

Bishop Tim's Presidential Address at Diocesan Synod on 15 May 2010

Something truly exceptional and historic happened this week; and we are fortunate to be meeting at the end of the week so that we can reflect on it and consider its implications. A world changing event has taken place and we are all trying to take in the importance of it and work out its consequences. It has changed the way we use language and the way we think about ideas and concepts.

I am not of course referring to the small matter of our new coalition government, rather I am thinking about The Ascension. What an extraordinary event we have marked and I am sure we were all in church on Thursday to celebrate. It is the feast that changes all our ideas and concepts for Christ who is now exalted and has joined earth and heaven together so that we can now use different language and share completely new ideas and concepts with people, and we can also share with others something of the way in which the whole world is now a different place.

Christ became human so that we might all become divine or as Athanasius put it rather more directly: "God became human so that humans might become God,"

The Ascension is not about absence but it is about presence and joining things up and making sense of things. Often we look at things the wrong way round and we need help and permission to look at them again and try and see them differently. Who knows but our new coalition government may well allow us all to see things differently and to change our basic ideas and assumptions.

Seeing things differently

There is, of course, a great deal of cynicism aboard. 'It won't last', we are told and already the media are trying to find splits, cracks and divisions. The idea that people who think differently and hold different views on important matters might be able to work together for a more important purpose is seen to be something which is threatening and downright odd. That politicians of all people, could be trusted to work together for motives that are not selfish and party spirited and focussed, is deemed to be implausible.

So, in the aftermath of the election and its result and the celebration of The Ascension, we meet as Diocesan Synod. It is very good that our worship reminds us of the worldwide church and our partners in Umzimvubu. It is so easy when we meet in this context that we all too quickly focus on ourselves and our own problems and become – yes, dare I say it – party spirited and minded. We are the one holy catholic and apostolic church and our vision should be broad and our purpose should be for the common good.

We meet, of course, in that period between The Ascension and Pentecost when the disciples were anxious, uncertain and fearful about the future, not knowing quite how they were going to carry on. In our debates and thinking today it is all too easy for us to be fearful and anxious. As we hear about our finances and the work of the Executive and the various changes that are being implemented we may well feel anxious and look around at the many reasons why things are apparently going wrong at the moment.

Difficult decisions

I know you will want to share with me our concerns for all the members of staff at Diocesan House who have been told they are at risk of being made redundant and want to keep them all in our

prayers, along with all the other members of staff and all those who are managing that complicated process. It is a process that is still in train and so it is not possible for us to say too much about it at this Synod.

We do appreciate how hard-working all our staff are and know how difficult it is to make decisions which affect the lives and livelihoods of those who have been part of the diocesan family for some time. The decisions we as Directors have made are because we are aware of the financial pressures upon us and the need to ensure that we are managing our costs as best we can. We have also made the hard decisions we have in order to reshape the diocesan organisation to ensure that we are working with the parishes and local churches to enable us together to discover God's Kingdom and grow the church.

As you will hear in other debates today, there are real difficult issues facing us in matters of clergy remuneration, how we give to the wider church, questions of stewardship and many other pressing issues.

All these things are happening just at the time when the Church of England – through the General Synod – is preparing to debate the question of the ordination of women to the episcopate. This matter will be discussed by the House of Bishops on Monday and Tuesday next week and I would ask for your prayers as we meet together and enter into what will be complicated and difficult discussions.

Broader understanding

There are those in the church who disagree with each other. There will be those here today who disagree with each other on a range of matters. How do we understand disagreement and division? Can we learn anything from our politicians and from the wider church? This morning I hope many will have an opportunity at this Synod to make a contribution. There will be today the first of what will be a regular debate on the work of the Executive, your Executive, so that you can hear what we have been doing and hold us to account.

The Ascension is about joining together heaven and earth, enabling us to have wider vision and broader understanding. It opens up for us possibilities and shows us a new way of behaving and being. Of course, we are all sinners and so we make mistakes and we go on falling over and have to be picked up time and time again.

Our discussions sometimes display, all too clearly, how vulnerable, frail and human we are. So be it. We do not always see things the right way and we are sometimes all too cynical and cannot believe that there is a way of working together which does not have some ulterior or hidden motive. There is always a potential conspiracy somewhere, but not in the Church of England we simply don't have the togetherness, thoughtfulness or energy to do conspiracies!

God's generosity and our giving

The Diocese of Truro is in need of more income. Our giving does need to increase or else we will be in a perilous situation by the end of this year. We are already worried about the low rate that Common Fund is being received this year. However, as always money is a symptom and not a cause.

The 'Giving for Life' report led to a motion passed in General Synod part of which stated, 'this synod encourages church members (including children and young people) to live generously as disciples of Jesus Christ, joyfully giving time, skills, money and other resources to God's mission in the world, in times of economic stringency as well as of plenty, in response to the lavish generosity of God to us in Christ who made Himself poor that we might become rich'.

So today we gather again to debate, for we are at Synod. How will we be changed by this process and this event and in what state of mind do we attend this gathering? Are we open to our own vulnerability as frail humans, aware of the constant need to be shaped by the love of God and keen to listen carefully and especially to those who hold different and opposing views to us?

If so, then we will be led into surprising coalitions and together I believe we can move forward to respond to the risen and ascended Christ and receive into our lives the power of the Holy Spirit. There is so much potential and yet we are often so cynical and defensive and cowed by the pressures of the daily grind.

There are difficult issues to face and real pressures on our organisation. We are not clear how we will move forward and in what state we will be over the coming years. There will have to be major changes at all levels of the thing we know and love as the Church of England here in the Diocese of Truro. I pray for wisdom and discernment and for openness to each other as we travel a hard road together.

I want to end by quoting some words from one of my predecessors, sent to me and which I keep by my side in the Chapel at Lis Escop. Bishop Edmund Morgan (1951–1960) wrote this of a bishop, but I think you can substitute 'disciple' for 'bishop'.

"It is to the Ascended Christ that the bishop (disciple) must direct his gaze, to him that he must be attached and responsible, with him that he must be clothed; and above all it is to the Ascended Christ as he presents himself to the Father, for it is by the bishop's (disciple's) Godward life that his ministry will bear fruit and be controlled.

"In order to guard against overwork, to counteract the snare of activism, to curb his (her) concern for his (her) reputation, to overcome the temptation to love the praise of people more than the glory of God, his (her) life must be a continual sursum corda, he (she) must be ever groping, fighting, leaping Godwards. He (She) must in fact give priority to spirituality, abiding in the certainty that God, and not merely 'the things of God' is central in life, personal, ministerial and social.

"It is God's world, God's church, God's diocese, God's parish. From the bishop's (disciple's) Godward apostolate there will flow the energy of divine love. By his (her) self offering in union with the Ascended Christ he (she) will help to hold the door open for God to take possession."