

Bishop of Maidstone September 2017 Newsletter

Introduction

You've probably heard the warning to beware of the barrenness of a busy life. Thinking about how busy the next few months are likely to be for all of us, I've been brought back to the opening chapter of 2 Peter. There, the Apostle tells us what will keep us from being ineffective or unfruitful. Recognising what God has already done for us through our salvation, we are urged:

'Make every effort to supplement your faith with virtue, and virtue with knowledge, and knowledge with self-control, and self-control with steadfastness, and steadfastness with godliness, and godliness with brotherly affection, and brotherly affection with love.' (2 Peter 1:5-7)

One of the significant features of these qualities is that they are the opposite of rushing in to things: knowledge takes time to acquire; self-control is about restraint; and steadfastness is about perseverance. Virtue is an interesting word which we don't hear much of these days. Michael Green describes it in his commentary as 'practical goodness.' I hope therefore that as evangelicals we will persevere in our evangelistic efforts; that we will be known in our congregations for our patience; that we will continue to help people even when that help is not acknowledged; that we won't lose patience in our struggle to see God's Word honoured in the Church of England or with one another; and that we will both discern and practice what is good and Christ-like without rushing into judgement on others.

Recent Events

The Nashville Statement

The Nashville Statement is a wonderfully clear statement about God's design for His creation insofar as it relates to marriage, sexual relationships and gender identity. I support it wholeheartedly. That doesn't mean that everything it contains is expressed in the way I would choose and I would particularly have liked to see Article 7 articulated differently. Nor does it say everything that could be said. However, overall, it is a very helpful summary of the Bible's teaching and it speaks clearly into the confusion over these subjects that many even in our own congregations feel. I very much hope that study material to go alongside the Statement will be made available in due course by the Council on Biblical Manhood and Womanhood.

Report of the Independent Reviewer into Philip North's nomination to the See of Sheffield

A major report by the Independent Reviewer has just been published and I very much welcome its findings. The report tells the story of what happened both before Philip North was nominated and afterwards. It makes fascinating if worrying reading. One of its key conclusions in paragraph 132 is that the whole basis on which women bishops were introduced into the Church of England (described as the 2014 Settlement) has been fundamentally challenged and that it is up to the House of Bishops to answer this challenge. The report makes a number of practical recommendations for ways of embedding the

concept of 'mutual flourishing,' when it comes to issues of men's and women's ministries, in the life of the Church of England all of which would, in my judgement be beneficial. In a throw-away line, the Independent Reviewer suggests that a new dialogue over mutual flourishing might also help the church on other issues like sexuality. While firmly supporting the report's conclusions and recommendations, I will continue to make it clear to the House of Bishops that the pursuit of mutual flourishing is possible when there are disagreements over second order issues, but cannot simply be read across to disagreements over primary, gospel issues such as sexual relationships.

Andy Lines

In his role as a missionary bishop, Andy Lines will meet the particular needs of churches in Scotland which can no longer be part of the Scottish Episcopal Church following their decision to change their canons of marriage as well as of those AMiE congregations in England which are outside the Church of England. It seems right to me that these needs should be met and in my press statement of 9th June I welcomed the steps that GAFCON was taking to support those who were seeking to stand firm by the Bible's teaching on marriage and sexual relationships, and assured Andy of my prayers as he took up his new role. I am currently planning not only to share a platform with Andy (and Jonathan Pryke) at the ReNew conference, but also to meet with them on a reasonably regular basis. That said, there are many others within the Church of England who are working hard to sustain the Church's doctrine of marriage and sexual relationships. I am therefore seeking to support a number of bishops who want to maintain an orthodox position on these matters, as well as working to encourage the Church of England Evangelical Council to set clear objectives that will help to unify our action in support of the Church's existing doctrine.

General Synod

Although I am no longer a member of the General Synod, I was for 15 years until 2015. I cannot recall a meeting of the Synod which more deeply shocked participants than the one last July. As I understand it, the motions themselves were not the most shocking element, since it is far from clear that anything will happen as a result either in relation to 'conversion therapy' or the commendation of 'liturgical materials to mark a person's gender transition'. Nor was it the failure of Synod to take opportunities to articulate a biblical view of the common good or encourage people to commend Christ to others. What appeared to be most disturbing was the atmosphere, which left one lay member concluding 'God is not mocked. The laughter and lack of respect for those who bravely gave the alternate case was beyond words. Bruised, battered, bullied, betrayed, bewildered.'

This is deeply shaming and I am not at all surprised that a number of Synod members want to give up their membership as a result. There is no doubt in my own mind that God was dishonoured and that the appropriate response would be for the next meeting of Synod to start with an appropriate act of repentance.

Two major questions follow from this:

- a. Does this indicate a turning point for the Church of England? My answer is that it is a further real cause for concern, but it is important to remember that the General Synod is not the Church of England. It has a significant influence, but the primacy of the local congregation is still something we stand for.
- b. Should conservative evangelicals remain on the General Synod? Not if it's against their conscience. However, it's important to remember that for many of us, the evangelical truths we seek to protect are embodied in the canons and the liturgy of the Church. These cannot be changed without a two-thirds majority in each House of the General Synod. So although we may be howled down, our presence means that when it comes to voting we can prevent changes that have no warrant in Scripture. Bad experience it may be – but we need evangelicals to stay.

Celebrations for Same-Sex Couples

When the DDO of Southwark entered a civil partnership, it was followed by a communion service in the cathedral and a reception afterwards in the same place. The service was neither a same-sex marriage nor was it technically a 'blessing.' However, the clear impression gained was that the union was being actively supported – and indeed such support would be consistent with the position leading figures in the Cathedral have taken over a substantial period of time. In a thoughtful paper, the theologian Martin Davie concluded that the substance of the service was a 'blessing.' It is unlikely that this will be a one-off – after all, such an approach was advocated by the Bishop of Chelmsford to his Diocesan Synod earlier this year.

So how should evangelicals respond? Our concern is to safeguard and promote the Church of England's current doctrine and to ensure there is no formally approved or commended change in liturgy. Events such as these clearly put that doctrine under pressure, but the doctrine itself has not changed. We therefore need to show our support for that doctrine in practical ways. For evangelicals in Southwark, it is difficult to see how relationships with the DDO could continue as normal, since she has thrown her role in the discernment process for new ordinands into question. There needs to be a practical response and Robin Weekes and I will be meeting with the Bishop of Southwark to discuss what shape this might take.

Some Positive News

107 Evangelical Resolutions

A good number of PCCs are continuing to explore the possibility of passing resolutions under the House of Bishops' Declaration. Currently the PCCs of 107 evangelical CoE churches have done so. In a good number of cases, there is no immediate need for any change in the arrangements for episcopal oversight, but in just under 50 cases I have been asked to supply ministry. As a result, in the last two months I have been involved in the appointment process for a new vicar in two parishes, and will be involved in a further one next month; over the last year I have confirmed over 120 people (more than the annual total for some dioceses!); I am undertaking Ministerial Development Reviews and licensing

services; I often bring the individual concerns of incumbents, curates and ordinands to Diocesan bishops and help to resolve problems; and in some cases I am easing the path for some church plants.

New Assistant Bishop Roles

In July I became an Assistant Bishop in both Birmingham and Bristol. It also seems likely that I will be asked to become an Assistant Bishop in Oxford. This will bring the total number of dioceses where I act as an Assistant Bishop to 14.

Strategic Development Funding

Finally, I have been very struck by the number of dioceses which have successfully applied for Strategic Development Funding in order to finance the staffing of new church plants. This is a very positive possibility and I hope to begin discussions shortly to explore whether it might be possible for church planting initiatives being taken by conservative evangelical parishes across different dioceses to apply for funding through me. Even if this proves possible, a great deal of work is involved in putting together a bid, so such a development would have implications for my own staff support.

Conclusion

I very much enjoy the visits I make to congregations and PCCs all over the country. Please do not hesitate to get in touch with Rachel in the office if you think a visit would be helpful. If Sundays prove impossible, do consider the possibility of a mid-week visit. For a snapshot of some of the things I am doing over the next two months, do visit my web site:

www.bishopofmaidstone.org

With love in the Lord,

Rod