

Presidential Address by Bishop Tim Dakin: Diocesan Synod, June 2017 – Five Years On!

Part One: A MEDITATION ON GOD'S GRACE

From his fullness we have all received, grace upon grace (John 1:16)

I wonder what feeds your soul, nourishes your life? Let me share what enlivens me and keeps me going. It is simply this: that deeper than any faith I may have, God is there, and he is full of life, and his life overflows to us all: his love is shed abroad in our hearts (Rom 5:5). And this I understand to be God's mission. God shares his life, his love, his fullness, in our creation and our salvation, and for our preservation and fulfilment: *from his fullness we have all received, grace upon grace.*

Most days, even the busiest and most scratchy, I glimpse God's grace gently present, and occasionally his involvement is striking. Sometimes it's easier to see God's grace at work when you're outside your normal context. For me this happened recently on a visit to Jordan, where I was an observer to the Provincial Synod of Jerusalem and the Middle East. I saw God's grace at work, bringing an unexpected resolution to a serious disagreement; I also witnessed his gentle grace through a ministry of missional care for disabled students: 'grace upon grace'.

Mission strategy might not feed your soul. But as a Synod we're called not only to agree strategy, and to set policy and budgets; we're also called to be generative, to bring life in a relational, synodical, way to all that we do. This is about *who* we are with each other, rather than how or what we do.

At the heart of our mission strategy we don't just talk about what we're going to do or what we're trying to achieve, we also talk about *who God is*. Our four strategic priorities begin with the phrase, 'Under God, delighting in his grace'. It's easy to skip over these words and move on to the rule of life or the priorities themselves. But everything we are and all that we can become flows from God's grace.

The Fullness of his Grace

So we delight in God's grace: in the goodness and beauty of creation (Ps 8), in Jesus' atoning death and mighty resurrection (Heb 8), and in the overflow of God's grace into our hearts by the Spirit who indwells all things, interceding for our fulfilment (Romans 8). God shares his fullness – his goodness in creation, his salvation of the world, and his perfection of all things... *grace upon grace!*

One of the great recent comings together has been the recognition by both Protestants and Catholics that we all start with the grace of God as revealed in Jesus. Through him we're made in God's image and in him we are restored and completed: we're a new creation! Though made in God's image our original nature could not have been perfected without grace; besides which we're sinful. Yet God, in his grace – even though we rebel against him – loves us, finds goodness in us and seeks good for us. So we repent, turn to Christ and respond to his call. By grace we're made, saved and will be glorified.

It is from this perspective that we respond to God, drawn by his grace, to give ourselves to him: personally, corporately and nationally. The national church has recognised our own need for renewal and reform. But God's grace is greater than that; it's also about a revival in our national life so that we live by God's grace, in a complex globalised world, for the common good of all.

Grace for the Common Good

It is very encouraging to hear that our bid for strategic funding has moved on to the next stage. Our bid included a rationale for our plans: sustainable growth for the common good. So by God's grace we hope to grow the diocese in a sustainable way that we might make known God's grace through our contribution to the common good.¹ Thus arising from our own renewal and reform we enable the revival of our common life together, regionally and nationally.

In his bestseller *Homo Deus* Yuval Harari suggests, despite media messages to the contrary, that we're beginning to get control over three great threats to humanity: war, plague and famine. The new challenge is what to do with our extended life-span ... soon to be limited only by our technology. So the big questions for the majority of humanity are becoming, "How can I, we, flourish?" and "How can we live together purposefully, peacefully and caring for creation?"

We need more than survival: we need a vision of the common good. The common good 'is not what is good for most people but is the sum total of the social conditions that enable people to reach fulfilment through the just ordering of society'.² I hope our commitment to the common good will offer practical answers to these big questions. Yet, as one of my African colleagues always used to add whenever we'd made a plan of action, "By the grace of God"!

¹ A new booklet helpfully introduces this theme: *Calling People of Goodwill: the Bible and the Common Good* Swindon: Bible Society, 2017

² Austen Ivereigh: *Faithful Citizens: A Practical Guide to Catholic Social Teaching and Community Organising* London: DLT 2010, p163

Part Two: THE GENERAL SYNOD

The General Synod in February included an important report *Setting God's People Free* and a serious debate on sexuality. I will reflect on some fundamental issues relating to the latter. My aim is to offer one way of holding things together and of going forward, having heard a diverse range of views as I've listened to scripture, culture, tradition, our context, LGBTQ+ views and the Communion. Most recently I've listened to our General Synod representatives. We face a dilemma around pastoral care and discernment, requiring gracious non-prejudicial mutual listening and sustained prayer. I'll look at three aspects: first, *cultural trends* around liberty, human identity and sexuality; second, the trajectory of *historic Christian teaching* on sexual identity based on scripture; and third, how we relate together in *church and society*, whilst holding deeply different views yet contributing to the benefit of others in a pluralist world.

Religious Freedom, Identity and Sexuality

In today's liberal societies we have freedom of belief. This is the wider context of *Setting God's People Free*. That we are free to believe is enshrined in the language and legislation of human rights. The Christian contribution to the human rights movement is contested. Yet the Reformation and subsequent struggle for religious liberty in Europe are part of the history of human rights; and Christian values about human dignity, difference and relationships (based on Biblical teaching that humans are created in God's image) were and still are influential.

However, the Christian moorings of our liberal societies are loosened. Freedom of belief has moved beyond the recognition and protection of religious communities. We have begun to see a secular version of this freedom and a freedom of the individual to express their identity. One form of the latter is expressions of sexual identity (LGBTQ+) and new patterns of relationship. These identities and relationships are also gaining legal protection in some parts of the world (eg 'equal marriage'). Having distinguished gender from sex, the cultural trend is towards gender fluidity.

Some advocates of these developments, like Lucy Nicholas, state clearly their ultimate intentions: 'the eradication or rejection of sexual difference' and its influence on how we understand ourselves and our relationships, and 'its replacement with an androgynous, relational ethic of reciprocity'.³ Some Christians might find points of agreement with this view. Others might respectfully disagree, but also look for points of cooperation or a different tone.

Historic Christian Teaching

Historic Christianity teaches us that God gave us our sexual identities, male and female (Gen 2:24; Matt 19:4). In fact God's image is expressed in this male-female relationship of difference and complementarity (Gen 1:27). Indeed, the male-female relationship is not only about the nature of that specific relationship but also becomes a rich resource for understanding God, his relationship with creation, and our diversity in and between cultures. There is debate in some quarters about how historic this view is, but the issues remain fundamental and are derived from the Biblical tradition.

The significance of 'male and female' imagery in Scripture is striking: God's image in us is expressed in male and female together (Gen 1); God's relationship with creation and his people is like a marriage covenant between a man and woman (Hosea 2); Jesus came to complete God's image in us as seen in Christ's nuptial relationship with the church (Eph 5); and one day heaven and earth will be united like a bride and groom (Rev 21 & 22).⁴

It's easy to caricature historic Christian teaching as restrictive; the irony is it provides a basis for resourcing loving relationships across differences and for sustaining family life. Yet the erosion of male and female sexual difference, replacing it with gender fluidity or androgyny, would appear to question this gift of God's grace in creation, salvation and consummation. Blessing relationships contrary to this perspective would also seem to raise deep questions.

Going Forward: Towards the Common Good?

So how can we go forward as church and as society? Perhaps we can learn from inter-religious dialogue (similar to an ethic of reciprocity)? Here we find at least three elements: *respect* for others; recognition of real *difference*; and a search for *cooperation*. 'Respect' implies recognising the dignity of others and the depth of their tradition, viewpoint, or experience. 'Difference' implies that truly alternative worldviews and ways of life exist and don't boil down to the same thing. 'Cooperation' implies a shared search for the common good and the possibility of a principled pluralism.

However, with the 'turn to identity' is there a danger that some identities will be excluded? If androgynous identity and gender fluidity are enshrined in human rights, could this lead to the inhibition of historic Christian values about sexual difference and marriage? A grace-filled principled pluralism could help us here, showing how society as a whole can benefit from the contribution of divergent communities to the conditions of social justice that promote the common

³ Lucy Nicholas: *Queer Post-Gender Ethics: The Shape of Selves to Come* London: Macmillan 2014, p.13.

⁴ See Tom Wright's essay in a collection sponsored by Pope Francis: Lopes & Alvaré (eds): *Not Just Good, But Beautiful* N.Y.: Plough, 2015

good of all. Here everyone is free to change their minds, influence others and make a contribution. Could this be a peaceful way forward, leading to a workable pattern of church and society? By God's grace it might just be possible!