

Opening Address – Diocesan Synod 11.10.2025

I want to start this morning with a thank you. Thank you for being here today, particularly in light of the fact that this is a whole day meeting of the Diocesan synod. I want to recognise and acknowledge that for many here today you will have done a full week of work and then you will be in one, or maybe more than one, of the churches across the diocese tomorrow. So, a big thank you for giving up your time to be here today and for all you will give as we hear from one another and as we seek to build up our common life together.

In gathering together we do as the church did from its early days in coming together from a wide range of contexts, to hear where God is moving and to discuss matters which affect the mission of God's church, the care of its people, and us all.

In Acts chapter 15, the early church gathered together in Jerusalem to consider the question of whether Gentiles who had come to believe in Jesus should have to be circumcised and required to keep the law of Moses. In other words, whether to be a Christian, a person needed to take on the requirements of the Jewish faith and law. The whole debate is summarised in verses 6 and 7,

'The apostles and elders met to consider this question. After much discussion....'

A debate which, I suspect, went on for quite some time, is summarised by Luke in 12 words. Instead, what Luke decided was important to record was how Peter, Paul and Barnabas were able to give testimony as to how they had seen God move amongst the Gentiles. The church came together to answer an important practical question and at the heart of their decision was the movement of God's spirit. In their practical decision to welcome those from non-Jewish backgrounds to be part of the church without taking on some of the practical requirements of the Jewish law, the early church both affirmed the tradition which many had come from and, at the same time, affirmed where God might be moving outside of that inherited

tradition. An early example of what now might be termed as a mixed ecology church!

So, as we come together this morning, I invite you to pay attention to where God might be moving, not only as we hear stories from around our diocese, but also as we debate the necessary practical aspects of our life together. And as we do so, to recognise the movement of God's spirit in ways which might be deeply safe and familiar to us and in ways which might not be our comfort zone or our preference.

So, I encourage us to come to our considerations and discussions with an openness to see where God is moving and with courage to hear things which might make us think differently. If we do so, we will be in good company with those who first gathered in Jerusalem.

But as we come with openness to where God is moving, I also want to encourage us to come together with the fruit of the Spirit, and most particularly with kindness. In Galatians chapter 5 verses 22-23, Paul writes to the church in Galatia,

'The fruit of the Spirit is love, joy, peace, forbearance, kindness, goodness, faithfulness, gentleness and self-control.'

To get here to today, I had to drive through Stevenage, which I do often when I leave my home in Knebworth. As I did so, I passed flag upon flag attached to lamp posts.

As these flags began to emerge a few weeks ago in the light of the Unite the Kingdom protest on 13th September, it felt threatening and deeply uncomfortable. As I drove towards the Novotel hotel in Knebworth which has housed those who have come to this country seeking asylum, I couldn't help but reflect that if I was finding the presence of these flags and every mini-roundabout having been painted with a red cross, intimidating, how on earth must those whose place of sanctuary was such an obvious building be feeling.

As I've listened to friends, colleagues, people in our communities for whom England is their home and who now feel threatened and unwelcome just because of the colour of their skin, it makes me sick to my stomach.

In saying this I am not, for one moment, saying that there aren't issues in our society which need to be addressed, or that everyone who marched on 13th September was a racist, but we seem to be losing our ability to be fundamentally kind to one another – to listen and take seriously people's concerns, but to encourage a dialogue with a starting point of kindness and valuing the intrinsic worth of each individual.

Over the summer I read Jacinda Arden's autobiography 'A different kind of power'. In it she described how, on becoming the 40th prime minister of New Zealand she was asked what it was she wanted to do. Her reply was to bring kindness back.

She went on to reflect,

Some people thought kindness was sentimental, soft. A bit naïve even. I knew this. But I also knew they were wrong. Kindness has a power and strength that almost nothing else on this planet has. I'd seen kindness do extraordinary things: I'd seen it give people hope; I'd seen it change minds and transform lives. I wasn't afraid to say it aloud, and as soon as I did, I was sure, Kindness. This would my guiding principle no matter what lay ahead.

Our society at the moment could do with rediscovering this fruit of the Spirit, to rediscover kindness, and dare I say it, so could the church.

We have an opportunity today to debate, to discuss, to be open to see where God is moving and to join in, but we also have an opportunity to model kindness – kindness which can do extraordinary things – kindness borne of the Spirit of God dwelling within us.

So as we begin our day together – as we hear what God has been doing and what God might be calling us into – as we deal with important matters of resourcing and governance – I commend to you the simple principle of kindness, through which we can build one another up and be a blessing to our churches, communities and society.