

General Synod 2015 – Primus' Charge

He was a good man, full of the Holy Spirit and of faith. Barnabas was of course the encourager. As we approach the work of our General Synod, we should be encouraged - we too should be full of the Holy Spirit and of faith. Jesus tells us that 'we should love one another as I have loved you'. And the pinnacle of Christ-like love is the love than which there is no greater - to lay down one's life for one's friends.

I hear those words of scripture as themselves an encouragement to us - an encouragement to transcend what we expect of a General Synod; an encouragement to strive to act as a community of faith and of love as we transact our business - some of it routine and some of it about things which stir passions; an encouragement to sustain visible unity in Christ as we do God's work together.

There are many things in the work which we shall do during the next few days which in themselves are encouraging. I think particularly of the development of the Scottish Episcopal Institute, the continuing development of the Whole Church Mission and Ministry Policy, the breadth of our interests and concerns as expressed in the work of the Church in Society Committee, the quality, faithfulness and the missional shape of our administration.

The most significant challenge to us as a Christian community comes as we address the questions around Same-Sex Marriage. In this too, we should be full of the Holy Spirit and of faith - people who love and sacrifice for one another?

I believe that that time has come when we must address this fundamental issue of our times. I was in Dublin at a 4 Nations meeting on Faith and Order two weeks ago. It was an extraordinary experience to be in the city of my birth just after the Constitutional Referendum on Same-Sex Marriage. The most Catholic country in Europe decided to make this change - no wonder Archbishop Diarmuid Martin of the Roman Catholic Church said that the churches need a 'reality check'. And in those words he unconsciously echoed the response of Archbishop Justin Welby to the vote in the House of Lords when he said that he now realised how radically and rapidly opinion had changed in Britain on the issue.

Just because society changes we don't have to. But we clearly have to consider the possibility. And that is what we shall do in this Synod.

I have often said that there are two, or indeed more than two, dialogues involved here.

There is a dialogue with our diversity. We weave together in our lives and the make-up of our Church different strands of theological and church tradition. But it is the complex of issues around human sexuality above all which have the potential to turn that diversity from enrichment into division. Our Cascade process of dialogue shaped a space in which our diversity might be spoken and heard. It was a space for the kind of speech which is tentative because it is sincere and speaks of the deepest things in our lives.

There is a dialogue with our tradition - with our reading of scripture, with our theology and with our social and moral teaching. We created another kind of space in the report of the Doctrine Committee - conceptual space for consideration of our tradition. We shall discuss that during this meeting.

We are not yet in a legislative space - one in which we make canonical decisions. But we might say that this year we enter into a deliberative space when we decide whether or not we wish to consider change and what kind of change that might be.

Most of all we need to discern what the spirit may be saying to us at this time - speaking to us through one another, speaking to us through scripture and our tradition of faith, speaking to us and challenging us through the extraordinary social changes taking place around us.

A General Synod is ultimately a way of making decisions. There are votes and therefore inevitably element of the sense of winning and losing. But we can be more than that - more than that in Christ. We can use Synod and its processes to express the underlying unity of our church - a visible unity in Christ. I believe that that means that we all need to be part of any decision - even if we do not all choose to enter into any new situation which may develop. That's visible unity in Christ, with functional diversity.

My hope for this General Synod is that our decision making will be a discernment of God's will for us and for our times. And in that I pray that we shall express the best of Christian community and be an encouragement to one another and to the world which we are called to serve.

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The Most Rev David Chillingworth, Primus