

Diocesan Synod – Wednesday 18 June 2008

Investing in our Faith

On this occasion I am going to begin unashamedly with some brief personal reflections. They take me back all the way to my last couple of years at school. During those two years there were two significant shifts in my life. The first was that I began to read more seriously – novels and much else too. In fact, my mother was delighted to see that I wanted to read some ‘proper’ literature but warned me off Thomas Hardy and Walter Scott. Naturally, the first novels I bought were Hardy’s *The Mayor of Casterbridge* and Scott’s *Guy Mannering*! Secondly and far more significantly I returned to an active Christian faith.

No one made me go to church and eventually over a period of months I was sufficiently convicted that I wanted to return. I did so in the easiest and most Anglican way. I simply walked up to evensong – I never looked back. As I returned to an active faith there were two stories that particularly had a powerful influence on me. Interestingly enough both of them came out of the experience of apartheid in South Africa. The first has a strong connection with this part of the world. It was Trevor Huddleston’s autobiographical book *Nought for your Comfort*. Huddleston was of course a Mirfield monk and indeed a rebellious priest. Even fifty years on his book is compelling and challenging reading. Under God he knew he could do nothing other than resist that terrible regime.

The other book is perhaps the most poetic novel I have ever read. It is Alan Paton’s *Cry the Beloved Country*, again it tells a story against the background and canvas of apartheid. At the end there is a conversation between a black man and a white man about the struggle against apartheid:

‘We will get to the gates of heaven (commented one man) and God will say, where are your wounds and we will say we have no wounds and God will say: “was nothing worth fighting for?”’

Now I begin there and with those challenging books and that quotation because it was at that time that my life was *transformed*. My whole worldview was changed – my aspirations, my fears, my motivation. I was left with a passion that has never since gone away and it all ultimately stemmed from the powerful grace of God. It was not me. It was God challenging me. What did I feel was worth fighting for? Was the Gospel worth living for heart and soul? He was calling me to respond, to give myself to be transformed by him.

This could be, I believe, a key moment in the life of our Diocese. We have an opportunity to look forward and I began with that brief personal reflection since *transforming* lies at the heart of all that we hope for. It is the key word for all of us not just as individuals but working together.

Just a little recap before I expand further. Recently we have been engaged in two significant and sustained initiatives: *Everyday God* and now *Transforming Lives*. As a part of those two linked initiatives we have been brought together in significant numbers (1500 on the first occasion at *Arise* in a pilgrimage to York Minster and then last year at Canon Hall 4000 of us at *All the Saints*; almost every time I meet him Archbishop Sentamu tells me how moved he was by that occasion and how he hopes that other Dioceses might go forward with similar initiatives).

Now all of these initiatives and celebrations are rooted in the assumption that God comes first to us. We do nothing but through his grace we are challenged, loved, comforted, enthused, inspired to live new lives. In other words in response to God’s coming to us we are challenged and called to transform our lives – there we are back where I began. It is at the heart of an initiative too that we shall hear more about at the autumn Synod – the Church of England’s *Transforming Worship* project which seeks to help us transform our worship so that we and others may be transformed by it. It is very closely allied, as you can tell, to our own *Transforming Lives* initiative.

The process that we are launching today we have called *Investing in our Faith*. We have deliberately used those words since they imply giving of every single part of us so that the world might be transformed – our hearts, our minds, our energies and of course our financial giving – all of them come together, all of them are investments. It is not simply about money, it is *everything* that God has given to us being offered back. You all have the leaflet, which sets out something of this pattern that I have already begun to describe.

Now I cannot over emphasise that this is no two-minute wonder. You will remember that both *Everyday God* and even more *Transforming Lives* have been sustained initiatives – *Transforming Lives* will altogether go on for about two years. *Investing in our Faith* will take us forward for at least five years towards the 125th anniversary of our diocese and will look beyond. What is it about?

At the very centre of it is a three-fold pattern which catches up every aspect of our experience. It is set out in those three columns in the centre of the pamphlet:

- 1 **Transformed Churches.** Churches will be challenged to see how they can themselves be transformed. Remember churches do not exist other than through the people who live their lives within them. That is you and me and our lives are transformed too. But we do not live alone, we cannot live without each other and so it is our churches that will be transformed.

- 2 **Transformed Deaneries.** Even individual churches cannot live alone. They live within wider communities and we depend upon each other. ‘Bear ye one another’s burdens and so fulfil the law of Christ’, so Scripture tells us. In other words we owe our lives to each other. That is true as churches as much as for individuals. Deaneries give us units small enough units to enable us to work together to see how we can realistically share what we are given for the mission of God.

- 3 **Transformed Diocese.** The *Transforming Lives* programme will work up to the celebration of All Saints in early November, when we shall be able to offer to each other (because they are not just our own possessions) our visions for transformation as individuals, as churches, as deaneries and thus as a diocese.

All this will involve change. There is no getting away from that. That is what transformation means.

It will mean some changes in structure – particularly strengthening and adding to the bodies we have to look after our finances. Then of course there will be changes so that we can deploy people more effectively – both those we pay as clergy and those who offer themselves as part of their Christian ministry and discipleship more widely. Then, too, is the issue of how we respond ourselves – how shall we invest our energies and all that we are given?

In that final challenge of how we shall respond, finance is bound to play a significant part if we wish God’s mission to be effective. Often parish clergy and parish officers can feel themselves caught in the crossfire. The Diocese is asking for certain things and individual parishioners are not always responding. It is frustrating and sometimes even frightening for those caught in the crossfire. I have heard this and I want us to respond. So stewardship resources and a diocesan wide stewardship pattern will unfold. Sometimes the challenge will be very blunt and simple.

It will be questions like ‘even if people are less well off nevertheless isn’t God worth more than two Mars Bars per week?’ – you know all the other examples about giving. But in the end that is where it really comes down to: it is all about what *we do* with what *we are given*. It says something too about what

we believe about God. Belonging to a church is not like belonging to any other club or interest group. It is about the God who shapes our lives. Without God we are nothing and we can do nothing – how can we offer something back? The leaflet notes at one point that *Investing in our Faith* is a ‘diocesan initiative to renew and transform our lives and our churches.’

This ultimately means investing all of our lives by focusing them on God as individuals and as communities and so I finish by asking you to support the motion that ‘this Synod believes that the transformation of individual lives, congregations and communities is central to the gospel message. We therefore call upon the whole diocese to engage prayerfully in the next stage of our lives together: Investing in our Faith 2008 – 2013 leading the Diocese to our 125th anniversary [and beyond].’