

# ST ALBANS DIOCESAN SYNOD

## Presidential Address

14.3.26

Synod, we meet against the background of significant conflict in our world, most recently that in the Gulf. Alongside our prayers for peace, for our armed forces and world leaders, I, like you, am conscious of the number of people affected by this beyond the Gulf. Within our own Diocese a considerable number of people, including some of you maybe, have family, friends or colleagues in the Gulf, Israel and other countries. Although reduced in number we have Iranians in our congregations, many of them asylum seekers.

So firstly, can we keep some silence together as we hold all that and more in prayer,

(Silence)

### Matthew 25:37-40

<sup>37</sup> *"Then the righteous will answer him, 'Lord, when did we see you hungry and feed you, or thirsty and give you something to drink?'<sup>38</sup> When did we see you a stranger and invite you in, or needing clothes and clothe you?'<sup>39</sup> When did we see you sick or in prison and go to visit you?"*

<sup>40</sup> *"The King will reply, 'Truly I tell you, whatever you did for one of the least of these brothers and sisters of mine, you did for me.'*

One of my favourite saints is St Alphonsus Rodriguez, born in 1532 and who died in 1617. A Jesuit Brother he served at the Jesuit College in Majorca for forty-six years. He was a humble doorkeeper. His duty was to receive visitors to the college, search out the fathers or students who were wanted in the parlour, deliver messages, run errands, give advice to the troubled and distribute alms to the needy. He was devoted to finding God in the present moment. 'Lord let me know you. And let me know myself' he would pray. Each time the college bell rang, he looked to the door and envisioned that it was God himself standing outside seeking entrance. On his way to answer, he would say, 'I'm coming Lord'.

Seeing God, seeing Christ in others, is that core recognition of each person created in the image of God, each person beloved and precious in the sight of God. That encounter with Christ in others, whoever they might be and however other to ourselves, is at the heart of Christian welcome. We are often not good at welcoming and including those who are 'not like us'.

So, holding that before us I want to focus on three things relevant to our common life.

Firstly, being a church that is safe for all is a priority for us all. Thank you again for all that you and your colleagues have done to make ours a safer Diocese.

We know in the Diocese the impact when people are not safe. We know the hurt that many experienced through abusive action and culture at Soul Survivor. You remain at the fore-front of our prayer. We continue to listen and learn from your experiences. The Christ in the other was not honoured, but rather abused.

Yet, whilst stressing that, I also want to acknowledge how Soul Survivor Watford has responded to those events. They have responded fully to the review carried out by Fiona Scolding, KC and amended their Bishop's Mission Order in the light of the Review's Recommendations. This in turn led onto changes in the regulations for Bishop's Mission Orders to the benefit of new mission initiatives across the whole national church.

Soul Survivor Watford, like all churches, is committed to continuing to grow and to develop as a place that is safe for all. I want thank Jon Stevens, his colleague Simon Nicholls and all the team, along with David Mitchell and his fellow trustees, for all that they have done to make Soul Survivor Watford a safer place for all. At the heart of this is valuing Christ in each and every person. It is good that going forward Soul Survivor Watford will be a resource for the Diocese (although at this stage not receiving SMIBB funding as the Church Times and Telegraph erroneously reported).

The work of learning, listening and ensuring a culture of safety is ongoing for us all.

Secondly, we should take encouragement from how our Diocese is developing as a place of welcome for all. The task of seeing Christ in the other – of envisioning God in the other.

We have appointed Charli Conway as our 0.4 Diocesan Disability and Deaf Concerns Officer with the task of enabling disabled and deaf people to play a full part in the life of the church. The post is funded from excess proceeds from the sale of a former centre for the deaf. She is supported in this by our two voluntary Archdeaconry Advisors, Becky Mynett in Bedfordshire and Em Coley in Hertfordshire. There is a wonderful opportunity to advance accessibility in every sense across our churches.

Similarly, using national money voted by General Synod to take forward the racial justice agenda so powerfully outlined by Guy Hewitt when he spoke at our Synod in October 2023, we have appointed Ben Hammond as full-time Racial Justice Officer. He will work alongside Jairo Nyaongo our Bishop's Advisor and the Racial Justice Group. Now to be chaired by Kathryn Alford, this is an opportunity to thank and pay tribute to Jacob Kurien who has chaired the work for the last three years. Jacob, thank you for your vision and leadership.

*The King will reply, 'Truly I tell you, whatever you did for one of the least of these brothers and sisters of mine, you did for me.'* Building a church where all are welcome, all can participate, all have voice is not optional.

What is good is that I am increasingly confident that we are making progress. When for instance those in ministry have additional needs we will do all that we can to offer support. We can't always meet the need, and I am sure we can at times do better – not least enabling diverse leadership in our parishes. But we are a long way from that church of not so long ago which so

easily saw disability or ethnicity or mental health needs as an issue that was something of a nuisance.

As I have highlighted before, there is another area where focus is required to enhance our diversity. It is relation to the inclusion of those often described as 'working class'. This was highlighted at General Synod through a motion that among things 'call(ed) upon the House of Bishops to address the structural and cultural barriers to the flourishing of working-class ministers and their ministry at all levels...' And while this was focused on ministry, it could equally apply more widely to our life together.

It is no easy task - the history of the Church in the Twentieth century is littered with initiatives to try and bring change - the Southwark Ordination Course, Kelham, the Aston Scheme and more. Yet here as much as anywhere else there is the challenge of how we see Christ in others as we nurture our brothers and sisters in ministry and call. I welcome the inclusion of **Releasing the whole people of God - Discipleship and Vocation** as the major item on our agenda.

Seeing Christ in others that helps build a safer church; seeing Christ in others that builds a more diverse; seeing Christ in others that builds a younger church.

I am not easily irritated, (you may disagree!) but I do struggle when visiting a congregation and there is a child or two present for whom no allowance is made. Nothing to celebrate their presence; nothing to invite them into the service; nothing to say Christ is in you and you are precious. It is why often - but not often enough - I will add unscripted talk for the child or invite them to join me at the altar and to serve the Eucharist.

We want our church to be younger - you all say it whenever a vacancy comes up - but that requires an attitude of excitement and expectation when a child or young person joins us. It is the same excitement when anyone new comes that should lead to a desire to welcome and to nurture, that they and we may flourish.

See Christ in one another for then we flourish - then we become safe, become more diverse, become younger - and so much more.

*The King will reply, 'Truly I tell you, whatever you did for one of the least of these brothers and sisters of mine, you did for me.'*

*Lord when did we see you .... You saw me in him and her and them and us .*