

Sermon for 50th Anniversary Service at AHBTT

All Hallows by the Tower has welcomed and gathered the people of the Diocese of Cyprus and the Gulf for 48 of its 50 years - thereby affectionately coming to be known as the Diocese's "spiritual home" in London. As a spiritual home it recollects the biblical Bethany¹ – a place where friends can meet with Christ and be refreshed on their journeys.

And so, my sincere thanks to the Rev'd Nicol Kinrade, and the Council and people of All Hallows for their ongoing generous hospitality. Nicol, I do hope that there will be an opportunity for us to welcome you and Paul one day in Cyprus or to one of the Gulf countries. And to make this invitation irresistible, know that there are excellent scuba diving opportunities within the Diocese!

Thank you to Canon Chris Butt and the Association of Friends for your prayer, fellowship, and support of the Diocese. We rightfully make much of Jesus' words to his disciples, "I do not call you servants any longer... but I have called you friends..."² The intimacy of Bethany was extended to the disciples at the Last Supper, and then to all disciples who in obedience to Christ love one another as he has loved us. The Friends of the Diocese can be counted on for their Christlike love - in word and deed - for our diocese.

And thank you to all who have made long journeys to be with us today, and for those who have worked behinds the scenes to prepare for today's service.

At some point, each one of us here has come into contact with the people and ministry of the Diocese of Cyprus and the Gulf; and I am convinced that that experience will have changed and enlarged our thinking and spirituality.

We have lived outside many people's frame of reference, and so we might dine out on stories of iftars and majilis; of kite-flying on Green Monday and walking in the footsteps of St Paul and St Barnabas. The Arabic language or a muezzin calling people to prayer does not jar or offend us – rather they evoke the sounds and prayerful rhythms of warm places that were once home. The Byzantine interior of an Orthodox Church will embrace rather

¹ e.g. Matthew 21:17, Mark 11:11-12, 11:19

² John 15.15

than overwhelm us. A few words of greeting or thanks learned in any one of our multicultural congregations now gives us an opportunity to connect with a stranger far from home who is amazed and pleased to be seen and acknowledged.

Living and ministering in the Diocese can be extremely challenging but equally rewarding. I can think of no other Diocese that offers a context in which such theological and cultural diversity can be encountered, and so our association with the Diocese is a blessing and a gift; and our minds, hearts and theology will have been irrevocably shaped by this experience.

Let us turn to our Scripture readings, which are those selected for the opening service of our Jubilee Synod in Bahrain.

In the first reading, the priestly scribe of Leviticus calls on his people to sound the trumpet to hallow the fiftieth year, and to proclaim a year of Jubilee. This service is the first sounding of the trumpet to hallow the fiftieth year of this Diocese! While we acknowledge that there has been an Anglican presence in the Middle East for at least 150 years, and that there have been Arab Christians since the Day of Pentecost³, our Province and Dioceses were constituted in their current form fifty years ago.

From its inception, the Diocese of Cyprus and the Gulf had an improbable quality to it:

- It is the largest diocese in the Province of Jerusalem and the Middle East: 12 times larger than the Diocese of Jerusalem, and twice the size of the Diocese of Iran.
- It is the 2nd largest Anglican diocese in the world after the Diocese of Europe.
- In terms of landmass, it covers half of the Middle East and is 15 x times the size of the UK.

The Diocese is constituted of Anglican Churches in 10 countries or jurisdictions, 9 of which are Muslim-majority, and 8 which operate under Sharia law. In every country in which we are present we have no *right* to practice our faith - we are the guests of gracious, far-sighted and tolerant rulers, churches, or religious authorities. To be an Anglican Diocese in this complex, vast and politically volatile context seems improbable indeed.

³ Acts 2.11

Improbable merges with the seemingly impossible because throughout its history the diocese has operated on a shoestring budget. It is served at any one time by about 23 stipendiary clergy, 3 diocesan office staff, 2 part time archdeacons and a bishop. The majority of our parishes are marginally viable. Very often our diocesan life evokes a sense of a David and Goliath struggle for survival - or offering a boy's lunch to feed a multitude. We suffer regular existential pangs. But here we are, and here we have been for 50 years, determined to embrace opportunities, remaining united in diversity, and driven and enriched by a common mission. And so, we must sound the trumpet this year and express our deepest gratitude to God for bringing our improbable diocese through impossible circumstances "safe thus far".⁴

The second and rather long reading was chosen to remind us rather pointedly of our primary identity as "children of God" - people whose spiritually inspired behaviour can reveal the nature of our Heavenly Father to the world. At the beginning of Synod such reminders are particularly needed... but "at all times and in all places" we must take the quality of our witness to heart.

In the context of Cyprus and the Gulf, there is another layer to this: we are not allowed to proselytise - to attempt to convert others to the Christian faith or to the Anglican tradition - and this means that opportunities to talk about our faith are extremely limited. Our behaviour thus becomes a window into our faith; our conduct demonstrates our values; and our lives become the only bible some may ever read.

This reading contains the evocative line, "...we are God's children now; what we will be has not yet been revealed..."⁵ As Christians, our deepest identity is found in being children of God; as an Anglican Diocese we have been on a long journey to understand who we are as God's children in this specific context.

In 1976 the Archbishop of Canterbury ceded Metropolitan authority over our Province to its Central Synod. At that point in time Cyprus and the Gulf ceased being the Church of England in the Middle East and became a Middle Eastern Anglican Diocese. The demographic shifts of the last 5 decades have further shaped our distinct identity. Today, less than 5% of the people of our Diocese are from Europe or the West. 70% are from the

⁴ From the hymn "Amazing Grace"

⁵ 1 John 3.2

Indian Subcontinent, 13% are from Southeast Asia, and 8% are from Africa. The influx of international Christians is matched by a disturbing exodus of indigenous Christians from the region. Nonetheless present estimates suggest that there are between 3 and 4 million Christians in the Gulf. Again, we bear witness to a reality so often hidden in the world - a flourishing international Christian presence in the countries of the Middle East.

The Gospel reading reminds us as individuals and as a diocese that we need to be open to the regenerating, reforming new wine of the Holy Spirit. And this openness will be sacrificial and contentious because most of us want the security and comfort of “business as usual”.

Wherever the Holy Spirit brings new life, there will be a basic tension between continuity and transformation. We will wrestle with questions about what is essential in “the former things”⁶; what is valuable in the new, and how these can be blended into something recognisable and fit for purpose. New wine necessitates new wineskins - new internal structures, new policies and practices, in order to hold this precious Anglican space in the Middle East.

Indeed with our transitory communities and in a rapidly changing world, we must be a Diocese that can be flexible, adaptable, and resilient. I hope that you will be encouraged by the proposals that will be tabled at Synod next week through groups such as the Bishop’s Task Force. They are, I believe, a reflection of an openness to God’s guiding and renewing presence.

What of the future? We must of course avoid any cheap or hubristic predictions. We know that we will always be called to follow Christ, and in the power of the Spirit to demonstrate the Father’s love for the world. To do this in the Middle East will require constant discernment and adaption but there is every reason to believe that we are in a context and era of growth not decline.

Perhaps it is the rancorous, divisive and self-centred politics of the present moment, but something that Kenneth Bailey, a former Canon Theologian of our Diocese, wrote struck me very forcibly this week: “...Jesus is a reconciler of people, not a divider. He wants to bring people together, not finalise separations...”⁷

⁶ Isaiah 43.18-19

⁷ Jesus Through Middle Eastern Eyes: Cultural Studies in the Gospels, p. 300

This is what the people of the Diocese of Cyprus and the Gulf do naturally and daily. We work at gathering and connecting people. Our well-governed, doctrinally moderate, via-media Anglicanism fits surprising well into the religious landscape of the Middle East. We are dedicated and respected interlocutors between Eastern and Western Christian Traditions, and between Islam and Christianity. Our parishes are gloriously international. We offer something incredibly rare and precious to the Anglican Communion and the wider world that counters disinformation about the Middle East and divisive rhetoric. It is possible to have positive interfaith and ecumenical relationships; it is possible for parishes to have 58 different nationalities worshipping in them all at one time; ⁸ it is possible for streams of living water to flow in desert places. ⁹

I believe that we are called to bear continued witness to this reality: to what is possible, however improbable by the grace of God.

“Now to him who by the power at work within us is able to accomplish abundantly far more than all we can ask or imagine, to him be glory in the church and in Christ Jesus to all generations, for ever and ever. Amen.”¹⁰

⁸ Church of the Epiphany, Doha

⁹ John 7.38 & Isaiah 43.19

¹⁰ Ephesians 3.20