**Primus’s Charge to General Synod 2020**

“The night is far spent, the day is at hand: let us cast off the works of darkness and let us put on the armour of light.

“I believe that this is the first time General Synod has been held in Advent and because of this date change then the atmosphere of Synod is also going to be different, let alone the different circumstances. For me a June Synod marks the end of session, the beginning of holiday. We will be off, travelling. And we at the General Synod, if not the General Synod officers, can begin to relax.

“How different this year has been. The Advent message of being led out of darkness into the light of Christ has never been more powerful and it is a theme the Church needs to hold dear.

“If I reflect on my own year then the darkness and the hope of light echoes loudly in my physical life and in my spiritual life. There have been days when simply saying the Office has seemed like walking through treacle; a real effort to see any point in it at all. The smallest issues and arguments have taken on huge proportions and relationships have at times been strained.

“If I left it there then the darkness, I know, will consume me but time after time a thoughtful letter, a kindly e-mail, an offer of prayer and words of hope have arrived. The light has got through and I can move onwards. That, I hope, can be the message of this Synod. We can sit in the darkness worrying about the structure around us or we can put on the armour of light.

“We entered this year with many things planned and dreamed of, things which needed to be cancelled or significantly changed. We also entered a year that had brought with it issues for society to face up to and issues for our church to face up to. During this year, I and the other bishops have engaged in bullying awareness training in response to the Clergy Wellbeing report. This hopefully has enabled us to understand and to modify our own behaviours and consider how we may seek to change the behaviour of others. I have to say that from a personal perspective, I found the process both painful and at times shameful. We cannot fully proclaim the Gospel if we cannot see when our own behaviour is damaging to others.

“The report revealed bullying at every place in the church, clergy to clergy, bishop to bishop, bishop to clergy, clergy to bishop and vestry to clergy. The training we have undertaken will, I believe, need to be shared across the church and processes prepared to enable us all to have the courage to name bullying for what it is and to deal with it. Following our own engagement with the issue, the College of Bishops is in the process of agreeing an anti bullying statement.

“The College has also been in conversation with Rev Anderson Jeremiah as we begin a programme of bias training and racism awareness. This follows the realisation of the SEC history in regard to matters of slavery and the consequences of a society that makes distinction between people along lines of race, either deliberately or as our bias training will reveal, by historic and cultural assumptions. To understand these matters should help us to address the issues in today’s world.

“And there are so many issues that we should be prepared to speak out about, to be Christ-like in our responses. International aid, gender violence, modern slavery; we need to keep our voices, and try to live as if we really can make a difference. Many of these have been difficult matters to consider, made all the more difficult by the lack of person-to-person interaction, yet we are making progress just as the Church managed to make such remarkable progress as our churches closed because of the pandemic.

“I want to take this opportunity to thank you all. I have been inundated with letters and emails thanking the church for stepping up to the mark and continuing to offer prayer, support and worship in the most extraordinary circumstances. I have attended so many meetings with government officials, with Scottish ministers, with UK primates, the list goes on and on, and each time I was confident that I could speak about the care, consideration and effort being displayed across the SEC, effort to make our places safe, effort in having the courage to say ‘no’ when things were not safe and above all keeping connected with our communities. Food banks, clothing banks, deliveries to the housebound, letters to the lonely, so many ways that members of our church have served the people of Scotland.

“I would like also at this point to thank Mr Robert Marshall, senior civil servant with the portfolio on faith, who has worked tirelessly answering the questions and challenges on what we can and cannot do.

“So what of now and what of the future? My charge today sits at a moment when we begin to see a way out of the pandemic. We are praying that our Season of Pilgrimage will give us the opportunities to journey into the light of a new freedom, but what do we want that future to look like?

“Do we really want to simply go back to where we were? What of the changes and the challenges that have enriched this time, the unexpected revelations that struck us? I for one want to witness the flowering of creation that became apparent to me on the track to our house this summer. The absence of traffic on the A9 seemed to give an impetus to the wild berries around us. I know this is just the Primus being romantic, but I had time to stop and watch nature this year, yet I think the visual impact of the atmospheric changes seen in some cities clearly indicates what we could achieve if we took care of the planet we live on.

“We have questions of what sort of investments we place our money into but also questions about how we heat our churches, how often and how far we travel, about the resources we use to run this institution. We need to get our own house in order if we are to keep putting pressure on the governments and industries of the world. You can’t challenge others if we don’t challenge ourselves.

“I see a bright future, not a return to everything we did, but a future where we continue to remember that we are part of a living, breathing community of faith not simply another institution that needs to keep going. The light we are looking towards is the light of Christ who calls us to care and to cherish, not to maintain and retreat; the real joy I have felt from people once again feeling connected to a church they cannot physically attend, seekers able to witness what we do from the security of their own homes, churches once again aware of what they don’t need to do, and excited about what they can do.

“On the day I led my first face-to-face service since lockdown I was taken aback to realise I was weeping as I looked into the eyes of those coming to receive the body of Christ, a moment of such joy and hope for those able to be there and a continuing sadness for those who could not.

“Should we listen to the gainsayers and those who try to ignore us? Do we believe we are simply a dwindling organisation that has had its day? No way. On that morning and the subsequent weeks as I joined with churches reopening or Zoomed with congregations, I saw and felt the overwhelming desire of a church filled with the power of the Spirit seeking to lead others into a relationship with Christ.

“Prepare the way of the Lord, make his paths straight and all flesh shall see the salvation of God. Alleluia.”

*The Most Rev Mark Strange
Bishop of Moray, Ross & Caithness and Primus of the Scottish Episcopal Church*

*5 December 2020*