**Diocesan Synod : 18 May 2024**

We have got lots of really important stuff to engage with and to discuss at Synod today; patterns of ministry, the role of Church Wardens, how we can support small churches, what went on at General Synod and an afternoon on money, but I want to start where we should always start, and to think together about God.

So here’s a question.

What do you think God feels about his Universe? When he looks at everything that is, what do you think he feels about it?

I know that’s a slightly crass question, and that there’s always a risk of turning God into us, but bigger, and I know that we suffer from an over-dependence on ‘feelings’ in our culture today, but still, I think it’s a question worth asking - What do you think God feels about the Universe; about you and me and Newquay and Newlyn, and star fish and aphids and palm trees and thistles? What does God feel about His Universe?

I think his fundamental feeling, if we can call it that, is joy. Unutterable, inexhaustible, glorious joy. Belly aching, cheek creasing, heart lifting joy. I think he looks at the stars and the space dust, at time, DNA and sub-atomic particles, at flatfish, chameleons, grannies and new born babies and is joy-full; full of joy.

Dallas Willard, the American theologian and pastor put it like this. ‘*God is the happiest, most joyful being in the Universe.’*

CS Lewis thought joy so central that he called the story of his conversion to faith ‘*Surprised by joy’*.

AndSt Augustine put it like this - *‘In the house of God there is a never ending festival; the angel choir makes eternal holiday; the presence of God's face gives joy that never fails.’*

And Jesus shares that joy - and he wants us to know it and to share it too. In John’s gospel he tells his disciples very clearly - ‘*I have said these things to you so that my joy may be in you, and that your joy may be complete*.’ So that my joy may be in you.

Jesus has just washed his disciples feet, it’s the last evening of his life, he is sharing everything he knows about his Father with his friends (which, he is clear, is everything that there is to know about the Father), and at the heart of it all, he tells them he wants them to be full of joy, just as he is full of joy.

I wonder if that's what you think is at the heart of your life as a disciple of Jesus, and at the heart of our life as the church. Because that’s what Jesus says he came to share with us.

And when he talks of joy, this isn’t some kind of desiccated, spiritualised joy, nor a ‘grin and bear it’ joy; this is the joy of hanging out with friends and family around a table of good food and wine, laughing, sharing stories, enjoying the sheer richness of being alive and being here, now. It’s the joy of dancing, walking on a cliff on a windy day, of singing in the car with the kids on the way home. It’s the joy of a puppy racing across a field just because it can, the joy of a good job well done. It’s the joy of the hand of a small child in yours. It’s life in God’s company, here and now. Right now.

And this joy isn’t offered only in the good moments, every now and then; the times when we can lay down the burdens of life and let our hair down. God’s joy is on offer all the time and in every moment.

And God’s joy, as we meet it in Jesus, is real, tangible and earthy. It’s tasted when Jesus produces vats of wine and sack-fulls of bread. It’s understood in stories of birds without a care and reeds clothed like Solomon. It’s seen in the face of a woman caught in adultery, told to go and start again and in the scrambling descent of a short man up a tree, who has just been invited to eat with Jesus.

God is joy, and we’re invited to en-joy that joy.

Hold on to what you’ve just shared, and we’ll come back to it in a bit.

Over the last year or so, I have been part of a group working on the issue of trust for the Church nationally. The work began with the recognition that there is a significant deficit of trust at almost every level of the church. In part that reflects the wider mistrust and distrust that pervades culture today, but we have our own particular Anglican version of it.

And it has been very helpful understanding better how trust in organisations and communities is built and lost, and how difficult it is to establish the kind of generous, relational trust that we all long for, in a complex, multi-layered thing like the Church of England, in which every part is both autonomous and accountable; which lacks clear lines of authority, and which invests particular roles with enormous power; and which has a tendency to a tribalism that begins with a right recognition of our diversity, and which easily becomes the focus for disunity and suspicion.

And our work has been helped by some people who have thought deeply about issues around trust, both theologically and in complex organisations. And they have helped us to see how organisations with a culture of good-enough trust are able to gather round a shared narrative of some kind. And these ‘narratives’ or shared stories are a way of explaining where the organisation has come from, what it’s here for and where it’s heading - and from that comes a shared identity and sense of mutual belonging.

And organisations that do this well build a sense of shared purpose and a willingness to see the best in others, from which come what we might call ‘thick’ bonds of trust. Bonds that connect people, and which can withstand disagreement, difficult decisions and conflict.

Now ‘shared narratives’ of that kind are not always a good thing - after all, it’s not difficult for a community or group to build their identity by blaming other people for their problems. All you need to do is to find some people who think like you, find some other people who are doing something different, make them into a threat against your shared purpose, talk about that threat a lot and, bingo, you’ll have a strong community with thick bonds of trust with each other, but which is full of suspicion and distrust about ‘the problem people over there’. And we don’t have to look very hard for examples of that kind of approach.

And there’s another kind of shared narrative that can work well, but which is equally unhelpful. And I think this is at work in the church. It’s when identity and agreement are built around a shared narrative, but that narrative is a negative or damaging one. Like, for instance, the church is in a decline that is inevitable and irreversible. Anyone recognise that story? - the story that says the church used to be great, but isn’t any more, and that it’s all much worse that it once was?

I think that is the shared narrative that the Church of England gathers around at the moment. And it’s a bad and dangerous story for all sorts of reasons - including that it makes us anxious and it sets us against each other, because if we’re in decline, there’s less of everything (people, money, generosity) and so we’re each in a competition for the scraps that are left - and that’s how deep distrust sets in.

And there’s a more fundamental reason why it’s a bad story; it’s a bad story because it has the wrong ending. That’s one thing we know about all stories, isn’t it - they have a beginning, a middle and an end. And in the story of the church’s decline, it begins in the past when all our churches were full and children all came to Sunday School, and schools said prayers every day and everyone was a Christian; and the middle is where we are now, when all of that is less and less true; and the end? Well the end is death - and not a glorious heroic death, nor a courageous sacrificial death, but a kind of awkward shuffling off the stage with nobody paying attention any more.

That’s the story we think we’re in, in the Church of England as a whole. And I think it’s that version of things that underpins our anxiety, and much of our distrust and suspicion.

But that’s **not** our story. That version of who we are and where we’re going has no roots in anything scriptural or holy, nor in what it is to be ‘church’, nor in what we know of God from experience.

Our end isn’t a sorry slipping off into oblivion, our end is heaven on earth; it’s creation restored and renewed, it’s the living and the departed together in God’s joy-full presence. It’s you and me and every ‘you and me’ welcomed into St Augustine’s description of the ‘*never ending festival going on in the house of God’;* it’s all things *‘joining the angel choir that makes eternal holiday’;* it’s the whole of everythingenjoying *‘the presence of God's face that gives joy that never fails.’*

The end of our story is joy.

And the point of that story - which is God’s story and which is our truest and deepest story, is that we don’t have to wait until the end for it to come about. We don’t have to suffer the struggles of this world in the desperate hope that we’ll get to join in the heavenly fun at the end - the point of the story is that the end has started already; that right now, in the midst of everything, the gates of heaven have been thrown open and that God’s beautiful, life-giving, overflowing joy is part of this world now. And the invitation is for God’s church to join in. The invitation is for us to be part of that story, and to be part of telling that story.

And I suggest that, if we start to see the life of the church in Cornwall through the lens of that story, then things start to look different. If we start to see that God has genuinely given us everything we need to be His people today - his joyful, heaven-on-earth seeking people - then we can lay the anxiety down and get on with life with Him.

Now I don’t mean any of that to sound like a kind of glib ‘don’t worry, just be happy’ attitude, nor an excuse not to do anything. Of course there are challenges and difficulties, and of course those include the fact that fewer people are interested in the Christian faith than they used to be, and that finding Church Wardens and other officers is hard, and there’s still the roof to pay for. But those things are all part of God’s bigger story, and the church has always faced challenges and difficulties.

Think of the early church, facing death by torture and execution.

Or the church in communist East Germany, banned from public life and driven underground - a situation true in many places still today.

Or the Church of England in 1800 when the Bishop of London reported a total of 6 communicants at St Paul’s cathedral on Easter Day.

And nor do I mean that we don’t have to make difficult and demanding decisions about the future - of course we do; we need to decide what to focus on and where to put our time and gifts and money; we need to make plans and to implement them - but we aren’t doing any of that to try to avoid an otherwise inevitable bad ending - because that’s not our story.

So we choose to put our time and and gifts and our money into serving our communities, and especially the most vulnerable and deprived, because we know that poverty is not part of God’s joyful kingdom; and we choose to find new and creative ways to connect with children and their families because we long for people of every age to know that there is a divine joy at the heart of everything - and it’s for them too; and we choose to move towards patterns of ministry that can enable the church to flourish in old ways and new, because the whole people of God are all called and sent in Jesus’ name.

We have to make decisions, and we do so because our eyes are focused on our ultimate destination and our great ending - which is the joy of heaven here on earth; and we do so because we are called to live from that ending here, in the middle of the muddle; in the middle of the joyful story of God and us in Cornwall today.

The thing about trust is that you can’t make it happen. You can’t make someone trust you.

And that’s ok, because we don’t need to do that. In fact, we’re not first of all asked to trust each other anyway. First of all, we invited to trust God; we’re invited to trust that God is good, and that he is faithful and that Jesus was telling the truth when he said he came to share his Father’s joy with us. And if that’s true, then it’s true for all of us; Jesus offers that invitation to everyone.

And if we can believe that; if we can take Jesus’ outstretched hand and let him lead us into that joy, then there’s every chance that we’ll find that we are all heading in the same direction - that we’re all being led by the same Jesus to the same joyful ‘heaven on earth’ destination.

And if Jesus is ok with trusting us - all of us - with his greatest truth, well then we might just find that we trust each other too, as we walk with him into joy.