



A few months ago those renovating the Great Hall, part of the library at Lambeth Palace, found this – it's a plumb line. It's beautifully shaped and goodness knows how old. It was found behind a wall, it could for all we know be several hundred years old and it's unbelievably heavy.

But a plumb line's chief purpose isn't to draw attention to what it says about itself, but what it enables. A plumb line is used to test verticality and depth.

It is, of course, the prophet Amos who has the vision of the Lord holding a plumb line against the people of God. And as we start this Synod, I offer this image of a plumb line being held against what we have and what we will build, what we stand for and how we conduct ourselves.

Amos uses it to warn the people that God is serious about both justice and judgement.

With the formal Inauguration of Synod, we now stand at the brink of another five year period of the work that the General Synod carries out.

To those of you who are returning, welcome back. To those who are new, the warmest of welcomes.

To all of you, thank you for being prepared to serve the Church in this way. For many of you, I do realise it is a huge commitment of time and quite often of precious holiday time that you sacrifice in the service of the Church. We genuinely thank you from the bottom of our hearts. It is a sacrifice and we know that.

If you're anything like me you come to this experience of a new Synod – whether you yourself are new or returning – with a certain amount of apprehension. How do we best take responsibility for the household of God which is the Church of England?

For me this is the first time that I have seen a new Synod, but I know that Synod has some tried and tested ways of building.

Having learned to like some of the ways of the old Synod, I feel like those in my parish church did when we suggested getting rid of the pews and putting in chairs. The pews may have been beautiful or ugly, comfortable or uncomfortable, there was even a suspicion – which I have to say I may have helped create – that they had been designed by an osteopath who was short of business. But whatever one's opinion, they were the pews we knew.

What is this new Synod to be like?

So much of the atmosphere and environment in which we sit and work seems to guide us in a particular way. We have the wigs, the formality, the points of order, all of which derive from the fact that in the General Synod we are from time to time required to discuss and make the law of the land.

Since Parliament has delegated certain responsibilities, albeit with the check of the Ecclesiastical Commission and the requirement for measures to be laid before both Houses of Parliament, we are required to do things properly, carefully and legally. That is of course exactly as it should be.

However, not everything we do is like that. Many of our debates may lead to legislation, but in their earlier stages they are above all attempts to understand and respond to the call of God – to proclaim the Gospel afresh in this generation.

There is nothing new about that challenge, but a Synod might seem a strange way to seek to meet it.

However, we remember Acts 15. Following the work of Peter in drawing Cornelius and the Samaritans into the Church, and the first missionary journey of St Paul, there was significant dissension in Jerusalem among the leadership of the Church.

All involved came together, and reflected and listened. They were a council, or some ways a synod.

Speaking to the recent Synod of Bishops Pope Francis said, "The world in which we live and that we are called to love and serve, even with its contradictions, demands from the Church the strengthening of synergies in all areas of her mission. And it is precisely on this way of synodality where we find the pathway that God expects from the Church of the Third Millennium."

So, before we are legislators, we are Christians. We are Christians with different views and attitudes, but we are Christians.

The plumb line that is held to us as follows of Jesus Christ, is Jesus Christ himself.

That means we are called to work together with all those, in this country and around the world – all those – who are fellow members of the Church, baptised in the name of the Holy Trinity.

Loving one another and working together is not a choice we are free to make or not to make. It is an obligation we are given.

Within that huge, diverse and extraordinary body that is the Church of God in time and space, the Church of England is one part, and assembles in synods of various forms, including here in the General Synod, to walk together.

So as we stand at the brink of the next Quinquennium, mindful of God's plumb line held up to our common life and its outworking here, what might be revealed concerning our hopes and our fears? What might be the best, and what might be the worst, in terms of how and what we might build together in these five years?

If I might begin with the worst, one of my fears is that we approach this Synod as a place of suspicion and conflict. To use Pope Francis' phrase, we cannot come together in what he called a "hermeneutic of conspiracy".

Many of you will remember the performance of Kenneth Williams in "Carry on Cleo", in which, as he faces his murderers, he cries out, "Infamy! Infamy! They've all got it in for me."

That is not a fresh expression of synodal spirit. But it is for many the default response to almost anything that happens.

Another example comes from the Congress of Vienna in 1815. When the Austro-Hungarian chancellor Metternich heard that the Head of the French delegation, the notoriously wily diplomat Talleyrand, had died, he is said to have remarked, "Now what does he mean by that?"

The Westminster model, in which we are to some extent caught, sets up a mood of equivalence and exchange, in which all Synod decisions are regarded as a zero-sum game, in which one side must win and another must lose.

But that is not the logic of the body of Christ. If any lose, we all lose. If any win, we all win.

My first hope is the counter to my first fear: the extreme opposite.

To steal an expression from the French philosopher Ricoeur, we live rather in a place of abundance and grace – the attributes of God whose generosity is far more abundant than we can imagine and whose grace takes us from the deepest sin into his living presence.

That was the first reaction of the Council at Jerusalem. In Acts 15:3, it says that Paul and Barnabas "reported the conversion of the Gentiles, and brought great joy to all the believers."

The extraordinary surprise of the conversion of the Gentiles is something that the lapse of two thousand years teaches us to take for granted.

But for the Jewish believers it was no less than a complete Copernican revolution. The whole world had changed, and yet it brought great joy to all the believers.

However, some of the believers wanted to set particular conditions for the reception of the Gentiles, especially that they adhere to the Mosaic Law.

But the joy which came first was the joy of seeing the abundance and grace of God, which is not constrained by the limitations of our imagination.

In many ways, the Council of Jerusalem faced turning the experience of the grace of God into practical decision – and perhaps that is our biggest challenge as a Synod.

If the way in which we work is only on the Westminster model, we will neither be overwhelmed with joy by the grace of God, nor capable of finding a way forward that ensures that all those who receive his grace – all those – are enabled to flourish in his love.

The achievement of the Council was that having rejoiced they acted decisively to respond to the work of the Spirit.

In the last Synod, we worked together until we arrived at the Five Principles, which set out clearly both a decision, but also an aspiration for the generous expression of the grace of God.

Agreeing the Five Principles was a moment of genuine synodality. The vision of what this Synod could be was strengthened in that moment. It was a moment of responding to the Spirit – recognising that wherever the Spirit was at work we must encourage life to flourish.

We must not be ashamed of the fact that we are a Church that has its arguments in public, loudly. It is healthy and good. The plumb line doesn't judge disagreement. But it does hold me and each of us to account for how we disagree.

This is one of the public fora in which different views are made apparent.

In an age of instant communications and strong party spirit, combined with the radical autonomy of individual rights, the subtleties and nuances of argument and of responsibility for the whole body of Christ are not well-reported.

Yet for all that people assert the lack of relevance of the Church of England in the life of the nation, there seems to remain an interest in the things we do and say.

Let me quote Pope Francis a third time. At one point in his speech in the middle of the Synod, he said: "What the Lord wants is, in a certain way, already contained in the word synod. Walking together," the Archbishop of York referred to this earlier, "lay people, pastors, the Bishop of Rome, a concept which is easy to put into words, but not so easy to put into practise."

That sets out my second hope. We must build together: lay people, clergy, the House of Bishops.

Building together requires us to listen to discern the mind of Christ. Pope Francis went on: "A synodal Church is a listening church, aware that "listening" is more than "hearing". It means listening to each other when both have something to learn."

This Synod offers enormous challenges to the future of the Church of England, but much more than that, to our role within the global Church, and indeed to our full participation in its life, to which we are called under God.

Each day, at Morning Prayer at Lambeth, we pray a prayer for the unity of the Church, praying among other things, that we may experience the suffering caused by division and see our sin.

A plumb line is that which points to our error, that we may not deny our sin but see it. It is from that place that we learn to hope beyond all hope, that our imagination may be stretched to conceive afresh God's grace outpoured abundantly.

A few weeks ago, the Archbishop of Constantinople and New-Rome, the Ecumenical Patriarch Bartholomew I, paid an official visit. We spent much time in discussion, and built a strong relationship. It is based on links that go back to Archbishop Tillotson in the late 17th century. Yet, that relationship is only as good as our next steps together.

The same is true for us in this Synod. We are called to unity – not for efficiency, or for bureaucratic tidiness, but by the prayer and command of Christ. The plumb line held against us is the very prayer of Christ.

Therefore, during the course of this Synod, I hope and pray that you will agree (and it cannot be enforced on you, this will be a choice of the Synod) that we will regularly find different ways of discussing together in order to listen to one another and not merely to hear one another.

We have been doing that in the structured conversations around the issues of sexuality. We will need to go on doing that, not only on that issue, but on others.

My second great fear is that we are too consumed by the inner workings of the Church of England. That we become a church curved in on itself.

The events of the last two weeks, in Paris, have broken our hearts. In great sorrow, we have seen the impact of religiously motivated violence at its very worst. We will not likely ever be forgiven if this Synod turns inwards at this time of crisis, thinking only of ourselves and our own preoccupations, and that if we neglect the fact that all around us is a great struggle, described recently by Lord Alderdice, who was so instrumental in the Northern Ireland peace process, he described what is happening all around us as the Third World War.

Let me be clear, it is not a war against Islam. Religious extremism is global, and faces us with a generational and ideological or theological struggle. It is a war against extremism and the fundamentalism that prefers to defy God Himself, rather than to live in holiness with those whom we are called to love. And let us remember we are called to love God, one another, our neighbour, and our enemy.

We will not likely be forgiven if we are self-indulgent in our arguments, party-spirited in our approach.

As I just said the conflict around us is global, affecting people of all faiths and none, including vast numbers of Christians, all around the world. Extremism is now a feature of every major faith tradition, including our own.

The conflict is generational – it will see us out – and requires the long, steady, focused haul and determination that alone can lead to overcoming.

And it is theological and ideological. There will be aspects that may involve the use of armed force in a quasi-policing form. We will differ over when that is right and wrong.

Yet at the heart of this conflict, for the first time in centuries in Western Europe, is theology.

So those who are people of faith, us, we have a challenge, and a task.

The challenge is to be like Jesus Christ, the Prince of Peace. The task is to overwhelm extremism not by other extremes but with hope and love.

Victory will mean the end of religiously motivated violence in the way that the great Christian wars that began with the Reformation and ended at the Peace of Westphalia in 1648 defeated Christian generated large scale religious war in Western Europe.

This present conflict must be won for faith of any kind to have any reputation in the public mind.

Let me repeat again, an inward turning, self-indulgent frame of mind that says we will do what we do and never mind the consequences – such a mind will not be forgiven.

On the other hand if we are a Synod that engages with the world around, that puts our own issues in a broader context, that demonstrates that deeply held differences on hugely important questions can be held in love through the grace of God, then we can acquire the right to speak prophetically, and the courage to act courageously and compassionately in a world of war.

Whether we like it or not, I believe Jesus Christ holds his plumb line up to each of us as individuals, to His Church and to this Synod. He does so that we might build wisely, responsibly, skillfully and in a way which will bring God glory.

Let us therefore approach this Quinquennium with an attitude of openness to the Holy Spirit, building together as a Synodal Church.

Let us learn to honour one another and to love one another as those who bear the name of Christ, and who seek to serve him.

Let us demonstrate the self-sacrificial love of the Cross in our debates, in our care and concern, not only for the Church but for the whole nation, and indeed for the whole world.

In five years' time we can look at ourselves as people who have built together, who have listened and heard and although not agreed, have done our best to be faithful to Jesus Christ.

We know that the Council of Jerusalem, despite the wisdom of James' words, was not the end of the matter. In later years, we see Paul still struggling with the fallout of those who disagreed.

Human beings, being sinners, will never be tidy in the way they disagree, or in the nature of their relationships. We will be an untidy Synod because we are a human Synod.

Untidiness in relationships is normal, not fearful: it expresses the richness of who we are.

The last Synod changed its way of working and achieved much.

If we are consumed with desire for each other's flourishing. If we can celebrate rather than resent the work of the Spirit in each other's lives, which expresses not so much who we are but above all whose we are; if we are willing to discover new ways of listening and loving; then this next Quinquennium, meeting at its beginning in the shadow of Paris, will achieve even more. Amen.

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