Presidential Address

In the Presidential address at last year’s conference, I pointed us to the Collect for Epiphany II, “Almighty God, you make all things new: transform the poverty of our nature by the riches of your grace and in the renewal of our lives, make known your heavenly glory; through Jesus Christ your Son our Lord, who is alive and reigns with you and the Holy Spirit, one God, now and forever. Amen.” This Collect expresses the vocation of the Church and of each of our congregations and of each of us, be we lay or ordained, secular or religious; that in the reality of the nitty gritty practicality and sometimes mess of our lives, we are called to let God’s presence be visible in us, not by our finished holiness but the reality of his presence working his grace in us, a work that St Gregory of Nyssa reminds us, never finishes. Even in eternity, the fullness of God’s grace deepens, widens and stretches us that we may be filled more and more with the fullness of Christ. We are called to allow God to make the love of Jesus real in us, in our weakness, in our fear, in our foibles and failures as well as in our strengths, our gifts and our joys. We do that by gathering Sunday by Sunday to listen to and reflect on the words of the scriptures, applying it to our lives and circumstances, exercising our priesthood by bringing before God the needs of the world, and by breaking bread and sharing wine together in remembrance of Jesus, in obedience to his command. We are called to learn to make our lives prayers and by learning to say yes to God’s love, moment by moment, in service of others and in allowing others to serve, support and love us. This is what we are called to and this is what our parish system was designed to enable.

Financially our parish system, where a stipendiary cleric ministers to two or three churches, is no longer viable and our transition to LMAs, along with the dioceses of Bangor and St Asaph is not meant to be a revolution, but the means of ensuring the continuance of our local congregations of Christians living out their life of prayer and service, worshipping God and being nourished by word and sacrament. I am not going to rehearse here the sermon I give when I inaugurate new LMAs about why we are making all the current changes but the rationale for moving from the traditional parish structure that has served us so well is to find a way to continue to ensure the thriving of our congregations at a local level in a way that is sustainable, sustainable financially but more importantly, sustainable for the lay people and clerics that are at its heart. The question before us this year, is how do we resource our local churches sustainably. How do we do this in a way that is sustainable for our planet, how do we do this in a way that is sustainable for lay people and clerics? How can we continue to be church locally and healthily when we no longer have enough money to have as many parish priests as we did 20 years ago? How can we continue to be church locally and healthily so that the congregations and clergy are not overburdened?

There are no easy answers so we must be prepared to learn as we go along and share what we learn with each other; that is one of the aims of the meetings I have with the LMA Deans. I will say now one of the things I do say in my LMA inauguration sermon. Thank you to all those
who have had the courage to work through the process of becoming an LMA, thank you, to each one of you who have been or are part of the transition from small parish to large parish, thank you who are welcoming to the change, thank you to those who are patient with the changes and thank you also to those who perhaps see themselves as having been “difficult,” thank you to those of you who have raised problems. This is not a game. This is not about people with one set of ideas trying to impose their will on another set of people. This is about being realistic and cutting our coat according to our cloth and part of being realistic is about acknowledging the difficulties. So thank you for raising difficulties, thank you for working through them, thank you for seeing the possibilities and a huge thank you to Marianne and her team who have come amongst you and sat with the expressing not only of difficulties but of grief and anger and disappointment. It has often been hard for Marianne and her team, because, while acknowledging the grief and the anger, they could only offer hope for God’s blessing on a new way and not the promise of a return to normal. As we look forward, the transition team will become the LMA development team and they will continue to come alongside you and help you to work together in this new way. Thank you too to Howard and his team who have been unstinting in their continuing offering of practical help.

I want to stress again that this is not change for the sake of it, it is about using faithfully, purposefully and gratefully the resources which our Lord has given us corporately to make us people whose lives and words are rooted in and reflect the life of Christ. People who can see the difficulties and people who can see the new possibilities are all part of the resources God has given us for this tasks. Let us be neither people who refuse to acknowledge the problems or people who fail to accept possible solutions.

Last year this address centred on a collect: this year, it will centre on the final words of Jesus to the disciples after the Resurrection and immediately before his Ascension, as told in St Matthew’s Gospel. Jesus’ words give us a succinct summing up of who we are as the Church and what our Church community is for because at heart these sum up what all the changes are for, they are to continue to enable us to continue to be church locally.

“All authority in heaven and on earth has been given to me. As you go therefore make disciples of the gentiles, baptizing them in the name of the Father and of the Son and of the Holy Spirit, teaching them to observe all that I have commanded you. And behold, I am with you always, to the end of the age.” Matt 28:18b-20.

This command is explosive and it was not one that the first followers of Jesus obeyed. They ignored it until persecution forced them out of Jerusalem and Judea and even once they had begun to take this command of Jesus seriously, it took them sometime to realise the full implications of these words of Jesus. This command that we see in Matthew’s gospel is not in the earliest version of St Mark’s Gospel, at all and there but considerably softened in the longer and later ending of St Mark’s Gospel. Instead of, “as you go, make disciples of the Gentiles,”, we have instead “Go into all creation” which implies it but doesn’t quite spell it out. The writer of the later ending of St Mark’s gospel cannot quite bring himself to use the word for “gentile.” While slightly stronger in St Luke’s Gospel where Jesus says to his disciples after his Resurrection that it is written in the scripture that the Christ will suffer and rise from the dead and that, in the name of Christ, repenting that leads to the release from sin will be proclaimed amongst the gentiles, it is still falls short of Jesus’ final command as St Matthew has recorded it. In Acts also, stress is laid on Jesus’ command that the apostles bear witness to Jesus to the ends of the earth but still no sense of the gentiles entering into the community of faith until it begins
to happen in the ministry of St Paul. St John’s Gospel does not record the Ascension in Jerusalem at all. It is therefore only St Matthew, who, if he was Matthew the tax collector, knew what it was to be an outcast, who faithfully transmits the explosive words of Jesus that all people regardless of ethnicity are to be included in the people of God. We here in Aberystwyth in 2019 are the result of the eventual obedience of the first apostles to that explosive command of Jesus and we must never never never forget the huge privilege it is to be those who know themselves to be children of God nor must we forget that we are the younger brothers and sisters of the Jewish community, who are our elder brothers and sisters in the life of obedience to the God of Abraham the God of Isaac and the God of Jacob, the God and Father of our Lord Jesus Christ.

We have been adopted into the community of faith. We are called to live the faith; we are called to share the faith. To do both, we are called to know our faith. We are not all called to be theologians, to be preachers and teachers but we are all called to know the basics of the Christian faith. That isn’t as difficult as it sounds, those basics are shrined in the Creeds of the Church and there are two Creeds I would encourage you to be familiar with. The one used in our Church’s daily prayers is the Apostles’ Creed, not written by the Apostles but it dates from the middle of the 2nd century and was used as the creed to be recited at baptism from that time onwards in Rome, where St Peter and St Paul preached. It enshrines the basics of what we believe. The second Creed to be familiar with is called the Nicene Creed, formulated in the fourth century, over a period of years, to end forciferous arguments about the relationship between Jesus, the Father and the Holy Spirit. This we use at our services of Holy Communion. Neither of them say all that is to be said about our Christian faith but they offer a scaffolding which we fill out by our reading of the scriptures, the Gospels, the Letters and the Hebrew scriptures. What we learn both from the creeds and from the scriptures are applied to specifics of our lives by our the gentle guidance of the Holy Spirit as we open our hearts, lives and minds to Him. This is not empty religious fluff. Open your hearts and lives to God and God will respond make himself known to you. Talk to God, expect God to answer. God will respond to you in all sorts of ways. “Put me to the proof,” says God through the prophet Malachi. “Cast all your cares on Him for He cares for you” says St Peter. I am not saying that God gives us everything we want or solves all our problems, of course He doesn’t, but as we open ourselves to a living relationship with Him we will find that God responds to us. And it is the reality of that relationship that we are called to share. We are not called to tell people stuff about God, we are called to lead them by example into a living relationship with God the Father, through the Lord Jesus in the Spirit. We aren’t called to share what we do not know, but what we do. We aren’t called to share Christianity as some kind of package, we aren’t called to have all the answers, we are simply called to bear witness to what we have discovered ourselves of the love of God in Jesus.

I want to remind you about the wonderful course put up on the internet free of charge by the Church Army, “Faith Pictures,” which Sister Val Legg introduced us to last year. “Faith Pictures” explodes the myth that what evangelism is about is telling people facts about the Christian Faith and persuading them to agree with it. “Faith Pictures” explodes the myth that evangelism is a difficult thing that needs people to do it who understand exactly what the Christian Faith is so they can pass it on. Yes, I have encouraged you to learn more about the Christian Faith, but what I am asking you to share with others, is simply what Jesus means to you, what being part of the Church means to you. I am not asking you to share what you don’t know, I am asking you to share what you do. That is why it is so important for all of us to open our hearts and lives to our Lord Jesus Christ and to do it in the unique way that each of us does
that. There isn’t a template of what a Christian is that we are all called to fit into. You are unique, I am unique and we are not called to squash our uniqueness into a Christian shaped box. Rather we are called to open the reality of who we really are to the gentle love of God and to learn day by day to accept that love, allow it to challenge us, change us, soothe us, reassu re us, forgive us, guide us and to shine in us so that in us, others can see Jesus, not because we are trying very hard to conform but because we have become transparent. Being ourselves transparent to Jesus lies at the heart of evangelism and then having the courage to share in halting words maybe not a packaged version of the Christian faith but simply to express what Jesus means to us, what our Christian faith means to us.

How can I have the audacity to say any of this? By implication, it means I think I am transparent to Jesus and that others can see Jesus in me. Well I do, not I hasten to add, because I think I am a good Christian but because I trust God to use even me. The Christian faith in which I had been raised became real to me when I saw the Holy Spirit shining out of someone. You open yourself to the transforming love of Jesus and God will speak to others through you and sometimes might ask of you the courage to say to others a little of what Jesus means to you. But it is God who will do it in you and through you so do not be afraid.

Why am I saying this? Because I trust God. I trust God to work in you, if you ask him, I trust God to work through you if you let him. We don’t have to get it all right, we don’t have to become perfect Christians, we just have to open the complexities of our lives to the One who created us, and loves us, who loved us enough to save us from the results of our sins, who loves us enough to remake us by his Spirit day by day and moment by moment in a normal ordinary run of the mill sort of way. It isn’t about having religious mountain top experiences, it isn’t about becoming a prayer warrior, it is simply opening the real you to the real God and learning day by day to love. I trust God to work in and through us as a Diocese.

I am going to say that again, I trust God to work in and through us as a Diocese. I trust God to give us the financial resources we need, I trust God to give us the vocations we need and I trust God to make himself known to us and to others through us. God can be trusted to do his part. But we all have to ask ourselves, can we? The point of all that we as a Diocese do week by week, Sunday by Sunday and day by day is so that you and I as individuals can become like Jesus, show the fruits of the Spirit in our lives, be salt and light, be the leaven in the lump of dough. It isn’t complicated but it is challenging. I trust God to work through us, but we have to be prepared to change. There isn’t one person sitting here in this hall who can say, well in all honesty Bishop, I think I am the finished product, I think I can truthfully say that if people just looked at my life, listened to my words, observed my actions, they would know exactly what a Christian should be like. That wasn’t said to make you feel guilty, it is just acknowledging the truth, we are all on the journey, we are all unfinished products but we all have at our disposal what I have called “the twin walking poles of the Christian faith:” repentance and love, acknowledging at least to ourselves and God when we get things wrong, and being guided by the claims of love to work out what we need to do and say next.

I trust God to work in us and I trust you to let him because as I am going round inaugurating LMAs I see the bravery of you being prepared to change how we organise ourselves so that we can continue to do as best we can, what we have always done, worship God, Sunday by Sunday in our local churches so that in the Monday to Saturday days in between we can live our Christian faith in our lives. I trust God to work in us and I ask you to trust God enough to ask him to help you not only live your faith but to share your faith, as he gives you opportunity,
with those around you: “All authority in heaven and on earth has been given to me. As you go therefore make disciples of the gentiles, baptizing them in the name of the Father and of the Son and of the Holy Spirit, teaching them to observe all that I have commanded you. And behold, I am with you always, to the end of the age.”

Repeat in Welsh
We have the twin walking poles of the Christian faith repentance and love to guide us on our daily journey of following Jesus and sharing his love by word and deed and in our diocese we also have the words from St David’s last sermon preached to his community on the last Sunday before he died.

These words of St David have been remembered and passed on by word of mouth and then written down so that we can still learn from them today. You know them, but let’s bring them to life, so that we don’t simply remember and repeat them but ask God’s grace that we might obey them. Our Father among the saints, Dewi Sant commands us, “Be joyful, keep the Creed and keep your faith and the little things that you have heard and seen in me, do.” Our SubDean, Canon Leigh Richardson used these last words of Dewi Sant to end the talk he gave at the opening of the new 3-16 Church School at St Davids, but in a moment of inspiration, when he ended his talk with Dewi Sant’s words, he put actions to them so that the children and young people might better remember them.

Be joyful, keep the faith and do the little things

I am going to ask Leigh and Dean Sarah to come up and do these actions with me, we’ll do them in English and then in Welsh and then I am going to ask you to stand and forget your British embarassment and do them with me, wholeheartedly. I want you to go back to your churches and pass them on, not so that we can have a tribal chant like football supporters but so we might have the humility and courage, to remember to obey our spiritual father Dewi Sant, not for its own sake but that we in our day, like Dewi Sant in his might so walk the way of Jesus, that our nation once again comes to know and live in the overwhelming, never ending, life giving love of God.