PRESIDENTIAL ADDRESS

We give thanks to Almighty God for another year in the life of our diocese. For me it has been a significant and challenging year. Yesterday marked the eleventh anniversary of my consecration as your bishop. I am thankful for health and strength which has enabled me to fulfil that ministry. I should also note that tomorrow marks the 20th anniversary of the Dunblane tragedy. You like me will have been moved and impressed by the dignity of parents and members of the community who have been speaking about it. It has been a remarkable witness to human resilience and compassion.

It has been a fascinating and encouraging year in the diocese. Challenges of course. But I am thankful for better relationships, for confident leadership among many of our clergy and many signs of hope in our congregations. We warmly welcome the clergy who have joined us during the year and hope that the remaining vacancies can be filled soon. Rev Thomas Brauer gives us valuable leadership in the shaping of the mission and outreach of the diocese. There is considerable hope for the future.

In my life as Primus beyond the diocese, it has been a demanding period. I have travelled to South Africa, to the USA for the General Convention of our close partners in The Episcopal Church and twice to India – once to act as co-chair of the International Dialogue between the Anglican Communion and the World Communion of Reformed Churches and a second time for a visit to our Companion Diocese in Calcutta. I shall say more about that shortly.

The SEC continues to move towards the consideration of canonical change which would allow same-sex marriage in our life. If the first reading passes at our forthcoming General Synod, we and the other Diocesan Synods will then consider this carefully at our meeting in 2017. After that it will be considered in a second reading by General Synod – at which point two thirds majorities will be required in each house of laity, clergy and bishops.

That change is of course linked to the meeting of the Primates of the Anglican Communion which I attended in January in Canterbury. The threat of splits and walk-outs made that an exceptionally difficult meeting. While those did not happen, the outcome of the meeting stretched our understanding of the polity of the Anglican Communion in ways which will cause significant difficulties in the future.

The Christmas and New Year period were also dominated by the unexpected publication of the Columba Agreement between the Church of Scotland and the Church of England. This also has raised a number of difficulties and I have written elsewhere about those. Our Faith and Order Board will produce a considered response later in the year. What matters most is that all of this does not disturb or impair the warm and mutually-supportive relationships between our congregations and local Church of Scotland congregations. There is no reason why that should happen and all of us should do everything possible to make sure that it does not.

I want now to draw your attention to a welcome pattern which has been developing in our diocese and more widely in our church. We are a small church and we are always limited in our resources. So the development of partnerships is very important. Many of you will know of the All Souls Fife partnership or church graft which is a partnership between the former ABI congregations with St Paul’s and St George’s in Edinburgh and the diocese. That is moving ahead strongly. We are actively considering a further partnership with Church Army which would give us a new dimension of ministry in the Central Fife Group – in what we sometimes call Post-Industrial Fife.

One of our other significant partnerships is our Diocesan Companionship relationship with the Diocese of Calcutta. In December, a party of eight people from the diocese visited. During that time, the Diocese of Calcutta marked the end of its Bicentenary Year with a Service in the Cathedral at which I preached. The visit was remarkably productive in developing relationships which we hope will be the foundation of future growth. There is also a considerable legacy in social media contact which ensures that friendships will be sustained.

More widely in our church, there is an increasing awareness that we need a shared understanding of our life together as a church at a critical time in the life of Scotland. It’s what we sometimes call a narrative – and that narrative will become an important contextual background to the training of our increasing number of ordinands – and younger ordinands – in the Scottish Episcopal Institute.

And finally – because some of the focus of what I have said has been outside the diocese – I want to note the presence with us today of our Secretary General, John Stuart. We have a small staff in our General Synod Office in Edinburgh – but they are remarkably effective. I want to thank John for that work – as I do our own Diocesan Office staff, Alicia and Leanne, who tries to ensure that I am always as accessible as we can manage. And you will know how valuable the support of Alison is – many of you see her with me on Sunday visits to our congregations. That is just one sign of deeper levels of support.

Thank you for being here today. I hope not just for a valuable meeting this morning but also for an afternoon session which may add to our thinking about our future mission and ministry.