

Bishop's Charge to Synod November 16, 2012

It is a great pleasure for me to welcome you to this 138th Session of Synod, and I want to begin by thanking the Rector and People of St. Christopher's Church for their willingness to host this important gathering. This parish is one of the many churches across the diocese where our Diocesan Vision is lived out in a whole host of creative and innovative ways and it is very fitting that we assemble in this place to deliberate and discern the will of God for our work together in the coming year.

At the very centre of our Diocesan Vision we find these words: "Following Christ passionately, we pursue excellence, practice justice and grow." In past Bishop's charges I have announced a particular focus for the coming year on one of the petals of the Vision and we have looked intentionally at innovation, at stewardship and in this past year we have explored more fully our works of justice. This year, however, I am encouraging each of our parishes in the diocese to look to the very core of our Vision and to ask this question: 'What does following Christ passionately look like for you in your life?' What would it look like for your congregation? What should it look like; what could it look like? What does following Christ passionately mean for us as Anglicans here and now?" Over the coming year I want these questions on the agenda of every Parish Council, every clericus, and every diocesan committee.

I am beginning my sixth year as your Bishop and over the past five years we have busied ourselves and concerned ourselves with important work and significant challenges, and committees have been struck and decisions have been made to address particular issues and opportunities, to the degree that I am left shaking my head as I contemplate the speed at which that time has gone by. I am astounded at all we have accomplished and I am deeply moved and grateful for the journey we have embarked upon, the distance we have traveled and for the place we find ourselves at as we gather for Synod this weekend.

As I reflect upon this challenge to follow Christ passionately, I am aware that the scriptures provide us with a rich mine of images and stories which have and could in future continue to guide our path. In the tenth chapter of Luke's gospel we read the brief but beautiful story of Jesus' visit to the home of Mary and Martha and how Martha was distracted by many tasks while Mary sat at Jesus feet listening to what he was saying. My strong sense, as we make plans for the coming months, is that we are in need of some time at the feet of Jesus. We continue to have many issues that need to be addressed; there are debates and decisions ahead of us with regard to budgets, indebtedness, the role of Cathedral Place in the life of the diocese, support for the National Church, Diocesan Mission and Ministry (DM&M) contributions, Ministry Covenants, governance considerations.... the list goes on and on. What I am saying is that in the midst of these and many other important conversations, we need to turn our attention to the centre of our Vision and ask ourselves this important question once again: "What would it look like in the midst of all these things, to follow Christ passionately?"

So let me get the ball rolling and tell you what I think it has looked like for us in the Diocese of Niagara, and what it will mean for us in the coming year and beyond.

This evening, in our New Testament reading from the book of Acts, we heard the familiar story of the day of Pentecost, the day that the gift of the Holy Spirit descends upon the Apostles and is given to the whole Church. The passage opens with these lines: "When the day of Pentecost had come, they were all together in one place." When Jesus began his earthly ministry, his first action was to call the disciples to follow him and as he did this he called them into community. He didn't call one disciple at a time and teach them the ropes separately, one by one, and then send them off ...he called them into this ministry together. It was in this community of followers that his friends listened to his word, they witnessed his miracles, they shared in his healing. In the midst of this community they argued with each other, they got angry, they doubted, they feared for the future, they broke bread together and they rejoiced and praised God for how this opportunity had changed their lives forever.

After Jesus' death, and in our Gospel lesson tonight, we hear that even in the midst of this bitter loss; in the wake of such a violent tragedy, they were together and as the risen Christ stood before them in the glory of the Resurrection somehow the reality of his presence, his hope and his peace was experienced and made known in their gathering once again. It is no surprise then that as the Day of Pentecost unfolds we find the community gathered in one place.

Over the past several years I have called the people of this diocese to come together. Together in our Cathedral, in the service of installation, we began our work as Bishop and fellow ministers of the gospel. Together, over so many gatherings, we shared our stories, our hopes and our dreams for our church. We made room for the Spirit to speak to us and our Diocesan Vision was born. In my own Episcopal ministry that same challenge to follow Christ passionately has taken me across the diocese and across the country; to places at the feet of those living with injustice and to the seats of political power; to poverty round tables, to Queen's Park, to Lambeth Palace, to Canterbury, to Cuba and Africa and even to the Vatican. It has also led me to reflect more deeply on the place of prayer, justice-making, innovation, stewardship and outstanding leadership in my own life and calling.

I continue to invite the parishes and regions of the diocese to uphold this work of corporate discernment and I want to thank those parishes who have accepted my invitation to gather and to share in these holy conversations about the future of their work and ministry. Invariably when I ask for this to happen, the first response is an expression of fear that I have some hidden plan or an agenda to close churches. I want you to know that I understand that this is a particular moment in the life of the church that brings with it a great deal of uncertainty and anxiousness but I would also want you to know that for me these invitations come from a profound sense that this is how God has empowered and transformed God's people down through the centuries, and that together across the Diocese of Niagara, in so many exciting ways, God's Spirit is descending upon us and empowering us as well.

This divine calling to engage in a ministry that is strengthened by fostering partnerships and by building relationships is sacramental in nature and is, I believe, at the very centre of what it means to be an Anglican. The fact that we are members of an Anglican "Communion" speaks of our deep understanding that it is God's will that we live out what we believe in the context of a community that goes far beyond our own individual faith journeys and also well beyond our parishes. It has implications for who we are as a diocese, what it means to be synodically governed and episcopally led. We are called into relationship with Anglicans nationally and internationally and this calling is also fundamental to the ministry that we are engaging in beyond the walls of our church buildings, as we seek to encounter and reach out to a whole new generation of people, many who claim to be spiritual but not religious. It is my experience as your Bishop over these past five years that we are often inexplicably unable to state what it is that makes us Anglicans and what distinguishes us from congregational denominations and churches.

I truly believe that this is something that we need to change and I want to challenge any decisions that we make about our future unless it comes with a true appreciation of the gift we have been given in what our Primate is fond of describing as "this beloved Church of ours." What does it mean to follow Christ passionately? What does it mean to follow Christ passionately as Anglicans and as members of this diocesan family in Niagara?

As the followers of Jesus gathered together in this one place on the day of Pentecost we are told that something miraculous and awe-inspiring took place: a sound like a violent rush of wind, images of fire rested upon them and they began to speak in many different languages. For me, however, the most incredible and inspiring verse in the passage is this one: "Now there were devout Jews from every nation under heaven living in Jerusalem. And at this sound the crowd gathered and was bewildered, because each one heard them speaking in their own language."

Writing about this reading from the Book of Acts, Christopher Duraisingh, Missiologist and Professor in Applied Theology at the Episcopal Divinity School has this to say: (in Waging Reconciliation: God's Mission in a Time of Globalization and Crisis):

“Perhaps the most powerful image of the Pentecost story is the richness of diversity. As the story opens, the first thing that strikes us is the fact of the milling crowd, of masses of people, a sea of humanity, in the narrow streets of Jerusalem. They come in different colors and speak different languages. They include Arabs and Libyans, Romans and Iranians, a microcosm of the then-known world. In the experience of Pentecost, the gospel is heard in the interwovenness of the plurality of peoples, in cultures in collision.”

As we have endeavoured to follow Christ passionately in the Diocese of Niagara many of us have discovered that we are called to do more than just come together and that in fact God has called us to be open to each other and to honour the rich diversity that we find in the perspectives and in the lives of the people we are called to welcome and to serve. We have been challenged to find a new understanding that unity does not mean uniformity. Surely the painful experience of our Indigenous brothers and sisters in the past and our work to restore those relationships has taught us that lesson if nothing else?

Like so many people around the world I have been captivated by the story of a young Pakistani schoolgirl by the name of Malala Yousafzai who was shot by a Taliban gunman because of an anonymous blog she used to campaign for the rights of girls to have an education in that country. It is one of so many horrendous acts of violence that have resulted from the human scourge of intolerance that our world continues to be plagued with. It has been wonderful over the past few weeks to hear that Malala has been making a miraculous recovery and it is also wonderful to see that this incident has had a very different outcome from the one that the perpetrators had hoped for.

This week British newspapers were reporting that former Prime Minister, Gordon Brown, has presented a petition to the President of Pakistan that demands free and compulsory education for young women and what is particularly moving is that it contains over one million signatures from Malala's own country. Her story has inspired and brought together millions of people around the world and a new petition is now circulating that calls for her nomination for the Nobel Peace Prize.

In the fourth chapter of John's gospel Jesus is exhausted from his journey and is sitting by a well alone in the noonday sun. A Samaritan woman approaches the well to draw water and, as she comes closer, Jesus surprises the woman by asking her to give him a drink.

It is an astonishing request for several reasons: the Jews of Jesus' day would have nothing to do with a Samaritan for they were considered heretical and unclean and, besides this, men and women in both their societies did not speak to each other in public. In many respects it was an encounter that never should have happened and yet what I absolutely love about this story is that this meeting, and the dialogue they engage in, is the longest recorded conversation that Jesus has with anyone in the gospels! Professor Duraisingh writes: “It is ... the demand upon me of those who are different, and the challenge they pose to my own prejudgements, that result in a decentering of myself. The other is the one who beckons me to change, who breaks open my boundaries.”

For me it is this opening up of ourselves to the “other” in so many different ways, that has allowed us to follow Christ passionately over the past few years but I would hasten to add that we still have a long way to go! I believe that when difference, diversity and disagreement, no matter how severe, gives us the excuse to walk away or turn our backs on each other, then we diminish our own ministry and calling and our actions run contrary to the ministry of Christ. What would it look like for us to follow Christ passionately and to be more open to the “other” in our congregations, our clericus gatherings, and the communities we are called to serve in the coming year?

Finally in our Gospel lesson tonight the risen Christ appears before the gathered disciples and he offers them the resurrection gift of peace. He says to them: "Peace be with you. As the Father has sent me, so I send you." The Greek word "ekklesia," that English versions of the scriptures translate into the word "church," points to a gathering of people who have been "called" or "called out." Over the past year the people of the Diocese of Niagara have followed Christ passionately by our relentless acknowledgement that God is calling us out to participate in God's mission for the world. I am so grateful that in communities across Niagara, we are feeding the hungry, we are walking with the homeless, we are standing with the marginalized, our prophetic voice is being heard everywhere and we are inviting ourselves and others to explore our relationship with God in innovative and creative ways. As I visit parishes in every region of the diocese I never cease to be amazed and inspired by the wonderful things you are accomplishing and I am so very grateful for the time, talent and treasure that you have dedicated to this work that we share in together. What would it look like, in every congregation in this diocese, to follow Christ passionately and to embrace more fully the mandate that was given in and through his resurrection: "As the Father has sent me, so I send you."

As I conclude my charge this evening, it is traditional, at least in the printed version, to give thanks to a whole host of those who have so richly earned my personal gratitude. Every year as I have endeavoured to do this, I have inadvertently left one or two people out. This year, therefore, I want to instead offer three blanket expressions of thanks.

First of all, in addition to my gratitude to God for your ministries, I want to thank you, the people of our diocese, both clergy and lay, for your continued prayers, for the warm and gracious welcome you have always given me as I have visited our parishes over these past years and for the care, the compassion and the privilege you have extend to me as I continue to serve as your Bishop.

Secondly, I want to thank my colleagues at Cathedral Place, both our staff and our volunteer leaders, who continue to work so passionately for the people of this diocese. They have encouraged me and supported me in so many ways and I want to thank each one of them from the bottom of my heart. Debbie Young celebrated her 25th anniversary this year in our Finance Department and it is remarkable in this day and age that this is the second 25th anniversary we have marked in as many years and I know that you join with me in expressing once again my thanks for her dedicated service to us all!

Thirdly, I want to publicly thank my wife and family for their love and support as I have engaged in a ministry that takes me away from home on many nights and many days and one that has many challenges.

Finally let me repeat the words of the risen Christ who came to that gathered community of diverse, anxious yet faithful followers who would soon be empowered by the gift of the Holy Spirit to proclaim the gospel message both far and wide: "Peace be with you. As the Father has sent me so I send you." Let us look to our Vision in the coming year and let us focus on the very core of that Vision and together let us follow Christ passionately in the days and weeks to come.