**Diocesan Synod : 14 September 2024**

First of all, to those of you joining Synod for the first time - a huge welcome, and a huge thank you for serving the life of the church in Cornwall in this way.

And to those of you returning to Synod - a huge welcome back, and a huge thank you for serving the life of the church in Cornwall in this way again.

I don’t know what the word ‘Synod’ prompts in you - it’s not a word that always inspires joy and enthusiasm, but in it’s roots, it’s a beautiful word. It’s made up 2 Greek words - *Sun*, meaning together, and *hodos*, meaning a way or a road. So a Synod is where we learn how to walk together.

And roads that are walked together make for some of the richest biblical stories. Noah and Abraham both ‘walked together with God’, and are honoured for it in Scripture. Micah famously tells the people of Israel that God wants them to act justly, to love mercy and to walk humbly with God. Jesus spent much of his ministry walking, and the great Resurrection story that takes place on the Road to Emmaus, reminds us that even the most unexpected of walks might turn out to be in the presence of the risen Christ.

And for us in Cornwall, criss-crossed by the great pilgrim routes of the Cornish saints and the medieval roads to Rome and Santiago, walking together has a particular resonance.

So these times together at Synod are for us to figure out what it means for the church in this beautiful and fragile part of God’s creation to ‘walk together’. To find routes through complex, and sometimes risky terrain; to do so humbly with God, always looking out for the risen Christ beside us. Synod is where we discuss, discern and sometimes decide on the direction we’re being called to walk in; it’s where we get to know our fellow pilgrims - the ones we agree with, and the ones we don’t; and above all it’s where we pray for Christ to reveal himself in and for the people and communities that we serve.

So welcome to Synod, and to our journey together.

Some of you will have heard me speak over the last few months about three words; faithfulness, curiosity and mutuality. They’re three words that describe the kind of church I think we are called to be as we walk together in this diocese. They aren’t so much the practical map for our journey - that’s provided by our deanery and diocesan plans, but about the way we need to be as we follow that map.

And that matters doesn’t it. We can plot out a route from A to B, and we can figure out what we need to bring with us for the journey, but how we are together as we walk is just as important - more perhaps. There’s all the difference in the world between a group on a forced route march, heads down, no talking and a grim determination to get to the end, and a happy band of pilgrims walking together, eyes open for the beauty of the hedgerows, singing as they go and laughing at the rain that insists on falling. Those are both ways of walking, and both groups might even follow the same route to the same destination, but they’ll feel completely different.

Well it’s the way we walk together that these three words describe, not where exactly we’re going. If you like, this is the culture that needs to go with the plan.

And the three words again: Faithfulness, curiosity and mutuality. In case you haven’t heard me talk about them before, let me briefly unpack each of them, and then I want to get more specific and ask, if our culture is marked by faithfulness, curiosity and mutuality, what might we see in our churches and in the diocese? What might we hope people who join us notice about the way we act, and the way we make decisions, and the way we engage with each other. What is a faithful, curious and mutual diocese actually like?

So, a quick word about each of the three words.

Faithfulness first. The bible is a big book with lots of characters, including great kings, prophets and teachers, but throughout it, God is the key actor in everything that happens. And work your way through it and you’ll see God described as the Faithful One over and over again. The one who is faithful to God-self across time and space - who is the same yesterday, today and tomorrow, and who is the same here, there and everywhere. The one who is faithful to Creation, and who doesn’t wake up one morning and decide to do things differently. The one who is faithful to his people and whose mercy and love endures for ever. God is love, and God is faithful.

And the Hebrew word that we translate ‘faithful’ can also mean true, dependable, reliable or trustworthy. To be faithful is to be a strong foundation, a dependable presence and a trustworthy support, and God, we hear over and over again, is exactly that - God is faithful and trustworthy. And the core biblical invitation is for us to respond to God’s faithfulness by being faithful in turn; by having faith. It’s the heart of who we are as followers of Jesus - that the world isn’t just what we can touch and taste and see, but that there is a joyful, merciful and ever-generous love that faithfully comes to meet us in every moment, and that we can trust that love. We can have faith.

We are called to be faithful to our faithful God

The second word is curiosity. If God is trustworthy yesterday, today and tomorrow. And if he’s faithful here, there and everywhere - then we can be confident that there is more of God for us to discover than we already know. We can be confident that God is at work right now in our lives, in our families, in our churches and the communities we serve.

Isn’t that a thrilling thought - that right now, here, and in every ‘here’ and every ‘now', God is active and engaged; the Holy Spirit is growing and harvesting the fruit of love, joy and peace; Jesus is turning and calling out to someone - ‘come and follow me’. And isn’t that a fundamentally hopeful way of being in the world? The assumption that God isn’t done with us. That whatever’s going on in our lives, or in our church or community, it’s never the end. Even when it looks like it absolutely is the end - when someone dies, or when something in church we love seems to be ending, or when a relationship has broken down, we are invited to believe that there’s more to come. Not more and bigger, or more and better - but more of God.

Being curious means being hopeful.

Because God is doing something, and who would want to risk missing out on something that God is doing?

Finally, mutuality. In 2023 spending on advertising in the UK was £37 billion. And much of that investment in persuading you that you aren’t good enough as you are, was telling you that you could be more the ‘you’ you’re meant to be, if you just bought that car, or used this washing powder, or wore those trainers.

Here are three famous advertising slogans giving you that message. Burger King says ‘have it your way’; AirBnB says ‘belong anywhere’; Nivea says ‘It starts with you’. Now compare those lies to the trustworthy truth of the gospel.

Jesus said, ‘*do to others as you would have them do to you*’, and Paul wrote ‘*welcome one another as Christ has welcomed you*’ and, Jesus again, ’*so the last shall be first, and the first last*’.

The world says it’s all about you; the gospel tells us that who you are begins in who we are together, in Christ. The world says, look after number one; the gospel that your wellbeing is my concern. The world says, freedom means the freedom to choose for yourself. The gospel that freedom lies in service to others.

We are called to have faith, to seek and search for the kingdom and to do it all together in mutual love; in Christ.

Faithfulness, curiosity and mutuality. Three words to shape our culture as we travel together.

So what might that actually look like? What would our churches, our Synods, Church House teams, Episcopal College be like if we were living faithfully, curiously and in mutuality?

In a moment, I want to invite you to answer that question for your own church or community, but here’s one visible expression for each of those three words - one thing I think you’d see in a faithful church, curious church and a church committed to mutuality.

Faithfulness first. In a church, or another part of the diocese that’s living faithfully, I think you would notice people taking God seriously.

And so a faithful church would talk about God, and that talk would feel entirely natural and normal, not forced, or weird or ‘holier than thou’, but an expression of the real life of the community.

And a faithful church has a kind of confidence (which, after all literally means ‘with-faith’) that everything happens within God’s grace - that whether things are going brilliantly well, or everything is falling apart, there is a gentle, generous presence that holds them up and carries them along.

You probably know people who have that kind of faith. People who are ‘faith-full’, and for whom God is just a given; people who have an inner strength, and for whom God is like a heartbeat, or a steady bass line in a song; people who are admirable, not because they’re charismatic or special, but because they’re steady, because they seem to have their life built on rock, not sand. Because they are full of faith.

And a faithful church is like that too. There’s a sense in the way the community speaks and prays, worships and serves, that they believe this stuff; that they believe that God really is the faithful one on whom they can rely.

You might have come across the term ‘functional atheism’. It describes a culture in which people profess faith, but observation of their behaviour suggests God plays no actual part in their lives. A community that is functionally atheist could get by without God perfectly well.

A church or community, on the other hand, that’s faithful to the faithful God that we follow, knows they can’t get by without Him. And so they pray to him, speak about him, they have faith in him.

How about a curious church? Being curious is fundamentally about recognising there is more still to learn and discover. More to learn about God, more to learn about people and communities, more to learn about ourselves. So a curious church will always be looking to go beyond itself and what it already knows, or thinks it knows. And that means it will be noticeably good at listening - listening to God, to each other, and to the community around them.

And a curious church will want to hear what the needs of local people are; their practical needs and their spiritual needs. And so a curious church will be connected to the people around them; to schools, and the care home or the people in the pub. Because you can’t listen if you’re not where you can hear what’s being said. And a curious church won’t assume that it knows what people need, and will want to find out - and a really curious church will do so knowing that in finding out, they might discover that God is already at work beyond them, and that there’s a great gift for the church waiting for them to discover.

And the reason that matters is because our purpose is not to look after ourselves, but to serve the people of our towns and villages. You might know that the English word ‘parish’ comes from two Greek words - *para* and *oikos*. *Para* means ‘alongside’ - like ‘parallel’; two lines that are alongside each other, and *oikos* meaning ‘household’ or ‘community’. So a para-oikos is something that exists for those alongside, those who are not yet part of the household of faith. - those who are strangers to church. The purpose, the focus, of the parish church is those who are not yet part of the household, those who are strangers. The church, as Archbishop William Temple famously put it, exists for those who are not its members. So our call is to be deeply curious about what God is up to in the para-oikos. And so a curious church will be a listening church.

And finally, what might we see in a church that is committed to mutuality. Well, perhaps above all, a group of people who show all the signs of loving one another. Which means being people who are patient and kind with each other; people who are really good at disagreeing well; people who don't always need to be right and, when they are really convinced of the need to hold fast, do so with grace and generosity.

A church living mutuality well would understand that God’s call is more likely to be heard together, than by one or two special individuals; they’d be clear about who has authority to do what, and how that authority is balanced and held accountable. This kind of community might not say ‘either this or that ’ very often, instead using ‘both this and that’. You’d be struck by how little they gossip about other people; and how they let go of grudges quickly; and extend the most generous interpretation to the intentions, words and actions of each other; and how quick they are to say ‘Sorry. I messed up.’

A church living mutuality well, will be full of signs, little and big, of loving each other and the communities they serve.

Churches that take God seriously, that listen deeply and that love each other - that’s what I’m looking for - and that’s what I see lots of around the diocese, and what I long to see more of. And you know, I’m confident that churches like that will inevitably be fruitful and sustainable. Be like that, and the stuff we need to do will happen naturally.

The scripturally alert amongst you might have noticed that faithfulness, curiosity and mutuality are very closely related to three words that appear in one of the most famous verses of the whole bible. They come at the end of 1 Corinthians 13.

After Paul’s glorious, soaring poem about love which, he tells us, is patient and kind, which is never envious, boastful or arrogant; which does not insist on its own way, is not irritable or resentful, never rejoices in wrongdoing, but only in the truth; a love which bears all things, believes all things, hopes all things, endures all things and which never, ever ends, he comes to his great finale…… And now faith, hope and love abide, these three, and the greatest of these is love.

Faith and hope and love.

Faithfulness, curiosity and mutuality.

Trusting in the faithful presence of God, we walk by faith.

Curious about what more of God there is to discover, we walk with hope.

Committed to mutual care, we walk in love.

We walk the glorious, demanding, holy way of Jesus Christ faithfully, with curiosity, and together.

May it be so

Amen

***Where do you see faithfulness, curiosity and mutuality in your church/group?***

***What would you see if there was more of it than there is now?***