



Synod 22 March – Full Transcript

Bishop Graeme's Presidential Address

I've never been completely convinced by the word presidential address. And when I am under a sign that says blood and fire (referencing the sign above the staging in the Salvation Army Hall), and presidential address becomes even more terrifying.

One of the things I'm charged to do to begin with is to speak of those who have left this body and those who have joined it.

The Synod will be really very sad to hear the death of Gill Jackson, the lay chair of the Ipswich Deanery, who gave so much to that particular deanery. We give thanks for her Christian service. And to Linda Ginn, who retired as Mothers' Union president and welcoming Jeanette Appleton as the new president.

Don't worry, it's not as thick as it looks like (referencing his speech paper), like St Paul, I need very large letters.

I have now been in post for three weeks. This last week was the first week to bring the purple ink letters. For those of you who are not conversant with this term, it describes the sort of letter which, in the old days, before laptops, were written in purple ink or green, if you were really lucky. You would tell by the envelope. They come from 'outraged of' and then you add the town on the end. They rage about the iniquities of the bishops of the Church of England, what they have said and what they have not said, what they have failed to do, and what they should do. They require immediate but impossible action and reply. They rail against the local incumbent, demanding immediate action, usually sacking. They are, on the whole, as I have said, totally impossible to answer.

Last night, I lay awake at half past three and I answered one of them, absolutely superbly. Luckily, I have forgotten every single word that I wrote.

It would be right to say that they are the joy of the Episcopal post bag. What I really want to do in response to such letters, is to tell of my recent experiences over the past few months, as I have helped Bishop Martin to cover his diary demands and in my three weeks as acting Diocesan Bishop.

As I came to write this presidential address, my mind turned on the hymn 'We have gospel to proclaim'. I remember vividly the first time that I sang this hymn, this is going to sound really good - it was at the enthronement of the Archbishop of Canterbury, Donald Coggan. Yes, I am that old.

I hastened to add, that I was then a curate serving my title in the Diocese of Canterbury in Broadstairs.

The hymn was actually written in 1968 for a mission in Chorley, which is in Lancashire. For those of you who don't know, Lancashire is up on the left hand side, a bit north of Manchester before you get to Scotland. But it now seems to be part of our DNA as a church.

In the new English hymnal, it was included in the section headed 'the church its mission and unity'. After the first verse which tasks us with proclaiming the gospel, which is good news for the whole world, the next four verses starts with the word, tell. Tell of his birth, tell of his death, tell of the glorious Easter morn, tell of his reign at God's right hand. There is something very forceful about that word at the beginning of a sentence. It's very much a command not to be ignored.

So what am I to tell you, of my recent experiences.

I can tell you of a village Confirmation, of a person who has come to faith. In what, probably we ought to call, her mature years. I can tell of her joy and the joy of those who had walked with her in her journey of faith. I can tell you of the absolutely splendid parish lunch which followed the service, somehow crammed in at the back of a church full of pews. But there we were eating our sausage rolls, drinking our coffee and eating our walnut cake, a wonderful experience.

I can tell of licensing a school chaplain. I can tell of the enthusiasm for her the ministry that she had. The enthusiasm of the staff who had witnessed the effect that she had already had on the pupils in that school, in the glowing terms in which they spoke.

I can tell you an induction that took me way out of my comfort zone, musically. You can work that one out for yourself. Of a band and singers leading a large congregation, making a joyous noise to the Lord, as they greeted a new incumbent.

I can tell you of interviews with ordinand and curates, of their deep sense of vocation and calling, of their commitment to the proclamation of the gospel.

So much to tell.

When I was dean of Carlisle, the bishop's staff meeting was held at Rose castle, the bishops home, they have got rid of it now, sadly. We sat in an amazing study which looked down a valley towards the tops the Cumbrian fells. I sat next to the Archdeacon from the wicked west, from the Workington area. He was a wonderful man. I can talk about him now because he has died. He was a completely unreformed, 1960s socialist, and he always wore a black leather jacket. He was of that particular format. He was great. He smoked pipe. We sat together because we were the sort of, do you remember the Muppets? We were the two old men in the opera box.

He had forthright views. At the start of one meeting, he sat down in his wicker work chair and said, "right" - we all woke up! "I'm fed up with this meeting being about fire-fighting and bad news", he said. He thumped his fist on the table in front of him. "From now on, we're going to begin every meeting with each one of us, telling the others one piece of good news that we have experienced in the past week, one experience that has brought us joy, right" Like all good Anglicans, we all mumbled, "okay". And it completely transformed the life of that bishop's staff meeting. Because from the negative, from the things that we all brought to that meeting, of difficulties, of problems, sometimes insuperable problems that were always going to be there on the agenda, we were never, ever going to move, we started with that moment of telling.

And it could be anything.

It could be hearing a wonderful little group of singers somewhere in the middle of Cumbria singing a beautiful anthem that was unexpected. Or a congregation that had suddenly turned round and had become positive. Or just something beautiful that we'd seen on our journey through Cumbria.

From the negative, we turned to the positive. The problems didn't go away, but we approached them with a much healthier attitude.

I would suggest that as we prepare for the coming of a new bishop, we should think long and hard about the good news stories that we want to tell them about when they arrive.

So much good is happening at parochial and at diocesan level. But that good news is often drowned out by the noise of national problems and events. It's drowned out by the purple ink letters. Yes, we must ensure that safeguarding is at the heart of everything that we do and are. Yes, we must be aware of the church beyond our county, especially remembering Kagera. But, but, let's celebrate and tell our local stories of success and joy more and more

Let's have the courage to do it. Let's not be beaten down by the world that wants to see us as a failing organisation.

I want to finish with a heartfelt thank you for one person in particular. This will upset all of you who are not that one person. And I make no apology for that at all, your turn might come at the next Synod, you never know. The Diocesan Secretary, Gary, is what my grandmother would call a treasure. His gentle but firm leadership, at what has proved to be quite a difficult time, through staff illness and staffing challenges, has been completely exemplary. Gary, we are very lucky to have you in post.

Lastly, it's good, isn't it ... lastly, I commend to your prayers for the work of the Crown Nominations Commission and especially our diocesan representatives on it. We have placed on their shoulders a great responsibility, the least we can do is to hold them in our prayers as they carry out the task committed to them.

Now we rejoice to name him king. Jesus is Lord of all the earth that this gospel message we proclaim, we sing his glory, tell his worth. Thank you.