

Diocesan Synod – Presidential Address

Saturday 15 March 2008

‘It’s grim up north’, so Monty Python used to tell us. Some even believe it and think that makes it difficult to attract clergy to serve in the north. My chaplain tells me that one southern friend from theological college said that she could imagine visiting people in Exeter but not in Wakefield because it wasn’t really on the way to anywhere! In fact it’s not true, it isn’t hard to attract clergy - certainly not in the Wakefield diocese. It’s instead the dioceses to the east and south east of us, Lincoln, Ely, Norwich and St Edmundsbury that often suffer. Parishes are grouped in double figure; villages have less than thirty souls. Sometimes for good or for bad the only answer is to close a church.

This was the fate of Fornsett St Mary inland from Great Yarmouth and Lowestoft. Yet it was from this tiny village that the Lambeth Conference originally sprang. Its vicar, John Colenso was nominated to be Bishop of Natal. He was a holy and scholarly man, but not the world’s best diplomat. Writing about the Bible, fairly radically for the mid-nineteenth century, he caused great offence by using the new scientific methods of historical criticism. None of us would turn a hair now but then his interpretation of scripture caused a furore. His senior bishop immediately attempted to remove him and people took sides both ways.

In 1867, the Archbishop of Canterbury, Charles Longley, realised he could not sit on the side-lines. Something must be done. His remedy was to invite bishops in communion with him from England and around the world for a conference at his palace-home in London. So the first *Lambeth Conference* was born. It was only fairly successful. Each bishop, just like now, received a personal invitation; but by no means all came. Not even all the English bishops turned up. The Archbishop of York *even* decided he had something better to do!

So the Lambeth Conference was born out of controversy. Should we be surprised? Hardly, it is a feature of Christian history; it is a commonplace of all human experience. Look at Holy Scripture. Paul’s letters are full of controversy. The Corinthian Christians caused him constant heartache, it seems; he addresses those in Galatia at one point saying ‘You foolish Galatians, what has bewitched you?!’ They are divided – some for Paul, some for Cephas (Peter), some for Apollos; they are ungenerous, even mean – he has to remonstrate with them to give to the Church. Then later the Council of Nicaea which set us on the road to our creeds, or the Synod of Whitby (not that far from here), which led to a united English Church, all came out of controversy. Disagreement is nothing new nor something which the church has invented in the last 20 years!

All this is worth remembering as the newspapers and other media attempt to make mischief from our disagreements. One of the key issues still, as with Colenso is how *do* we interpret Scripture. Does it rule out homosexuality or women bishops? Can it help us decide on nuclear power or war and peace – we shall return to that later. Will cultural differences mean that in different parts of the world our answers to those questions may not be the same? It seemed like that in 1988 at the Lambeth Conference when western provinces of the Communion bowed to those in Africa on polygamy. Polygamy would not be acceptable here, but in Africa it may take time for changes to happen. Bishop Hilkiyah from Mara even made it clear to me that it has been an issue for parts of his own family.

Now you may feel so far that this is all very fine but what has it to do with us here in South and West Yorkshire? Or more to the point what does it have to do with the Diocese of Wakefield? I have already given you a couple of hints, one just a moment ago. I mentioned Bishop Hilkiyah. If the western provinces of the Communion had voted straight forwardly to *outlaw* polygamy it would have put the Anglican churches in Tanzania, Kenya, and indeed Nigeria in an almost impossible position. In these places, polygamy is a cultural reality which cannot be ended by an edict from on high. The mission of these churches would have been blunted. Such change *must* come but *slowly* and with *subtlety*.

Similarly now, some provinces and some dioceses have postured and threatened to leave the communion. There are those in England who have sympathy with them. We no longer live isolated lives. What happens in one part of the world can have a 'knock on' effect elsewhere. So, as we now know, some of the most extreme statements coming out of Africa have been written by extreme conservative Anglicans in the U.S.A. English speaking (and often English born) Anglicans in South America work with those in Sydney. If we, here in Wakefield, are not part of the Lambeth conversation, influences from elsewhere could subvert us and divide us. If we are part of a worldwide communion we can work together and support each other.

... Which brings me on to the second point that I have 'trailed', a second point which is of immediate relevance for all of us. I am invited to the Lambeth Conference, as is the Bishop of Pontefract, by a personal invitation of the Archbishop of Canterbury. In other words, the two of us and all the other hundreds of bishops are not invited as part of an amorphous mass, as representatives of the Church of England. We are invited personally – not, of course, like personal invitations to a party. We are invited because we focus 'the local church.' The local church *is* the diocese, not the parish nor the Church of England. The bishop focuses that local church. If you are in communion with your diocesan bishop then you are *part* of it.

So, on that basis, Bishop Tony and I shall take the Diocese of Wakefield, with all its joys and sorrows, all its opportunities and challenges to the Lambeth Conference. We shall contribute all of that. We shall also learn and bring things back to you. If we need any evidence of how enriching this is, we only need look to our Mara links. It is hard to see how Mara and Wakefield could now prosper alone. This link itself grew out of the Lambeth Conference in 1988. This year we celebrate twenty years and I am leading a group going to Mara to celebrate and build on this. Two years ago, remember, you helped save the people of Mara and the Serengeti from what almost certainly would have been a cataclysmic famine. Once again we give profound thanks to God for his grace in allowing that to happen.

So that's a couple of reasons why I think the Lambeth Conference will be important for us as a diocese. So, what will happen at Lambeth? Well here I could, of course, bore you rigid. Let me avoid that and let me be brief. First what won't there be? There will not be endless resolutions as in the past. It has been one of those resolutions, hastily drafted and foolishly put forward that has led to the controversy over sexuality. Secondly, many of them achieve little and are in favour of 'motherhood and apple pie'. No-one can disagree with them but where do they get us? Instead there will be a very strong emphasis on prayer and worship. We shall begin with a retreat. Now, believe it or not, some have complained that there is too much emphasis on prayer! My hope is that this will set the scene, just as it ought to do. Then the topics will focus on 'the bishop *and* ...' – evangelism, injustice, God's mission, the environment, other religions, the abuse of power. I have run off copies of this list of daily themes so that you have some feeling of what we are about. It will also help you in your prayers for the Conference.

This moves me on then to your part now and before the conference. What can you do? First of all, you are just a tiny group when we look at the diocese as a whole. You can go back and inform, educate, enthuse and galvanise your parishes. How about beginning to ask how you can adapt *Transforming Lives* to have a universal impact? How can we transform other parts of our world? Think of the terrible challenges to the Church and to human society in Pakistan, the Sudan, Zimbabwe or indeed Mara. How about our active links with Skara in Sweden, with Georgia, with Adelaide and again Faisalabad in Pakistan and Mara? There's a starter for you.

Then, in the week before Lambeth, we are hosting a number of bishops. You may be able to help with that. There is a great celebration in our cathedral on Sunday 13 July with all these bishops. We want the cathedral to be packed. That same morning the Archbishop of Adelaide is preaching in the cathedral – why not send two or three people to hear him? Then, remembering that the whole

conference is rooted in prayer, please pray for us. This is crucial. Pray for me and for the Bishop of Pontefract. Pray for our partner churches and their bishops – and that includes non-Anglicans, Bishops Erik from Sweden, Bishop Malkhaz from Georgia. Pray for those churches where their churches are devastated by war or injustice – Zimbabwe, the Sudan, Iraq and for Bishop Suheil Dawani in Jerusalem. Finally and essentially, pray for our communion, for the Archbishop of Canterbury, for generosity and forbearance, for humility and for the grace to listen to one another, for what we might give and what we might receive from this extraordinary gathering that happens *only* by God's grace.

When it is over, Bishop Tony and I will think how best to offer to all of the diocese something of what we have learnt and received.

Thanks be to God for all that we are given in Christ Jesus.

Addendum

Over the coming months there will be a number of events where parishes and individuals can learn more about the 2008 Lambeth Conference.

At 7.15pm on the 12th June at the Mirfield Centre, the Rt Revd Michael Doe, (General Secretary of USPG: Anglicans in World Mission and a member of the planning group for this year's Lambeth Conference), will be talking about "Transforming Expectations".

<http://www.mirfieldcentre.org.uk/individualevent.php?pageid=108&eventid=176>

A service with visiting Bishops will take place in Wakefield Cathedral on Sunday 13th July at 4pm, to which everyone is welcome.

Finally, on Thursday 16th October at 2-5.30pm, the respected theologian Clare Amos will be at the Mirfield Centre looking at the Bible Studies used at the Conference this year which she helped to write.

Further details will be available on both the Diocesan Website, and that of the Mirfield Centre and Cathedral as appropriate.