differently, it is inevitable that we will have made mistakes, and for these we ask for your understanding and grace.

The term "flying bishop" might have been coined especially for the Bishop of Cyprus and the Gulf! In my 8 months in office, 6 have been spent travelling. I have visited all the parishes and countries in the Diocese except for the Canterbury Group and Yemen, both of which I will visit later this year. I have had the pleasure of visiting some parishes in the Gulf several times, and I hope to visit the parishes in Cyprus a bit more in the year ahead.

I have quickly learned that we are a diocese that is unknown and invisible to much of the Anglican world, and yet when people hear our story, they are fascinated and encouraged to know of our presence and ministry. In the last few months, it has been a great privilege to represent the Diocese internationally in our link diocese of Exeter; and in New York while attending the launch of the US Friends of the Diocese; and even in Sydney while on holiday there.

It has been a busy time since my consecration in Bahrain in May 2024, but by God's grace I am finding feet, or perhaps "growing into my hat" as one cheeky priest from the Gulf described it!

One of the questions I am frequently asked is, "What is *your* vision for the Diocese?" Clearly, the vision and direction of a diocese should not be set by one person or even a handful of people. Together as laity and clergy, we must do the challenging but necessary work of discerning God's vision together, and then by God's grace, aligning ourselves with this vision.

Through our Synodical processes I trust that we will do exactly this - and our gospel reading today reminds us not be sidetracked from what God wants to reveal to us by personal posturing or irrelevance.

In the interaction between Jesus and the Samaritan woman at Jacob's Well,^{vi} there is a fascinating interplay between revelation and obfuscation. In this interfaith and culturally provocative encounter, Jesus is determined to reveal who he is, while the

Samaritan woman seems equally determined to obscure who she is behind personal posturing and religious debate. This strikes me as a fitting metaphor for how the Church may sometimes miss what God is saying to us, in the clamour of personal agendas and overheated debates.

The encounter at Jacob's Well furthermore pierces social norms to reveal the broken humanity that exists behind personal, cultural and religious defences. In the Samaritan woman's backstory, we realise that however we may present ourselves to one another, we are fallen, imperfect people who are nonetheless known, loved and saved by Christ.

St John links the life-sustaining water of Jacob's Well with the living water of Christ^{vii}, and this imagery strongly suggests to me the ministry of our churches in the Gulf and Cyprus. Our churches are spiritual oases, whose springs are the living water of Christ, welling up to eternal life.

So, God's vision rather than my vision, but let me conclude by sharing what will be my priorities in the year ahead, over and above existing pastoral and synodical work:

- Our "fearfully and wonderfully made"^{viii} diocese will celebrate its Golden Anniversary in 2026. Over time all things change, and it is abundantly clear that the Gulf Archdeaconry is, for want of a better term, "the senior partner" in our Diocese. We therefore need to reflect the Gulf's status and importance in our constitution, structures, and planning.
- I will continue to build relationships with the clergy and laity of this diocese, and with interfaith, ecumenical, diplomatic and supportive partners.
- A senior diocesan leadership team must be appointed.
- Our tripartite link with the Dioceses of Exeter and Thika requires renewal and development.
- I need to create a healthy balance between travel, marriage, and home life.
- And I would like to challenge our clergy, in this year that we celebrate the 1700th anniversary of the Council of Nicaea, to take a break from the lectionary for a few weeks and to teach through the Nicene Creed. Challenge accepted? The Creed is the defining and foundation statement of our Christian faith, and although it is embedded in traditional Anglican liturgies, I know it is most often said without thought, and sometimes even without belief.

In the longer term, my hopes are that Cyprus and the Gulf will be able to celebrate its unique identity within the Anglican Communion as a Middle Eastern and International Diocese, and will come to be seen as a resource to the wider Church in interfaith, ecumenical, multiracial and multicultural practice and witness.

But what I long for most deeply, perhaps most naively, is for a diocese where conflicts would be infrequent and not intractable; where the word “diocese” could be said without contempt; and where the institution of the Church would enable clergy and laity to grow and flourish in their God-given vocations, rather than cause disillusionment, or crush the spirit.

This is just one synod — there will be others, and so we do not need to accomplish every aspiration in these three days - although we know how much God can accomplish in just three days!

We simply need to take the next steps, guided by that sovereign, unpredictable wind^{ix} of the Holy Spirit. In the words of the Venerable Bede, “Unfurl the sails, and let God steer us where he will!”^x

Welcome to Synod 2025!

ⁱ Acts 15.2

ⁱⁱ International Journal of Humanities Social Sciences and Education (IJHSSE) Volume 9, Issue 4, April 2022, PP 138-149

ⁱⁱⁱ Acts 15.23ff

^{iv} Acts 15.28

^v Jeremiah 29.11

^{vi} John 4.1-26

^{vii} John 4.10

^{viii} Psalm 139.14

^{ix} John 3.8

^x <https://quotefancy.com/quote/1087705/Venerable-Bede-Unfurl-the-sails-and-let-God-steer-us-where-He-will>