BISHOPS’S CHARGE TO DIOCESAN SYNOD 2012

We meet in gratitude to Almighty God for the opportunities of mission and service in which we share. Our meeting today will look at many aspects of our life. Undoubtedly there are challenges – the economic recession continues to provide challenges for our community and for the church – but there is energy and there is hope for the future.

A little later on, we shall look at Casting the Net and the revision of the Policy and Action Plan which shapes it. People sometimes ask, ‘Is it working?’ There are many answers to that question. I can say without question that I have been to places where the Mission Action Planning process has been transformative of congregational life. The statistical returns give some cause for hope. Our diocese now has a growing group of laity who are vocationally committed to mission. Beyond that … when we started on the process which began with the Diocesan Review and led to Casting the Net, we were to some extent ‘on our own.’ Many of you will be aware that the situation has changed. Right across the Scottish Episcopal Church, dioceses are addressing the challenge of mission. Provincially the Whole Church Mission and Ministry Policy affirms that movement and draws it together in a new set of understandings of the relationship between the church nationally and provincially and the constituent dioceses.

It has been an exciting journey. It is the story of a prayerful church becoming mission-shaped. And there is a parallel story which is about our church – small as it is – more confidently taking its place in wider Scottish society, more present in public discourse and debate. I think that we can do that because there is evolving among us a narrative – a way of describing – our present and our future in ministry.

It is particularly important that we have that increasingly buoyant sense of ourselves at this moment because we face two important questions which are about our belonging. The first is the Anglican Covenant which we shall discuss later. The second is the question of Scottish Independence.

I have gone around the diocese attempting to explain to people what the Covenant is, what it seeks to achieve, what it means for us and what the consequences for us as a church of either adopting or not adopting it might be. Our General Synod will make that decision in principle this year. Some would have wanted to delay further if not indefinitely. My view was that we needed to discuss it now – for two reasons. One was that we should not shy away from it because we thought it might be difficult. We are increasingly confident in our own life – we should be able to discuss difficult issues in a measured way. Secondly I believe that what the Scottish Episcopal Church thinks matters to the Anglican Communion. We are one of the ancient churches of the British Isles. We have warm relationships across the Communion and those relationships are not tainted by colonialism. So while inevitably we shall today and at General Synod say what we think about the Anglican Covenant – we should also think about what we want to say to the Anglican Communion about our vision for its life and our part in that Communion life.

Scottish Independence is an important issue for us – but a complex one. It matters deeply because we are Scottish and because, when people call us the English Church, we feel that there are some ambiguities about our identity in Scotland. But we approach it on the basis that churches should be agnostic about the issue itself. It must be possible for members of our church in good conscience to be either for or against Independence or any of the other options which are emerging. I wrote in the Church Times about this issue last week. In that piece I explained that questions of identity and belonging – linked to faith identity – are what my life has been about – and what the ministry of my grandfather among the southern Irish minority protestant community after Irish Partition in 1922 was about. So he was with Southern Irish Unionists when they couldn’t be that any more. And I was with Northern Irish Unionists when they had to recognise that British in Portadown couldn’t be the same as British in Finchley. And now here we are beginning in this entirely different situation to talk about who ‘We’ are and who we are not.

I believe that we should be fully and strongly engaged in this debate. The part of the debate that matters most to me is that area of identity – because it is the part of the debate which most easily connects itself to faith. That’s what the scourge of sectarianism is about in both Scotland and Ireland. I have responded warmly to the positive feel that Scotland has had these last few years. I think particularly about moments in which I have shared as Primus – the Kirking of Parliament in St Giles’ Cathedral, the Opening of the Fourth Session of the Scottish Parliament by Her Majesty the Queen. But it is all too easy for positive feelings about Scottish identity to be strengthened by negative feelings about others – warm feelings about ‘we’ can easily be balanced by colder feelings about ‘not us’

I am aware too of the wider complexities. A few weeks ago I stood in Lambeth Palace with leaders of churches and faith groups from all over the United Kingdom to meet Her Majesty the Queen at what was the first engagement of her Diamond Jubilee Year. And in the times which one spends talking there, I reflected with others from Scotland on the way in which our relationship with the monarchy is similar yet different from that in England.

Finally – I want to thank the people whose work and commitment is recorded in the pages of our Diocesan Synod materials today. I shall refer to those who work in Casting the Net elsewhere. But I want to thank Alicia and Sharon – whom you will meet at lunchtime if you have not already met her – for all of the faithful work which they do on our behalf.