

Presidential Address: General Synod July 2020

Archbishop Stephen Cottrell

First of all a very warm welcome to the York Synod - though I'm sorry you are only here virtually. I very much hope that next year we can gather in person.

Could I also take this opportunity to pay tribute to my dear predecessor, Sentamu, thanking him and Margaret for all their faithfulness. I receive the baton from a very great Archbishop of York through whom God was very clearly at work. Which leads me to scripture -

In Galatians 1.16, Paul speaks of the God "who set me apart from birth, called me by his grace, and was pleased to reveal his son *in me*"

Some translations of the Bible lose their nerve at this point and say "reveal his son *to me*" instead. But the Greek text is clear: God is revealed *in* Paul, and as Rowan Williams said in a retreat address to the last Lambeth Conference (when we were able to have such things): "every calling – every vocation in the Church of God - is a calling to be a place where God's son is revealed."

This seems like a good place for me to start. Over the past few months we have all experienced a stripping back of our lives. This has been painful and illuminating in equal measure. Denied access to our church buildings, having to fast from the sacraments themselves, learning how to live with each other without being able to meet or touch, enduring long periods of isolation, we have come face-to-face with ourselves and through that discovered with alarming clarity that we are the places where God is to be encountered and it is in us and through us that God can be made known to others.

Do not misunderstand me: I hugely miss our church buildings and our liturgy, just as I also miss going to the cinema and eating in restaurants, or just having a coffee; and I grieve for the fact that I was not able to say goodbye to the Diocese of Chelmsford in the ways I wanted, nor am I able to hug my new grandson without donning a mask; and I cry out for the pain of all those socially distanced funerals, the thousands of people who have died alone, the baptisms, weddings and ordinations that have had to be postponed; the economic hardship which is around the corner and the devastating impact of this pandemic upon the whole life of our world. But neither can I deny, that it has forced me to encounter things about myself which I had allowed to remain hidden behind the security of the things I have had to relinquish.

The journey of the Christian life is a journey where one by one we learn to let go of things that we thought were so important until there is only Christ. Or should I say only the Christ who has through his death and resurrection and through the outpouring and indwelling of his Spirit revealed the God who is community and invites me – and you and everyone – to find ourselves in him. And this, of course, is the heart of our message: Christ can save us and make us whole.

In the desert monasteries of the third century, Abba Moses instructed the novices, 'go to your cell, and your cell will teach you everything'. We, the Church of Jesus Christ is being

purged. We are being asked to consider what really matters, and where shall we put our trust, and upon what things shall we depend.

Therefore this never was and never should be a weary debate about whether we should be the church online *or* in our buildings. Just as there cannot be two Christs, so there can only be one Church. But I believe that God is calling us to be a church of glorious and profligate diversity. Though, like all outrageously beautiful buildings, this must be established on the firmest foundations.

As many of you will know, I have been asked to lead a process in our Church that will map vision and strategy for the next 10 years. The vision is the easy bit. It is unchanging. It is what God has done for us in Jesus Christ and continues to do through the power of the Spirit, offering to the whole world a vision of a new humanity and the invitation to that fullness of life which we find in God. We, followers of Jesus Christ, we are the ones in whom this life is revealed. We are called to live it and share it joyfully. Spirituality and evangelism go together. We give from the overflow of what we have received.

However, in every age, and with both the limitless resources of the spirit and the very constrained resources of our own time, abilities and finance we have to make decisions about what our priorities should be and how they will work themselves out through the complex and dispersed diversity of a church like ours.

There have been one or two speculative reports in the press about what this group may or may not be proposing. What I can assure you at the moment is that we have reached no conclusions but hope to bring to this Synod next year a number of propositions to discuss, and this is where decisions will be made.

At the moment I am engaged in a very wide-ranging discussion with people from all across the Church but with a particular determination to draw in and listen to the voices of younger Christians and all those whose voices are not usually so easily heard in a Church which is still overly dominated by a particular - usually white, usually male, usually with a certain sort of education, usually over 60 - kind of voice.

Some of the conclusions we will come to are not hard to predict. I'm sure we will be asking ourselves to have a renewed intimacy with God; a deeper love of worship and the sacramental life; a greater commitment to scripture; and a desire that every Christian person becomes the place where God is revealed. The hard thing will be working out what we can and should do with the time and resources at our disposal, and therefore, also, what we might have to stop doing.

I am excited by this work. Please pray for me and for those with whom I am working. And please be patient.

To give you a taste and flavour of our longings for this work, I have asked three members of our co-ordinating group to share a one-minute hope for our Church as we move forward.

And I have also asked Archbishop Justin who has commissioned this work to say a few words. In sharing the presidential address in this way, I hope that we can begin to model a more collaborative style of working. Jesus sent them out in pairs, and this is how Justin and I intend to work. Together. This is how God invites the whole Church, setting all God's people free to work together – bishops, priests, people, even the General Synod.

Rev Dr Sharon Prentis

My hope as we undertake this process, is that it would allow us to discern what the Holy Spirit is saying. That by being attentive to a variety of voices from different backgrounds, especially those who are not normally part of our consultative processes, we can truly be an intercultural, that is a Church that represents all cultures, ethnicities and backgrounds, an intergenerational, a Church of all ages, and an inclusive Church, in Christ.

Rev Ben Doolan

It has been a real privilege to be part of the group that's been having some preliminary discussions about where we feel God may be calling us as the Church of England over these next few years. It's my hope and prayer that, as God's chosen people, we will be more joyful, more confident and more willing to take risks for the sake of the Good News of Jesus Christ and the Kingdom of God. One of the things that has emerged as we've been discussing together is that children, young people and young adults must be at the heart of everything that we do. This is not because we want to see the average age of the Church of England come down, although we do, it's not even because these people are the Church of tomorrow, but it's because we believe passionately that children, young adults and youth are the Church of today. They have so much to teach us, they have so much experience to bring, and in this new world that we find ourselves in, having them not just play a part but be at the centre of our life is gonna be invaluable to us. We long to see this generation come to know the Good News of Jesus and play a full part in the Church of England.

Rt Rev Dr Emma Ineson

I'm delighted to be helping with this process of discerning a refreshed vision and strategy for the Church of England for the next ten years. And I think a key theme that has already emerged for me is the need for an absolute focus on lay discipleship. Above all, I think we need the Church to be the Church, by which I mean all of God's people, mostly lay, some ordained, released, inspired by the Holy Spirit and growing as disciples of Jesus, living out Christian faith in everyday lives, wherever and however God calls us. And I think if we saw this truly begin to happen, the world and the Church would be transformed overnight. Yes, we need to look at governance and structures and stuff, but this is about the basic idea that God's people will find a new confidence in the Bible, discover gifts and ministries, and be able to respond to the challenging issues of now - racism, mental health, the environment - with a Christian voice. So from the very oldest to the very youngest, my prayer is that through what emerges in this process, God's Church will rise up and be who she's meant to be, not so that we'll look great, but so that everyone will come to know that Jesus Christ is Lord. To the Glory of God the Father.

Archbishop Justin Welby

Stephen, it's an extraordinary feeling after all these years to find myself with a different Archbishop of York and, like you, I want to start by saying how grateful I am to Sentamu. What huge shoes you have to fill, as I do with my predecessor being Rowan. And I want to thank him now too, for the advice he gave me over the years, and the guidance he gave me and the inspiration he gave me. But I am fascinated by what you're saying – I love that phrase that I keep hearing you use, from Abba Moses: 'Go to your cell and your cell will teach you everything.' And this picture you've painted in the first part of your address, about God stripping everything away from us – it reminds me of a story that you may have heard me tell before, which is of a man who ended up as a cardinal, was then an archbishop of what was then Saigon in 1974. He was arrested when the communists conquered South Vietnam and turned it into Ho Chi Minh City – he was arrested a few weeks later, stripped of his clothes, his name, everything, a number put on his arm, and thrown into the hold of a ship, and taken north for nine years of solitary confinement. Extraordinary man – Van Thuan was his name, he died a few years back, and I remember him saying 'as I lay in the hold of the ship, the Holy Spirit said to me, now you have only me'. The same thing, that stripping away, which is surely what has been happening to the Church, not just over this period of lockdown, but even more so, steadily, almost imperceptibly, over the last 70 years. It's not something to worry about or complain about, it's the work of God, and you have said so much about this previously and you continue to speak about it. I am so excited about working with you – if we go back in history, there have been good relationships with Archbishops of York between Archbishops of York and Canterbury, and I've enjoyed one of those. And there have been more difficult times, going back to the 12th century, where they came to a fist fight in front of the king - probably a mistake. With you, I don't think there will be a fist fight, at least I hope not, but I think there will be a friendship. It will be a friendship based on difference and you've talked about the diversity of the Church – and it's in that rich diversity that we find the presence of Christ, because God has created lavishly more than is necessary in terms of the world and the creation, and also the different types of human beings. And in Christ, he has called us to be the one new person, individually and collectively, for the Church to be the image, almost the word incarnate, the Good News of the Gospel made flesh. You and I agree on that – we agree on the need to differ and love, we agree on the need to communicate the Good News of Jesus Christ, we agree on the need for a simple Church. I think that the next few years are going to be a huge adventure – not a retreat, not a defeat, but an adventure of exploring our way into becoming a new Church in a new world. Primates from the Anglican Communion last week, or three weeks ago actually now, said 'the world has changed. We must forget our differences and become one Church for the sake of Jesus Christ.' I think it's something we need to take hold of. And thank you so much for giving me a bit of space as this symbol of collaboration, in your presidential address.

Archbishop Stephen Cottrell

So finally, we need to remember that the Gospel is for the world. As well as being a painful opportunity for encounter with Christ and Christ alone, this lockdown has brought much misery and enabled us to see more clearly many of the ingrained dis-eases in our society. The pandemic has not been a great leveller, as some suggested - those from Black, Asian and minority ethnic backgrounds and those who are poor have suffered disproportionately. Yet at the same time we have changed our understanding of whose work really matters. The person who drives the delivery van, the person who stocks the

shelves in the supermarket: we have learned to appreciate their labour. Meanwhile, with planes standing idle on the runway and cars on the drive, the planet itself was able to heave a sigh of relief.

As we move towards a new normal, it is by no means inevitable that we will learn from this. It is, I'm afraid, just as likely that opportunists and extremists will seize the controls. What is needed is a coherent narrative about how we inhabit the planet and order society. That narrative is given to us in Christ. Christ shows us what humanity is supposed to look like. Christ shows us that we are meant to live in community with one another and with God. Christ commissions us to be stewards of God's creation and the midwives of the new creation. Therefore, we need to be bold in sharing with the world those values and principles that can shape a different way of living where everyone has a fair share and a fair opportunity, and a different way of inhabiting the planet where we learn to live in a sustainable way. But values and principles do not exist in a vacuum. They arise out of the beliefs and practices which are the foundation of our faith. It is because Jesus is Lord; because he has taught us that God is our Father that we are able to recognise each other, in our diversity, as sister and brother, one humanity inhabiting one world. We are able to denounce prejudice, racism, homophobia and exclusion of any kind. We are able to be both *just and* merciful, because the world belongs to God, not us. We know how we should behave with each other and with the world.

We also know that we get it wrong. And where that failing is acknowledged, let us be merciful and forgiving. It is what Jesus requires of us as the sign of a different world. Repent. Turn around. Live differently.

I am very sorry for the mistakes I have made, and for the ones I almost certainly will make in the future. But I will be honest about them. I will seek to learn from them. I will try to build a safe and loving Church that is merciful and just.

So, dear General Synod, as we enter some turbulent times and some challenging decisions, we are just going to have to learn how to love one another, love the world and love God so that, both individually and collectively, we can be the place where God is revealed. We've not always been so good at this. We have allowed ourselves to become tribal and divided. We have sometimes allowed secondary things to obscure our belonging to each other. The Holy Spirit reveals Christ in us; and through us. So, may we learn afresh how to share this Gospel in the world.