

## **Synod Presidential Address**

Texts: Leviticus 25.8-12; 1 John 3.1-24; Mark 2.18-22

### **Welcome**

To all our Synod representatives, observers, honoured guests, visiting bishops, and ecumenical and interfaith partners, a very warm welcome to St Christopher's Cathedral, and to the Kingdom of Bahrain!

As we begin our Synod journey together, it is my deepest prayer and hope that this will be a time of transformative encounter with God; renewal of our bonds of affection; inspired decision-making; and celebration as we give thanks to God in this Jubilee Year.

### **Address**

I would like to begin this Presidential address by asking you to do something. If you wear a wristwatch, can I please ask you to move it from the arm that you normally wear it on to the other arm. I will explain the reason for this later!

In 1965 a film about Jesus entitled "The Greatest Story Ever Told" was released. And I think we would all agree with this description of the Gospel: it is the greatest story ever told; a story that is more than a story because it has led us into relationship with God through Christ Jesus.

I have recently come to think that the Diocese of Cyprus and the Gulf is one of the greatest stories never told! This was brought home to me following a recent discussion with a young man from an Anglican diocese that will remain nameless, who felt that God was calling him to minister in the Middle East. He approached his DDO - the diocesan director of ordinands, who promptly told him that there were no Anglicans in the Middle East. Not to be deterred the young man googled, found us and had a very positive conversation with me. He was astounded to find a 50-year-old Anglican Diocese here, with its own vocational programme...!

As a somewhat invisible and unknown diocese in the world, how can we our story to others? I believe that our story begins with how different, how unusual our diocese is compared to others.

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On the Feast of the Epiphany fifty years ago, the Archbishop of Canterbury handed over his authority to the Provincial Synod of Jerusalem and the Middle East, and in that moment a new autonomous Province of the Anglican Communion in the Middle East was created; and the Diocese of Cyprus and the Gulf was born. It is a diocese that has many astonishing features:

- It is the largest diocese in the Province of Jerusalem and the Middle East: in area, it is 12 times larger than the Diocese of Jerusalem, and twice the size of the Diocese of Iran.
- In fact, it is the 2<sup>nd</sup> largest Anglican diocese in the world after the Diocese of Europe, and has 3 time-zones.
- In terms of land-mass, it covers half of the Middle East; is about the same size as India, and is 15x larger than the UK.
- We have churches in 10 countries or jurisdictions, 9 of which are Muslim-majority, and 8 which operate under Sharia law. In every one of these countries, we have no right to practice our faith - we are the guests of gracious, far-sighted and tolerant rulers, churches, or religious authorities.
- We encompass the biblical land of Cyprus – the birthplace of Barnabas, the location of Paul and Barnabas' first missionary journey, and the final resting place of Lazarus.
- And despite what might seem to be geographic and contextual challenges, we are not a diocese in decline but one with strong and growing churches especially in the UAE, and opportunities for new churches in Northern Iraq, Oman, and other interesting places. There are also currently around 15 people in our vocational and ordination programme and several on a waiting list.
- We provide a spiritual home for indigenous Christians in Iraq, and for international Christians flowing into the Gulf and to a lesser extent into Cyprus. The majority of our parishioners come from the Indian subcontinent, Southeast Asia, and Africa, and our congregations are

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thus incredibly diverse: at the Church of the Epiphany in Doha there are no less than 58 different nationalities worshipping together. Such diversity in churches is unknown in most parts of the world - and indeed would seem almost unbelievable to many.

- And so, I suggest that our Diocese serves as a powerful illustration to the Anglican Communion and to the world, of how multinational churches can exist and flourish, and do so in the Middle East. Perhaps it is fair to say that we go beyond illustration to a prophetic witness that confronts the many ignorant and toxic narratives about diversity, co-existence, and religious tolerance in the world today.

What is improbable about our diocese intersects with what is seemingly impossible, because throughout its history the diocese has operated on a skeleton staff and 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. Very often our diocesan life evokes a sense of a David and Goliath<sup>1</sup> struggle for survival - or offering a boy's lunch to feed a multitude<sup>2</sup>. We do experience existential pangs every so often! But this is our story - the story of God's provision and faithfulness to indigenous and migrant Christians at the crossroads of the world.

Let's now turn to today's readings.

In the first reading, the priestly scribe of Leviticus calls on his people to sound the trumpet to hallow the fiftieth year<sup>3</sup>, and to proclaim a year of Jubilee. This year our Jubilee Celebrations hallow the fiftieth year of this unique Diocese, and express our deepest gratitude to God for bringing our improbable diocese through impossible circumstances "safe thus far"<sup>4</sup>.

I invite each parish of the diocese to find its own and authentic way to celebrate how it has made Christ known during the last 50 years. Some parishes have already begun to plan special Golden Anniversary services; and I have also heard of

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<sup>1</sup> 1 Samuel 17

<sup>2</sup> John 6.1-15

<sup>3</sup> Leviticus 25.9-10

<sup>4</sup> From the hymn, "Amazing Grace"

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- Bible studies on the biblical concept of Jubilee;
- Displays of photographs and artefacts from the last 50 years;
- Former parish priests being invited to preach and offer their memories
- And of “1976 parties” where people will come dressed in the style of that time!

How the trumpet is sounded in your context is entirely up to you - but I hope that you will share your story through our Diocesan Facebook page and website so that throughout the year we can see a rolling celebration of gratitude and praise to God.

The second<sup>5</sup> and rather long reading was chosen to remind us of our primary identity as “children of God” - people whose behaviour can reveal the nature of our Heavenly Father to the world. In a context where we are not allowed to proselytise, our behaviour in our churches and in society becomes the only bible that many will ever read.

At the beginning of Synod I would like us to take this reading to heart. We live in an era when powerful algorithms deliberately polarise and antagonise people, propagate outrage and misunderstanding, and celebrate the “othering” of people. One wonders who benefits from such divisive conditioning? It has seemed at times if such algorithms have infected this Diocese, corrupting our perceptions, corroding our trust, pushing us suspiciously apart. I wonder who benefits from this? My hope is that this precious (and expensive) time together would be an opportunity for us to discern what “seems good to the Holy Spirit and to us” (Acts 15.28) and to work together as a team of laity, clergy, and bishop. None of us is smarter or more spiritual than all of us!

The epistle contains the provocative line, “What we are becoming has not yet been revealed<sup>6</sup>”. We are at an inflection point in the life of this diocese; a once-in-a-generation moment where we will make decisions that will determine the priorities, direction, and shape of the Diocese for years to come. But the question is what are we becoming? What is God revealing of his ongoing call? Where are we going? Quo vadis? The answer to these

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<sup>5</sup> 1 John 3.1-24

<sup>6</sup> 1 John 3.2

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question lies with us, with our discernment of what God is calling us to and our synodical process.

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 such openness will be sacrificial and contentious because most of us desire the security and comfort of “business as usual”, old wine, old wineskins. We will wrestle with questions about what is essential in “the former things”<sup>7</sup>; what is valuable in new structures, policies, and practices and how these can be blended into something recognisable and fit for purpose.

And so, back to our wristwatches for a moment. Moving them to our other wrists is unwelcome and uncomfortable change. But I challenge you to keep your watch on this wrist just for the duration of Synod and see how you feel about it in three day’s time. The chances are that you will find yourself adapting to this change. Let us not fear the changes, the growing pains, of a diocese that is open to the Spirit of God. What God changes, he transforms, and blesses.

Last year, as we celebrated the 1700th anniversary of the Council of Nicaea I asked the clergy to preach and teach on the Nicene Creed - to teach people about our historic faith. In our 50th Year, I would like to request that clergy spend time teaching about our Anglican tradition. We are custodians and practitioners of a great Christian tradition that is known for its moderation, dignity, and beauty. It is spiritually, theologically, and liturgically, rich. But like many fine things, it needs some explanation to the uninitiated.

I have known people who have walked into an Anglican church, and found it incomprehensible – simply because they were unchurched and didn’t have the biblical knowledge of the generation before them. And so they went to a “pop-up” church that was friendly and easy to understand but, in my opinion, offered spiritual “fast-food”. Friends, please teach and reveal the treasures of Anglican liturgy, the Eucharist, and our polity to your congregations, and here is a prediction – I believe this will result in the spiritual and numerical growth of your congregation!

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<sup>7</sup> Isaiah 42.9

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During the course of this year, please also prayerfully consider how the Church can theologically and practically respond to three major challenges:

1. The first is climate change. Kuwait is one of the countries in our Diocese, and it is currently listed as the hottest country in the world. I can believe that - having experienced temperatures in the mid 50s during a visit last summer. Such temperatures are driving migration and causing concerns about scarce resources.

2. Secondly, our world order is being violently reordered. All the pragmatic and ideological alignments that we have taken for granted are now being ruptured, and this makes an already volatile part of the world more unstable. We are told by military and political commentators that we are in a pre-war era and so we must also consider what an outbreak of global conflict could mean for our diocese.

3. Finally, we need to consider the challenges that “Large Language Models” - that is Artificial Intelligence pose. I think I have already heard my first ChatGPT sermon delivered by an anxious priest trying to sound more prepared than he was, but more importantly we are rapidly entering an era where there will be intelligence without soul or morality. We are beginning to see how the arc of the AI boom is bending towards domination and profit – not human welfare. The Church needs to speak truth to this power.

Our Province and Dioceses were born on the Feast of the Epiphany in 1976, and I find much in the journey of the Magi that describes the life and ministry of this diocese.

- The Magi travelled from afar – so have the people of this diocese.
- The Magi represent God’s plan to call and save the Gentile world. This diocese presents and reveals Christ to the nations of the world.
- The Magi brought gifts to the Christ-child. We bring our gifts to serve Christ in the churches of the diocese. *(contd next page)*

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- The Magi were drawn by a star. We are called to “shine like the stars”<sup>8</sup> and “let the light of Christ shine before people, that they may see our good works and glorify our Father in heaven”<sup>9</sup>.
- We are an Epiphany Diocese and Epiphany people.

Amen.

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<sup>8</sup> Philippians 2.15

<sup>9</sup> Matthew 5.16