**Presidential Address Diocesan Synod 26th Sept. 2020**

Because we live in time, all our lives, and our life together, tells a story. That’s what history is: the telling of a story as life is lived over time. We have been part of an unfolding story over the last few months. Partly that story has been written by others, partly there have been wider issues in play – notably a global health pandemic - that has written quite a bit of the script for us. But partly too we have been actors, and active ourselves, in telling that story. And a very unusual and unexpected story it has been.

The stories we tell are the means by which we make sense of the world around us, of our life together, and of our own individual lives. And of course history isn’t just the telling of a story, it’s a quest to make sense of it too, and to understand it.

I suspect it will take a very long time to make sense of and understand what has happened to us all over the last few months – partly of course because the story is ongoing, and other factors are at play too. The political turbulence that has wracked this country over the last few years has not stopped either, sadly.

But the fact that the story is ongoing, and uncertain, does not mean that we cannot try to make sense of it, or indeed that we cannot both ask and answer the key question, ‘Where is God in it?’ Indeed we should absolutely try to make sense of it and ask where God has been in it – and then to ask how we should respond to it, to ask what a faithful, Christian, Kingdom response to it should be: for that is always our task and our calling.

‘The Saints’ Way’, our diocesan vision which we discussed last time, following its endorsement by BDC, expressly encourages us to see what we are doing in the context of a bigger story, in the context of the work of God in Cornwall and the isles of Scilly, and our two parishes in Devon. It’s a story that stretches back not just centuries but millennia. It encourages us to be attentive to that story, and indeed to be faithful to that story, to ask what it is that it is essential to that story that should set the trajectory for us for the future.

It sets us some specific goals and I will come to them later, but it also sets some softer targets – but which are nonetheless essential – and I want to remind them of you now. It suggests that if we are to be true to our distinctive Cornish Christian story we should be:

* more pioneering and adventurous
* more attentive to holiness of prayer and place
* more communal than organisational
* more open to wonder and expectant of the miraculous
* more caring of creation
* more committed to learning and growing
* more willing to express and explore our faith in music and the arts
* more content to be on the margins
* no less local in our focus but broader in our horizons.

As we have lived through the crisis of the last few months I want to say to you today that I believe that attending to those things is even more urgent – and also even more exciting – than when they were first written. I believe that this current crisis calls us – indeed I would be so bold as to say that God, through this current crisis - calls us to go further and faster down the road that TSW sets out for us than we could have predicted. This crisis has leveraged more change in us in a few months than we could have achieved in a decade – not of course without its pain – but it would be foolish to suggest that all that were just accidental and temporary. There are deep lessons to be drawn from it all about how we can better connect and better communicate, and better love and serve, in this new world we are entering into – and those lessons must be learnt.

Last time we met I suggested that some were talking about this period as being akin to the Exile in the OT. But I suggested – and I still suggest – that is wrong. This story does not take us back anywhere. It leads us on – and we must allow our God, and it, to do just that – to lead us on. So I don’t think Exile is the right image at all. This is much more about Exodus – a journey onwards into God’s promised and preferred future for us – a journey in which, as TSW emphasises, we will have a particular concern to ‘reach the young, serve the poor, and care for the earth.’

And I’m happy to report to you that since we last met we have been taking significant steps along the road TSW sets out for us – that road that encourages us to be faithful in the future to the millennia old story of the work of the Kingdom of God here in Cornwall.

I will run briefly through the six specific priorities TSW sets for us in a moment but before I do that I do want to acknowledge the gifts of people God has given us to help us in that unfolding story. It was a delight to be at +Hugh’s consecration as Bishop in July and an even greater delight to see him already making such a difference to our life together. Another great gift has been Simon Cade who is now no longer acting but permanent Diocesan Secretary: in Simon’s case it really has been a case of ‘cometh the hour; cometh the man’ and the way he has helped us so ably to navigate the challenges we have faced - and with faith and confidence too – has been truly outstanding.

And Simon’s moving to that post has meant that Katie Fitzsimmons has become Director of Education and is doing the job superbly well – bringing faith, wisdom and real compassion to her work. And in general I’m immensely grateful to God for putting such a wonderful team of people in place around me.

So let me speak to the six priorities we have and outline briefly the progress we are making. First on the list, and one over which +Hugh has a watching brief, is ‘Becoming a church that celebrates children & young people at its heart’. In many ways this is the most urgent and yet the one on which we have made least progress, but I do have some ideas about how we can put extra resource into this, at no extra cost, which I will share with you in due course. But I also remind you that there is some truly excellent work being done in our church schools, as well as in a number of our churches and where there is strength we absolutely do have to build on it.

The next two we are taking together in a group chaired by +Hugh, with Jonathan Rowe, Director of Ministry, as the lead officer. They are ‘Embracing an innovative and pioneering culture’ and ‘Becoming increasingly confident in our calling.’ Even after just one meeting I think the group looking at these two are going to be positively fizzing with ideas. But I also want to say, as with the first priority, this is not a question of producing something out of nothing. To take ‘becoming [a church] increasingly confident in our calling’ I would say that many churches have become just that through this crisis, and I continue to be very impressed by the energy, commitment and compassion so many churches have put into serving their local communities, giving practical expression to the love of Christ. That’s been very much recognised by Cornwall Council: I was on a call with a councillor recently who said that the community response to the crisis was largely led by the churches, and without them it would have been negligible.

When I talk about ‘becoming [a church] increasingly confident in our calling’ I would be negligent if I did not mention the individuals who have continued to put their calling into action through this crisis and sought to discover more of what God wants for them – indeed I suspect many people have a clearer idea of their calling because of the crisis. I’ve spent many hours since last we met speaking to our curates and what an impressive bunch they are – they give me great hope for the future. And of course I must mention those whose ordinations have been delayed – indeed we had four ordinations services in St. Petroc’s Bodmin yesterday and five today and tomorrow in the Cathedral. Our ordinands have been very patient and understanding in waiting for these services: it was hardly how they expected to start their ministry or be priested.

Indeed those ordination services act as something of a metaphor for us all. They are not at all as we would have expected. But that does not mean in any sense they are a second best. They are different, and particularly suited and shaped for the times. And that is a metaphor for us all. Church in the future will not be as we are used to, or as we might have expected. But that does not mean in any sense that it will be second best. It will be different, and particularly suited and shaped by our God for the times in which we live.

And in that new world we will increasingly need people who are willing to do church differently, and to go to the margins of society and see what God is doing there and work with him to build something new there. That’s already happening, but it will do so more and more, which is why TSW talks about the need for us to embrace an innovative and pioneering culture. And I’m impressed and excited by the increasing number of people I come across with just such as passion. I well remember +Chris saying that Cornwall is the most natural place for people with a pioneering passion to come – and I hope they will, more and more, as indeed they already are. We need to say again this is not a place where things end, but where good, new things begin.

I will deal with last three priorities more briefly, but not because they are less important.

TSW commits us to rejoicing in strong, warm, mutually encouraging international links and we have an excellent small team working on reviving and strengthening those links. One particularly that has become ever more pressing is our plan to develop a link with the people of Lebanon, our ancient partners in the tin trade, and we will be hearing more from Lebanon in a few minutes’ time.

Our fifth priority calls us to rejoice in the generosity of God – and I absolutely believe we should. Too often we see God as a heavenly miser, parsimonious in his giving, rather than the generous Father scripture shows us to be. Undoubtedly church is changing, and our model of church will change too, but we must be led by richness of vision, not poverty of money. And above all we must trust in our God who only has good things in store for us. I’m really pleased by the work that is being put into this area, under Simon Cade’s leadership using the services of David Oglethorpe, formerly Director of Finance for both Coventry Diocese and Cathedral and with a strong track record in the private sector before that. It will be, I think, the first time ever we’ve done financial modelling that looks ten years ahead.

We must be careful in our stewardship of our resources and TSW’s sixth priority does just that. There is no icon for it because it’s really for internal consumption, but it’s no less important for all that. It calls us to review our governance (as we now have) and to review our support functions and ensure we are getting excellent value for money. But I say again, we must not think of ourselves as poor but as rich. We have significant assets even if we are cash poor. But above all we have a God who loves us and who wants the best for us, even as he wants us to be our best for him.

We live in uncertain times, but the story we tell of the goodness of God is good and true in itself. We don’t know specifically what the future has in store for us. But our God does. He calls us to walk not by sight but by faith. Maybe in the past we got that the wrong way round, walking more by sight than faith. But in uncertain times you simply cannot do that. In fact we can do much better than that, and walk by faith trusting in the faithfulness of God. So let’s not be frightened to step into that future but do so in faith and hope and in trust. Let’s do that not for ourselves, but for our Lord’s sake, and for the sake of the world to which he calls us.