



Read the Archbishop's presidential address to the Church of England General Synod in London this afternoon.

This Synod is devoted to the Great Commission to seek to make disciples of all nations. Inevitably we will talk much about what we do.

Far more important though is the question of who we are when we seek to witness to the good news of Jesus Christ.

We are not a club with a membership drive. Evangelism and witness are not means to something else, any more than worship is a means to something else. They are ends in themselves.

Both worship and witness spring from our own experience of the unmediated love of God in Jesus Christ, a love that captures and constrains us.

Next year, at the Lambeth Conference, the theme will be God's Church for God's World. The Conference seeks to unite all who come in turning outwards to the world around and in love and passionate discipleship to seek to serve the mission of God, to share in the work of God in His world.

The biblical book of the conference will be 1 Peter. I am therefore at present spending a significant amount of my own prayer and study time reflecting on this letter in the New Testament.

1 Peter speaks to us of holiness, of suffering, of mutual love and commitment, of the transformation for each of us and for the world in the creation of the church of Jesus Christ, of its great themes of "what you were", "what you are" and what you will be" through being a disciple of Jesus.

The letter is written to insecure churches, threatened from without and uncertain within.

It is beautiful in its sweep and call for pragmatic action to avoid adding unnecessarily to the offence of the gospel and at the same time it calls for absolute faithfulness to Christ, against the current culture.

It says Christians are always to be ready to give a reason for their hope, but to do so with gentleness and grace.

Out of the cosmic change of their incorporation into God's people comes the utterly down to earth need to witness faithfully, to live well and above all, *"Now that you have purified your souls by your obedience to the truth so that you have genuine mutual love, love one another deeply from the heart".*(1 Peter 1:22)

In one extraordinary verse Peter brings together salvation, truth, holiness and love.

Even if there were not hundreds of other examples in scripture this one verse puts paid to the absurdity that truth and love are somehow alternatives, that we can be in favour of one but not the other.

To separate them is like separating breathing from the beating of the heart. The absence of either stops the other and brings death.

In holiness God brings salvation through Jesus the truth, overflowing in love to every person on earth, and as we respond to that love we cease to be what we were and become something new.

Yet Peter writes this letter because there is so much pressure to conform, and so much behaviour which is what the recipients had been, behaviour like those around them in their culture, the absence of love, competition, no grace, no hope.

There is too much of what they were, too little of what God in Christ has made them.

Peter calls for a holy and loving church, reaching out to a world that does not know the power of the resurrection, nor understands that the suffering of Christ were for them. And the church exists to communicate this extraordinary truth.

Communication is so very complex and whatever is said has also to be heard and whatever is heard is not always reflected on in the same way as the original speaker may have intended!

Sometimes our passion and enthusiasm can be in danger of being misunderstood or can be mistranslated as synod has another debate on standing orders or we agree to set up a working group to bring forward a paper in order to set up a commission to investigate a problem which, in due course, will lead us to having a debate.

At the Lambeth Conference the communication of truth in love, of holiness and salvation in one sentence is made more difficult by 100s of languages and cultures, by the very fact that phrases that mean one thing in one culture have a completely different meaning in another.

That is why It is a great joy to welcome our Communion and ecumenical guests with us at this group of sessions.

It is always both informative and intriguing to hear observations and comments on what we do and how we do it from our fellow Christians, fellow Christians from different cultures or churches.

Their observations enable us to realise and learn from what we believe are obvious and transparent ways of behaving that that is not always the case and it is good to hear what Anglicans do in other parts of the world that is not necessarily what we do here or how we behave here. Nor do we necessarily and understandably share the same priorities.

Yet the language of love, hope and holiness is a common language.

The language of love, hope and holiness walks in the light. It recognises that its own interests are not the final word, but that self-giving and self-sacrifice is.

It does not constantly seek advantage or gain.

It is a language that the church has always struggled with, from the time of Paul writing his first letter to the Corinthians to this very day.

It is a language made harder to speak by the real complexities of the world in which we live, the clash of cultures, and the differences of personality.

The brokenness of the world is also the brokenness of our church.

There is an eternal struggle in each of us and among all of us to speak love fluently, and our tongues stumble over its expression and find law and rules and exclusion and a certain tribalism and club mentality comes so much more easily to each of us.

But such living in so normal and earthbound a way cannot express the wonder of salvation or the glory of the treasure laid up in heaven for us (1 Peter 4-5).

It cannot set us free to declare to the world the wonderful works of him who brought us out of darkness into his marvellous light (1 Peter 2:9).

To put it in the simplest terms, we must look like what we speak about.

As Lesslie Newbigin said the “business of the church is to tell and embody a story”. So, we cannot talk about Jesus without looking like Jesus.

I am grateful to Bishop Steven of Oxford for reminding me of this in a paper he wrote recently, “Rethinking Evangelism”. I hope he will speak to it and might even get a bit longer than some of us!

He sets out eight marks of witness to Jesus Christ, but at the heart of what he says is that the witness is both the carrier of the message and its embodiment.

Here we are not only any group of Christians but a meeting of Synod. Synod and synodality is something being discussed by many churches and with many groups at present.

I do think it is well worth while considering what is our purpose here as Christians who are journeying together, we are ‘in the way’ ‘syn’ ‘odos’ walking together, those who are both trying to hear one another, understand one another and walk with each other in the light of Christ.

Synod is the focus of our day to day work, but also of our differences. It is a test tube in which we mix up the ingredients of the church and heat them to see what happens.

If the resulting reaction is to be holy, hope filled and truthful, it must be loving. In many places it is.

The Church of England is not only alive and well but is showing signs of growth, renewal and reform and for this we give thanks and rejoice with the God who made us, loves us, and call us to the hope that is in us.

Numbers of ordinands continue to grow. Parishes and chaplaincies work even harder than ever, at the front line of spiritual, emotional and physical needs in our country.

Dioceses are showing immense effort and imagination in developing new models of church. Church planting goes ahead with over 2,500 planned before 2030.

We are alongside people either to give debt advice or to deliver food or shelter for those in need, or to provide relationships and friendship for those who are struggling with the daily grind of being human.

We continue to educate more than 1 million children.

The work we will hear about from the estates evangelism group is encouraging. We are present for people in some of the most difficult and complicated situations.

Most of all we serve the God who raised Jesus Christ from the dead and whose activity we see all around.

Because of the resurrection we have hope, whatever happens.

Yes, we argue, yes, we fail, yes, we disagree about inclusion and we let people down and we mess up, but do not leave the wonderful work of the Spirit of God out of the equation.

And thus, we have good news to share and show. Thus, as we journey towards Lent some of you may be considering what you might give up during the penitential season.

I urge you to consider especially as members of General Synod giving up cynicism and renewing love for those with whom you and I differ.

It is not easy. Some of them have views we find so obnoxious that we wish they were not in the church. We even convince ourselves that really, in God's mind, because he agrees with us, they are not with us in the church.

Yet they and we are equally loved by God in Christ, equally sinners needing to repent, equally part of the body of Christ.

So, let us hear a little of why each of us has hope in Jesus Christ.

I am now going to ask you to turn to your neighbour or perhaps even better to be in a group of three and to share your faith story with each

other.

Each in one minute, without jargon, explain your hope, not in the Church of England, but in Jesus Christ.

So as we listen to each other, and through this Synod as well as in legislative business we turn to evangelism, let us recall that we are in the presence of Jesus Christ by his Spirit. Let us praise God afresh that we carry the ultimate good news of salvation and love, the news of Jesus Christ.

Let us allow the Spirit to warm our hearts with affection and love for one another, to constrain us with the love of Christ. Let the Spirit of Jesus cause us to imagine how we can be the good news we proclaim.

We are not, in this Church, optimists or pessimists. We are those who hope because we are all followers of the risen Christ, sinners yet justified, failures, cracked pots of clay, yet with the only treasure that is the only final answer to the bleakness of a world that too often finds its despair in seeking its own answers without Christ, and needs the light and hope of the Gospel that is in our hands to proclaim. Amen.

9 min read

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