

St. Edmundsbury & Ipswich Diocesan Synod 1st March 2008

President's Address

“If any want to become my followers, let them deny themselves and take up their cross and follow me. For those who want to save their life will lose it, and those who lose their life for my sake will find it.”

Matthew 16:vv 24b,25a

A suitably Lenten text to begin with. It is of course St. David's day as we have been reminded in a Eucharist that commemorates the patron saint of Wales. It was a very nicely put together Eucharist by the Loes Deanery, who have a Rural Dean surnamed Owen!

I trust blessed St. David is lost in wonder, love and praise as he gazes on the face of the Saviour and ignores all petitions to favour the Welsh rugby team in their surprising progress.

St. David we are told was an exemplar of the ascetic spiritual life. His monastic rule was drawn from the experience of the desert monks and hermits with a strong emphasis on hard work, abstinence from alcohol and a refraining from unnecessary speech. Most of the time I like to aspire to two out of those three, but being Lent I am trying for all three. If I go on too long now you will judge that I am not very successful at the last.

So, what is necessary to say? First of all it is thank you. Many people have been very generous of their time and very patient as I begin to get to grips with the nature of the task, and of this Diocese and area. A particularly heartfelt thanks to my colleagues on the Staff Team and to all at the Diocesan Office and in the Bishop's Office. I am very blessed by my immediate colleagues.

I am using these early months to try and meet as many people as possible. It will take time, and it will take more time for it all to sink in. You will have read that I am spending a day in each deanery accompanied by the Rural Dean and where possible the Lay Chair. The Archdeacons have very generously given up the time to come as well. At this point I have completed twelve such visits and there will be two more before Easter. That will leave five to complete which will be done by early June. The archdeacons have made it possible for me to use their annual visitations to speak to the Churchwardens which will be another way of meeting an important group of people across the Diocese.

Then there are the different aspects of life in the county to get to know. As a newcomer I am impressed by the willingness of so many different groups to meet me. It says a lot for the way in which the Church is engaged in the community.

It was also very instructive for me to see how the media reacted to the whole tragic business of the trial of Steve Wright for the Ipswich murders. The media were interested in reaction from the Church, and we were able to meet their requests. It was

a strange experience queuing with the Leader of the County Council and the Leader of the Borough Council at 7.30 am on an Ipswich Street to speak to Radio Suffolk. Probably not such a strange experience as that of Archdeacon Geoffrey in his interview on television sitting next to a girl who had escaped from the sad life of the streets. Thanks to our communication department it did seem to be possible to say what was necessary, without getting dragged down sensationalist roads.

Where things can end up was sadly demonstrated by the media storm that overtook the Archbishop of Canterbury. Whether or not you agree with what he actually said, he was in my view badly misrepresented, and those who disagree with him on other issues were happy to jump on the bandwagon. The Archbishop has an immensely difficult task at the moment. The Anglican Communion faces a crucial year with the Lambeth Conference. Having served overseas myself in a remote part of the communion I know how much these gatherings mean to many small and isolated Provinces. Some have questioned whether it is worth the expense of getting together “just” to pray together and study together and not make definitive decisions on doctrine. Just to pray together! Just to study together!

When I first came on November 20th I deliberately used the picture of the crowd sitting down with Jesus, and reflected again on the miraculous feeding that came about. Sitting at the feet of Jesus is the sort of Lambeth Conference I want to go to.

I am sorry that certain provinces are not going to Lambeth, but I would like to make it absolutely clear that I and Bishop Clive have long since registered to go. I look forward to hosting eight overseas bishops and their spouses in the diocese immediately before the conference. Please pray for a good outcome from the conference, and continue to pray for Archbishop Rowan as he seeks to hold together a fractious family.

But back to here and now in the Diocese of St. Edmundsbury & Ipswich, what is necessary to be said?

“What is your vision for the Diocese Bishop?”

It would be easy I suppose to say that I have only been here three and a half months and I need to get to know a lot more. Whilst true it is also a bit of a cop out. I need to have a concept of where we are trying to get to, and I need to be clear that we can only get there if people are in agreement and on board. It would also be immensely arrogant to assume that people haven’t been working to a vision anyway.

In some ways my vision could be for any Diocese. I have had enough of the internal conflicts of the Anglican Church. I want to find the way to work as collaboratively as possible and to start to look outwards.

I have a dream. It is of a Diocese that is at ease with itself, and which knows that everyone is working to spread the Good News of Jesus Christ. It distresses me when I read letters from parishes that see the parish share as a tax from the centre wilfully imposed by spendthrift bureaucrats with no financial acumen. It is of course legitimate to want to query the details of these things, but the way some people phrase

things you would have no idea that budgets had been prepared and passed in Diocesan Synod.

I have a dream of a Diocese that can establish the proper shape of its ministry structure which can be maintained into the future. We are blessed with many riches. We have many varieties of ordained and licensed lay ministry and commissioned lay ministry. There are actually more licensed ministers in the Church of England now than forty years ago. But all that is noticed is the reduction in full time stipendiary ministry. Some of you will have read of the vocations crisis in the Roman Catholic Church in Ireland. Robert Keays a Wiltshire MP who sits on General Synod once stood up and remarked that the Church of England ordains more people than any other European Church apart from the Roman Catholic Church in Poland. Well true or not, are we making the best use of that resource. Are we taking full advantage of what we could do? It might be right that we have fewer clergy in the Diocese than we would be permitted by the national share of available ministers, but I would like to be sure of that.

I have a dream that everyone will own that we have worked to get the best possible support structure in the Diocese. This will constantly be changing and we have to face a decision now. We have three Archdeaconries and two Archdeacons. Something has to change. We have nineteen deaneries, but some with very few clergy. What are the best ways of working together? In order to help to answer that question I am glad to say that the Dean has agreed to chair a small working group to look at the Archdeaconries and deaneries and to make recommendations for their future shape. It is an important time to be doing this as local government structures are also being reviewed. I have no idea whether that has or ought to have a bearing on our decisions but the question needs to be asked. Of course crucial to this task will be wide consultation and I am sure the group will seek to do that. The results of that working group will of course eventually come to Bishop's Council and Diocesan Synod.

But what I dream of most is of a church which is confident in its message of hope for a distracted and frightened world. Listening to the wisdom of the farming community over the last few weeks, we do seem to have got so many things out of proportion. In a world where populations are increasing at rapid rates, it is salutary to learn that the worlds' grain stores were reduced to nine weeks supply recently. Our lack of food production and the uncertainty of the agricultural industry, are symptoms of global problems. The Church speaks of faith, hope and love. It has so much to contribute, not least in a gospel that speaks of self sacrifice.

Whatever else we dream of, I hope that primary task of mission, of drawing others to the self-sacrificial love of Christ unites us all. It is that that puts everything else from people, to buildings, to administrative structures into perspective. As one wise Lay Chair of a deanery said, if we get more people into our churches so many of our other problems disappear.

I know it is more complicated than that bald statement but it is something to keep in mind.

I asked people in one deanery to get into the habit of telling the Good News. We are always so full of anxiety we can forget to do it! Some of them have taken me up on

that. As I was putting this address together an e mail came through about such Good news. It told me of a Churches Together Lent course in one of our Market towns that was based on "Sharing faith more effectively." The meetings will be held both centrally and in House Groups. The first two central meetings attracted 120 people, making it the most effective Lent course yet for that ecumenical group. That the subject attracted so many is significant.

As I go round the Diocese I keep finding so much good practise, and I do think we need to share that, and that in itself will instil confidence.

So, a dream of a diocese with a clear sense of mission and service to all Suffolk's communities. A Diocese united in the Lord Jesus, willing to be bold and to take risks and to be sacrificial.

It is part of the role of leadership to encourage people to catch a vision and then agree how to work towards it. You have been well served in that in the past, I ask your prayers as I seek to serve you in that way in the future. May we all together be willing to enter that way of sacrifice that helps us to find the true life of following Jesus Christ.