Diocesan Synod 7th March, 2015

Next week, I mark the tenth anniversary of my consecration as a bishop. That is a vocational moment for me when I shall give thanks for this extraordinary calling on my life which has led me into all sorts of places and given me opportunities beyond my imagining. Last night, Alison Peden was instituted as Rector of St Modoc’s Doune – a ministry which she will exercise alongside her role as Provincial Director of Ordinands – nurturing and supporting vocation. And I believe that we are now at a vocational moment in our life together – a sort of threshold moment. As I said earlier, I believe that we are emerging from difficult times. The appointment of Thomas as our Diocesan Missioner – Thomas, a person from the world church drawn to share our life and ministry, is an act of courage and faith. It says that we see the work of mission as central to our life together. It says that we live by a faith in which death and new life are inextricably linked - as seeds fall into the ground and die so that they can bear much fruit. It says that for those who trust in the living Christ, there is hope.

Paul chides the Athenians for their worship of ‘an unknown God’. As a pastor, I know that people as individuals and families often live by deep, simple and humble faith. But I also know that churches and congregations are sometimes very flawed shared expressions of that faith. Congregations can be at their most unattractive when they worship a god called survival. Paul speaks to them of God who commands all people everywhere to repent – all people everywhere in all times and in all places.

I’m wearing two signs of that bigger picture of God today. One is the Coventry Cross of Nails – we have just marked the 70th anniversary of the bombing of Dresden. Coventry and Dresden are for ever linked in the Cross of Nails Community. After the destruction of Coventry and its Cathedral, the Dean took two blackened nails from the roof timbers, set them up as a Cross and wrote behind them ‘Father Forgive’ The shells around my neck were given to me last week in South Africa by Bishop Jonathan Casimina of the Philippines – remember that in 2013 over 2m people were made homeless by monsoon rains and floods - he asked me and you to remember his people whose lives were devastated by a typhoon – one of the marks of climate change.

It seems to me that the Gospel response in the Casting the Net gospel is very simple. For me it is about obedience. Our preoccupation with survival can make us wayward – fixated on things which we seize on as possible solutions; prone to blaming as a way of holding somebody responsible for the challenges we face. The Jesus response is very simple. He calls for faith-full obedience. They need to put the net in again on the other side.

I don’t find that easy and nor do many of you. In Northern Ireland, we named a phenomenon which was called ‘Whataboutery’. Challenged in any way, people would respond, ‘But what about …. ‘ as a way of deflecting the challenge.

There is no deflecting the challenge which Jesus Christ brings to our lives and to our congregations. The challenge is to turn that deep, simple and humble personal faith by which we live into a deep and humble life in our congregations.

May God bless Thomas in his new ministry among us. May God bless all of us in our faith-full obedience to Jesus Christ.