

Primus Charge 2019 - The Most Rev Mark Strange, Bishop of Moray, Ross & Caithness and Primus of the Scottish Episcopal Church

When I was a young ordinand, difficult to believe I know, I was on placement in the Lincolnshire Fens. I had been deputed to provide an evening Confirmation class in the community of All Saints Saltfleetby and I duly arrived and conducted the class and then set off to walk to the Prussian Queen to meet up with my colleagues. There I was wide skies, no hills, no horizon, open country, not the comfort of hills and trees of home. As I walked along this narrow track a duck flew out of the ditch, I just panicked and fled along the road, actually running, I took a wrong turning but kept running until eventually I arrived at the Pub, exhausted and terrified. All much to the amusement of those with me. I tell you this because so often we as Church can take a scare at something and panic and then end up looking incompetent or foolish. We can also then struggle to hear the voice of God in all the noise around us as we run around in circles.

This is what was happening in this morning's reading from Isaiah, here we are told of a blind panic and fearful rush away from the centre of faith, away from Jerusalem, away from the House of God. The people are told by the Prophet to listen to the voice of the Lord which says "This is the Way, walk in it".

Now I believe that we are people on the way, sometimes we are led onto a path which we know will be difficult and at times painful, we also know that the journey on this path may become joyful and life enhancing, and we know that this is the Way when we are also called to have faith that we are accompanied by the one who loves us and cares for us, our Saviour Jesus Christ.

In this reading we are warned not to give into our human instinct to flee or to fight or to hide but to listen to the voice that says "This is the Way, walk in it", yet how often do we still seem to panic, to rush off the pathway to take short cuts and end up in blind alleys. We listen to voices telling us we are finished, we are irrelevant, we are damaged - and we in this room, across our church walk day by day in the Way, preaching, declaring and living out the love of God.

We know we have many issues and important matters to deal with at this Synod, the papers are full of reports on reviews, challenges and changes. We have asked about wellbeing, we have reviewed safeguarding, we are looking at matters of Ethical Investment, but we need always to remember that there is no point in asking the questions if we are not prepared to seek the answers, to listen to each other and to try walking together on the Way.

We are living in a time of unprecedented political upheaval, the reality of Brexit has paralysed the UK political world, we know it and witness it in our ministries and in our churches, people damaged by Universal Credit, people terrified by UK Immigration policies young and old living lonely lives because of social isolation, sexual exploitation, addiction, and we watch increasingly our church servicing foodbanks that should not be required - and there....above us and around us and under us we are aware of Creation Groaning, we the stewards continuing to be the destroyers, watching as the world we love is changed and damaged.

So is the Way of this General Synod, this beloved church, to be one that sees us rushing around in panic, running away from the path, unable to change or to acknowledge difficulties, so tied up in our institution that we seem to be deaf to the call of God or are we to be listening to the voice of God, the voice which should be heard in our prayers and our worship, in our debates and in our fellowship.

We must address the problems we face, live in the reality of the situation we are in but only if we then use that in the work of God. I personally see no value in a perfect structure if the structure is simply to serve itself rather than the God who calls us. Our society cries out for reconciliation, fairness and hope, we must be the church that offers that, and we can only do that if we mirror that in our treatment of each other.

We have a mission, to bring the love of God into the lives of those around us, to care for them, to share our faith with them and uphold them. Why? - well as it says in scripture:

Lord when was it that we saw you hungry and gave you food, or thirsty and gave you something to drink? ³⁸And when was it that we saw you a stranger and welcomed you, or naked and gave you clothing? ³⁹And when was it that we saw you sick or in prison and visited you?' ⁴⁰ And the king will answer them, 'Truly I tell you, just as you did it to one of the least of these who are members of my family, you did it to me.'

Amen.