

Read the Archbishop's welcome speech at the inaugural session of the new General Synod, which was attended by HRH The Earl of Wessex who delivered a message on behalf of HM The Queen.

Your Royal Highness, it is our privilege to welcome you to the 11th General Synod of the Church of England.

We are a year delayed in meeting, because of the pandemic, but as Her Majesty the Queen so presciently said last year in an address on Palm Sunday, which comforted the nation in a particularly dark hour: 'we will meet again'.

We are, of course, also celebrating an anniversary, albeit a year out of time. Not the Platinum Jubilee which we look forward to next year, but the 50th anniversary of General Synod.

Much has changed since the first Synod, but one constant source of reassurance and stability for church and for country has been Her Majesty's leadership, faith and service to the church, to her country and to God. She has been a profound example to us all.

Coming together after so long is a great joy, but it is necessarily tempered by the grief, the suffering and isolation so many have experienced since we last met in person. The lasting impression I have been left with is a renewed sense of the importance of relationship, of interdependence and duty to one another in so many ways and at so many levels.

Recently I visited Pope Francis in Rome, where he presented to Alok Sharma a joint statement on the climate crisis on behalf of faith leaders and scientists, the biggest gathering of such faith leaders we have seen. Climate change is of course the leading example of our interdependence. But the Pope and I also discussed particularly the importance of synod, because the Roman Catholic church is moving towards more synodality. I cherish this part of the church, not always easily, but actually deeply and genuinely, because it is in this part of the church and its life that we allow the Spirit to lead, the Holy Spirit of God rather than any person or faction in particular. Our focus and structure works from the local to the national, via the lay, the ordained and the episcopal – all equal, all valued.

But Pope Francis also talked about syn-hodos, literally 'walking together'. The need to avoid becoming stuck on a particular issue or problem, but to keep moving, and most importantly to keep walking together. In our private discussion he said that any synod that ceases to walk together, that gets stuck in one place ceases to be a synod. That's what Synod does at its best, and what the Church of England does at its best – we make space to walk together, with people with whom we disagree; we learn from each other, to cherish and strengthen the weak and to help the strong to serve rather than dominate.

In her first televised Christmas address Her Majesty spoke about journeying together –she read from 'the Pilgrims Progress', that extraordinary, wonderful Christian allegory where Christian, the protagonist, journeys from the 'City of Destruction' to the 'Celestial City', amid much danger and not a little diversion.

Just a couple of years ago, in 2019, Her Majesty returned to the theme of journeying - she said 'The path, of course, is not always smooth, and may at times this year have felt quite bumpy, but small steps can make a world of difference.'

The path is indeed not always smooth, and many of us have felt the bumps very heavily indeed - bumps, gaps, holes in the road that have caused us to lose those we love most in every family, including your Royal Highness'. We have found at moments like that that with God we do not walk alone, and with another we do not walk alone and those are the moments in which we can find the grace and love of God, moving us onward, towards God's glory.

I have been increasingly celebrating and deeply proud, over these bumpy years, of the way the Church of England has continued serving communities around the country, indifferent to their faith but caring deeply about them in genuine love. You will all know that. Our 33,000 social action projects across the country support people when they are in their deepest need.

We kept these great traditions of the Christian faith - of service and community, - but we found new ways of accomplishing them. We found different ways to walk together, even when we weren't in the same room. We do this, because being the established church means we are the church not just of England but supremely the Church for England, called to serve every person under the crown in this country.

It is our ongoing privilege to walk with and speak up for all churches and faiths in this country, and those of no faith, and I too give thanks for our friendships with other churches and particularly thanks to Archbishop Angelos', His Eminence, for his wonderful words this morning.

It is also our call, supremely, to build deeper relationships of peace and friendship further around the world in a time of greater insecurity, more fragility, and less capacity to disagree. Next year, the Lambeth Conference will bring bishops together from all over the world. The theme is 'God's Church for God's world: Walking, listening and witnessing together.' Those conversations of walking together have already begun online, but when we continue them at Canterbury, we will talk about what it means to be a church that responds to the needs and opportunities of this world with the good news of Jesus Christ.

We meet today, knowing there are difficult decisions to be made and hard conversations to be had. Our willingness to have these messy, difficult and tough decisions and conversations are part of what makes us the Church of England. They mark us out as different: our determination to walk and listen together - to love one another across difference - witnesses to the love of God. But that doesn't mean it's always easy, and today I encourage us all to follow Her Majesty's example in a particular way: in all her years of service, she has, at every point, treated the many hundreds of thousands, probably millions, of people she has met with unfailing courtesy, respect and kindness.

I am humbled beyond words, as I believe every person in this country is, by Her Majesty's example of such selfless service. Whilst so much has changed since 1952, her unfailing love for her people and her God has been a light of faith in our country.

Your Royal Highness, we would be grateful if you would convey to Her Majesty on our behalf the message that we draw great comfort from her prayers for us. In turn please be assured that she and all members of the Royal family remain firmly in our prayers, when that road is bumpy and when it is smooth, as we travel together.

I now call the Joint Registrar of the provinces of Canterbury, York and the Secretary General to make their returns, after which I hope Your Royal Highness will be pleased to read to us Her Majesty's address.

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