

Primus' Charge

delivered during the Opening Eucharist of the General Synod of the Scottish Episcopal Church on Thursday 10 June 2010

It is fitting that the readings* at this Opening Eucharist of our General Synod should lead us to focus on God's creation and our relationship with that creation. In a world which fears rising sea levels, the story of Noah speaks clearly to us. But we should also hear the challenge to think about our place in the great purposes of God - not just the ground on which we stand. The gospel reading addresses the complacency of those who believe that they have done what is responsible and necessary to secure the future. In present financial circumstances, we have little about which to be complacent - but we crave security. We should be haunted by the words, 'So it is with those who store up treasures for themselves but are not rich towards God.'

As we gather for this General Synod, we bring different feelings and expectations. Earlier on this morning, I met those for whom this is their first General Synod. You are particularly welcome among us. Others are veterans – anoraks of synodical life – waiting for the triumph of hope over experience - fearing that we shall find ourselves yet again worshipping the God of small things. So let us together lift our eyes, our hearts and our prayers. Let us use this time to measure faithfully and in faith the movement forward of our church by God's grace. Let us celebrate and give thanks for vision and spirit-filled creativity as we see God at work among us and in the world we serve. Let us also give thanks for the week by week meticulous faithfulness of people right across this church where, as I believe, God can also be found in faithful attention to the detail. And in everything let us ask the question whether we are 'rich towards God.'

The business before us over the next few days will give us plenty of opportunity to talk about the life of our church, our society and our place in the majesty of God's creation.

We shall visit questions about what it means to be fully human – for example in the Gender Audit. The Anglican Covenant of course arises from the stresses and strains in our life around the issues of human sexuality – the continuing questions about what it means to be human and about the nature of God himself. But it also leads us to ask how we can continue to express a common faith in Christ – to recognize one another as disciples – within the rich diversity of the life of our church and of the Anglican Communion.

The Church in Society Committee invites us to consider our place in society and indeed our place in the whole of God's creation. Our concern for the fragility of the created order is one of the great issues of our times. Our responses often seem puny and inadequate - but we are puny and inadequate before the grace of God. Here too we are called to be rich towards God.

Most of all today, I think of the work of mission – of our part in the work of God whose spirit moves within the whole of creation. I think that we are gradually learning that a church which makes itself the focus of its own life is fated to decline. A church which is prepared to transcend difficulties and challenges is a church which is open to being transformed by the spirit of God – a church which seeks to be rich towards God.

We have been going through a season of Episcopal Elections and I have been privileged to work with the clergy and people of the Dioceses of Glasgow and Galloway and of Argyll and The Isles. I learnt there what I have learnt elsewhere in my life as priest and bishop - that the church is energised when we begin to explore what mission means. Even to talk about it brings to people a feeling that they are handling what faith is about. No longer is the discourse about the church - no longer is it for insiders alone. The church becomes a Pentecost place where everybody can speak in their own language the wonders and the richness of God in their lives.

My movement around our church leads me to be hopeful. The easy security of the past has gone. But in our cities, in the beautiful and sparsely populated spaces of Scotland, in the new and fluid demographics of the Central Belt and the Central Lowlands, we are thinking positively about the future. We have riches of liturgy, preaching, prayer and shared ministry. Our very diversity is a sign of our openness to people of all kinds. And what they seek, I believe, is the chance to be touched by and experience the life of a people who are rich towards God.

The Most Rev David Chillingworth, Bishop of St Andrews, Dunkeld and Dunblane and Primus of the Scottish Episcopal Church

* Genesis 9: 1, 8-17
Romans 8: 18-27
Luke 12: 16-31