

**NOTES TAKEN OF THE PRESIDENTIAL ADDRESS AT THE SECOND SESSION OF THE EIGHTEENTH
DIOCESAN SYNOD, HELD AT ST MARY'S CHURCH, HORSHAM ON 5TH FEBRUARY 2022**

The Bishop welcomed members to this extraordinary meeting of the Diocesan Synod, and reflected on the origins and purpose of synods in the life of the Church.

The Bishop explained that the word 'synod' is Greek in origin and comes from the idea of being on a road together. The word speaks of Christian identity as the people of God called to journey together, growing into deeper knowledge of God.

The Old Testament is full of stories of synodical life. The story of Noah and his journey in a boat is one of a synodical journey, with the boat representing the Church, going into an unknown future in trust and hope. Similarly, the story of Abraham shows him going into an unknown future and taking his family with him.

The story of Exodus tells of the ultimate synodical journey, with the people of Israel being liberated in the journey they undertake, and being given guidance in the form of a holiness code, which fuses together how they are to worship and how they are to live. At the heart of this is the theme of justice. Without justice, worship becomes a parody of itself and the outcome is that the earth does not give its fruitfulness. These themes echo through the Old Testament and flow into our identity as Christians.

The Bishop explained that Synodical character is not about the rules, amendments, motions and votes. As in the Old Testament, there has to be regulation but that is a means to an end. God has called us together and invited us into a journey of faith that will last throughout our lives and lead us to heaven.

The experience of being a synodical, pilgrim people, is not that we live with everlasting change. The gift God gives us from scripture and teaching and the unfolding of Church, gives us stability and orientation as a synodal people. This is the wisdom, truth and reality that prevents us from being fashion victims, shaped by mood and moment of the day.

It gives us a vision of who and what we are. This is not a vision that fills us with pride and superiority. But it should give us the sense of what it is to be human and created by God, individuals made with purpose, with the image of God upon us. God has given us the intellect and will that enable us to find his purposes of love, leading us from earth to the perfection of heaven.

The Bishop shared the following quotation illustrating how intimate the experience of synodality could be: *"When, in the course of time, we acknowledged our friendship and recognized that our ambition was a life of true wisdom, we became everything to each other: we shared the same lodging, the same table, the same desires, the same goal. Our love for each other grew daily warmer and deeper."*

The Bishop spoke about the film *Shakespeare in Love*, which ends with words from the opening of Twelfth Night, when Viola asks "What country, friends, is this?" The film speaks to us about a phase in the history of our nation, when culture was changing rapidly and the theatre as an art form was taking off. Theatre in England came from the Church, having developed from the mystery plays and

then, through the tumult of the Reformation, having grown into something else, a medium that allows us to reflect on life and the things that matter to us most.

Both *Shakespeare in Love* and *Twelfth Night* play with the idea of gender identity, asking questions about whether it is right for women to act on stage, or for men to play female characters, in a context of rapid cultural change.

One small detail in the film is the character of Philip Henslow, who is responsible for putting on the play. Although everything seems to be working against Henslow – there's no money, the playhouses are shut due to plague, the actor playing the main character turns out to be an actual woman. Despite a chorus of people saying it's not going to work, Henslow is insistent that it's going to be alright in the end. How? It's a mystery, but it will all be alright.

Henslow's message resonates with the Christian experience of being on a road together walking into an unknown future in which we shall ultimately see God face to face. As a Synod, we want answers about what is going to happen and how it will work but at the heart of Christianity, there is mystery.

We do not take life on our own terms but accept the gift of mystery which opens to us God's love. Every person made in His image, each one of us is a mystery to ourselves and to each other, and we must approach the mystery of personhood with awe and wonder. "We are children of God, and what we will be has not yet been revealed" (1 John 3:2)

The Bishop explained that God has called us together, and that we are travelling through cultural terrain in which new questions are being put to us, including new statements about the mystery of being human. The Bishop expressed his hope that the sacredness of this topic will inform our awareness everything that is said today.

At a recent MDR, a priest had explained that in relation to the topic of gender and sexual identity his greatest difficulty was that there was so much he did not know or understand, and that made it difficult to articulate thoughts. There was consequently a fear of being accused of hate crime because of getting the words wrong.

The Bishop emphasised the need to strive to ensure that this synod would be a safe space for every person here and that there needed to be awareness that whatever we say, we are walking on sacred territory of other people's lives as well as the sacred territory of our own lives and faith.

Returning to the quotation he had quoted earlier, the Bishop said it was from St Gregory Nazianzen, describing a journey of Christian faith with his companion, St Basil. They were teachers of the Christian faith in the fourth century. This quotation was included in the introduction to a Church of England report on homosexuality in the 1980s.

We have actually been walking this journey for a very long time, and this Synod is a step on that journey. This must not be a step that will compel others to leave and so diminish the diversity and quality of our companionship. This step aims to deepen our understanding of the mystery of our identity and of God's purposes, so that we might continue to witness to Jesus Christ and maintain safe spaces in our sacred places for the people of this age.