

Bishop's Presidential Address to Diocesan Synod: 12 March 2019

This room is a different location venue for our Synod meeting. A change of venue, and a change of subject-matter: can we manage a change of culture as well? Our name-badges are part of my desire to personalise the experience of Synod, and that also is the reason we gather in this room, with its warmer and more intimate atmospherics and acoustics, and lines of sight not obscured by pillars. But I will return to that question of culture, and how we develop it, later in this address.

Our question for this evening is about how, through partnering and sharing in wisdom and resources, we can grow the Church and grow God's Kingdom in this place.

Is that even possible? Are we not, like Christian churches throughout the Western world, facing rapid and inevitable decline?

From material issued by 'Leading Your Church into Growth (LYCiG)', here are thoughts on 'Decline':

- Our perception is worse than the reality: Decline is like the woodworm that erodes us gradually rather than the wolf that suddenly consumes. But, clearly, the longer we leave it, the more damage it does.

- LYCiG offers 3 specific observations on 'Decline':

1. Pubs, post offices, political parties, shops, cricket clubs, newspapers: these are all declining, indeed more rapidly so than the Church. We recognise that we live in a post-modern world where trusted and longstanding institutions are finding existence difficult, and in that context the Church can actually be seen as doing well.
2. In most churches, decline is gradual (as noted above). If you have a congregation of sixty adults which is declining by 3% annually, you only have to find three new people a year to be growing.
3. Decline is like global warming: we know that we need to reverse it, and we believe we can do so, but we keep putting it off.

Why do we keep putting off our engagement with decline? What is it that saps our energy and determination to reverse decline? Why is it all so difficult?

Here is a parable, not from scripture but from the canon of literature. Translated from German, it is called 'Before the Law'. It speaks not just to the questions that I raise now but also to problem-solving in its wider and general context.

Before the law sits a gatekeeper. To this gatekeeper comes a man from the country who asks to gain entry into the law. But the gatekeeper says that he cannot grant him entry at the moment. The man thinks about it and then asks if he will be allowed to come in later on. "It is possible," says the gatekeeper, "but not now." At the moment the gate to the law stands open, as always, and the gatekeeper walks to the side, so the man bends over in order to see through the gate into the inside. When the gatekeeper notices that, he laughs and says: "If it

tempts you so much, try it in spite of my prohibition. But take note: I am powerful. And I am only the most lowly gatekeeper. But from room to room stand gatekeepers, each more powerful than the other. I can't endure even one glimpse of the third." The man from the country has not expected such difficulties: the law should always be accessible for everyone, he thinks, but as he now looks more closely at the gatekeeper in his fur coat, at his large pointed nose and his long, thin, black Tartar's beard, he decides that it would be better to wait until he gets permission to go inside. The gatekeeper gives him a stool and allows him to sit down at the side in front of the gate. There he sits for days and years. He makes many attempts to be let in, and he wears the gatekeeper out with his requests. The gatekeeper often interrogates him briefly, questioning him about his homeland and many other things, but they are indifferent questions, the kind great men put, and at the end he always tells him once more that he cannot let him inside yet. The man, who has equipped himself with many things for his journey, spends everything, no matter how valuable, to win over the gatekeeper. The latter takes it all but, as he does so, says, "I am taking this only so that you do not think you have failed to do anything." During the many years the man observes the gatekeeper almost continuously. He forgets the other gatekeepers, and this one seems to him the only obstacle for entry into the law. He curses the unlucky circumstance, in the first years thoughtlessly and out loud, later, as he grows old, he still mumbles to himself. He becomes childish and, since in the long years studying the gatekeeper he has come to know the fleas in his fur collar, he even asks the fleas to help him persuade the gatekeeper. Finally his eyesight grows weak, and he does not know whether things are really darker around him or whether his eyes are merely deceiving him. But he recognizes now in the darkness an illumination which breaks inextinguishably out of the gateway to the law. Now he no longer has much time to live. Before his death he gathers in his head all his experiences of the entire time up into one question which he has not yet put to the gatekeeper. He waves to him, since he can no longer lift up his stiffening body.

The gatekeeper has to bend way down to him, for the great difference has changed things to the disadvantage of the man. "What do you still want to know, then?" asks the gatekeeper. "You are insatiable." "Everyone strives after the law," says the man, "so how is that in these many years no one except me has requested entry?" The gatekeeper sees that the man is already dying and, in order to reach his diminishing sense of hearing, he shouts at him, "Here no one else can gain entry, since this entrance was meant only for you. Now I'm going to close it."

I refer to this as a parable because narrative devices characteristic of a parable are clearly present (the absence of proper names, the concentration of the plot, the point at the end). Like a biblical parable, it offers a clear point: indeed, perhaps more than one. So how would you interpret this parable by Franz Kafka ('Vor dem Gesetz' ('Before the Law'), from Kafka's novel *Der Prozess* (*The Trial*))? What might you take from it?

These are lessons that I learn from this alarming parable of human existence:

- The door is actually always open, although we may not think so.
- Perception and illusion may be more persuasive than reality.
- Our own fears hold us back.
- Our fears may be without foundation.

- We can be put off by superficial appearances.
- We can yield to demoralisation and anger.
- We can be reluctant to engage at a deeper level.
- Lethargy prevents action.
- To put off is easier than to take action.
- The answer is there all the time.
- Every complex problem contains within itself its own solution.
- We can be too ready to accept discouragement.
- We can become obsessed with a single obstacle, at the expense of the wider idea.
- There are tasks that only I can do.
- One day it will be too late.

Some of these things are very negative reactions which will turn us in on ourselves, and if we give in to them we will become an inward-looking church. By contrast, LYCiG speaks of developing a 'culture of Invitation'. This is what we are doing with the assistance of Michael Harvey, who is working with seven parishes following his CMD presentation on 13 February. He offers us A Culture of Invitation, A Culture of Change.

'If you develop a 'culture of invitation' and just invite one or two people to church a month, you will grow.'

What is culture change, so often enjoined upon us and yet so difficult to achieve? And what is conversion? Are they the same thing? Not quite; but there will not be conversion without change.

It may have to do with a way of speaking, and a way of understanding; with **the vocabulary that we use** in order to convey and receive meaning. Our vocabulary, both in words and in gesture, can be positive and welcoming and hopeful, or it can be closed and negative.

We can speak of Inviting, of Sharing, of Resourcing, and of Partnering in Mission, but we need to mean it, and to have a sense of what it will involve. Establishing that understanding is our task for this evening, our 'substantive issue' under Item 9 of the Agenda: but before we embark upon it, here are a couple of further thoughts from me:

- We need to think seriously about partnering and sharing, to the extent of combining our resources, learning from each other, and 'twinning'. Within our Mission Partnerships, we can share knowledge, wisdom and experience, both pastoral and practical; we can open our borders; we can share with another parish in study-programmes, missional initiatives, even financial undertakings.

- In contrast to the normally individualist calling of the Prophets of the Old Testament, The Lord did not send people out alone. Nor did the early Church, even in the book of The Acts of the Apostles (Paul travelled with Barnabas and John Mark and Luke); nor the later Church in its models of Mission; nor the Religious Orders; nor the Mission Agencies of today such as USPG. Mission is collaborative, and where we do not have the capacity within our own resources, we look to brothers and sisters elsewhere in the Christian community to support us.

Here too are further thoughts from LYCiG:

- Growth requires a change of attitude, of use of resources, time and energies.
A change in our thinking from

- Surviving to thriving
- Maintenance to mission (which includes maintenance)
- Fearing evangelism to embracing it
- Decline to growth

- It requires time spent in the vital process of establishing a relationship with a person, which then becomes one-to-one evangelism.

-It requires time spent preparing, and implementing Evangelistic Events, and Enquirers Courses, of the highest quality.

- It requires deep prayer, and it requires the kind of open and imaginative discussion within our own local contexts which I want us to initiate this evening. So ...

1. How might you move from Maintenance to Mission, as a parish?
2. What help might the Mission Partnership give with this?
3. What might you as a parish offer to the wider Mission Partnership?
4. Is there another parish within the Mission Partnership that can help you?
5. How might you draw these points together into a Mission Action Plan, perhaps in Partnership with another church or parish?

I am not imagining that we have our answers to all those questions this evening. But if we have asked the questions, and if we have engaged with them in heart and mind, we are on a journey. Michael Harvey and others will help us on that journey. As in Kafka's parable, the door is always open: but, as the parable also warns, we will need deep resolve and faithfulness if we are to enter. We will also need courage. And perhaps most of all we will need the trustfulness and the generosity of heart that enable us to share and to partner in going forward together as the people of God.