

The Primus' Charge, General Synod 2021

“Let your light shine before others so that they may see your good works and give glory to your Father in Heaven. Do not place your light under a bushel basket. A city built on a hill cannot be hidden.

“These are phrases which are very familiar to us, but which at this time have felt difficult, particularly during the last year and a half. Difficult because the journey we have been on sometimes took away from us the things we naturally did to make the light shine, and sometimes felt like the bushel basket was very close.

“But the psalmist wrote so many wonderful words, and I simply quote:

“Yea though I walk through the valley of the shadow of death, I will fear no evil: for thou art with me; thy rod and thy staff they comfort me.

“I have been meditating on the psalms for much of the pandemic, day by day as we read them in our morning and evening office, I have tried to spend a bit of time thinking about the words more deeply, yet what I am now finding is that as the rules and regulations, the guidance and the frustrations in people have changed then the available time each day has diminished. Those promises I made to keep my diary centred on the holy have begun to slip. I realise that I am once again thinking of those words that I know by heart rather than words that I am reading, and therefore the more familiar psalms are coming closer to the fore, hence

“Though I walk through the valley of the shadow of death, I will fear no evil: for thou art with me; thy rod and thy staff they comfort me.

“What does it mean to fear no evil? Who can genuinely say that they have not at times been fearful? I certainly can’t. There have been moments in the past year and a half when I have been afraid; often that fear is for my family and for those I love but couldn’t get to, fear for those things that are precious.

“Yet that fear isn’t about evil, it is about the illness, worldly concerns and those we love. Evil is about assault on the godliness in and around us. The assault on our relationship with God, and a desire to turn us from God. The words of this psalm are telling us not to fear evil because the Shepherd carries to protect us the rod of defence and the staff of guidance, both things needed if we are to reach the table prepared for us, to be anointed and to dwell in God’s house.

“So what is it that makes me really afraid, pushes me to take shelter with the shepherd? It is the assault on the godliness in and around us, the degradation of those who are different from us, the assault on the humanity of those we don’t understand, the laying of blame at the feet of those who have no voice. I see things around me that talk of the valley of the shadow of death.

“Child poverty, the plight of refugees, the aggression shown to those who are racially different, the need by so many to be so publicly critical of each other. Dragging people down because they are easy targets, the list goes on. We often seem to cope with these things around us because we can make ourselves busy doing things that might make a difference. These past months have shown me the worst of this. Long days of meetings about, well, I am not

always sure. These months that have often reduced my response to important matters to one of writing letters and posting on social media.

“Yet in the midst of all that the green pastures of love and care can be glimpsed, the letter written not in anger but in thankfulness or in concern, the small package arriving with an aid to prayer or a beautiful picture. We know what makes us smile, we know when we are at God’s work, we feel it in the air, we sense it on the hairs on our skin and we feel it in our hearts.

“Let’s try to uncover that place of quiet waters as we sit in Synod, using this time to discover the things we can use to bring hope and joy to those we meet on our pilgrimage, discussing how we can help those on the edge of society, acknowledging that we can disagree on detail but always trying to agree on the message we are asked to proclaim. The message revealed in the Good Shepherd, the Lord and saviour of us all. The message of Love.”

The Most Rev Mark Strange

Bishop of Moray, Ross & Caithness and Primus of the Scottish Episcopal Church

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