

## **Sermon preached at the Synod Eucharist on Saturday 7 May 2016 by Revd Dr Claire Nye Hunter**

Gospel for the day: John 16:23-28

*Jesus said, "I tell you the truth – my Father will give you whatever you ask in my name. Until now you have not asked for anything in my name. Ask and you will receive, and your joy will be complete" (Jn 16:24)*

### **Introduction**

We have almost reached the end of Synod 2016. Before we came, I am sure many of us prayed for this Synod – maybe that we would endure it, not be too bored, not have any major disagreements, or that the time would go quickly – but no doubt also that the Holy Spirit would guide us, lead us into the truth, speak to us and give us his wisdom as together we explored "God's mission in a missionary model".

I am sure we will all agree that God has answered our prayers. We have listened and heard the voice of God. We have been led by the Spirit through the teachings and presentations of our guest speakers; through our discussions, reports and motions; through our corporate acts of worship and through our interactions with one another. There has been like an invisible thread running from one speaker to the next, with each building on the previous speaker even though they did not hear one another! We have at times been excited and amazed, exclaiming "Wow – surely God is speaking to us?!"

Jesus said we must ask in his name. Before we came to Synod we asked, we received, and now our joy is complete.

### **What shall we ask for now?**

Today we shall return to our parishes and our homes. The question I want us to consider now is simply this: "What will we ask of God as we leave synod? God, what is it you want us to ask for, in Jesus' name?"

I want to suggest three things we might ask of the Lord:

#### **1. Lord, DEEPEN in each of us a sense of our calling and vocation**

Last week, I was asked to address students at the College of the Transfiguration on the topic "How do I know that I am called?" Often the assumption is that "calling" refers only to a call to the ordained ministry of the church.

However, whether lay or ordained, we are all called first and foremost into a relationship with God, through Jesus. We are called to 'repent and be baptised' (Acts 2:38). Jesus invites us, as he did Nicodemus (John 3), to come and be 'born anew/born again/born from above' so that we might see the Kingdom of God. We are called to come and 'receive him, believe in his name' and so are 'given the right to become children of God' (John 1:12-13). As his children, we can approach God as 'Abba, Father' and enjoy an intimate relationship with him; we can speak to God and listen to his voice. Like the disciples, we are called by Jesus to "Come and follow me and I will make you fishers of men (people)" (Mark 1:17).

Whether lay or ordained, our identity is never simply as 'churchwardens, priests, doctors, deacons, layministers, parish councillors', but rather our identity comes through our relationship with God through Jesus: we are sons and daughters of the living God. Archbishop Justin Welby recently reminded us that at his enthronement as Archbishop of Canterbury, he was asked "Who are you?" and his response was, "I am Justin, a servant of God". We are all called to be sons, daughters and servants of God. That is both our identity and our calling.

Once we respond to God's call to enter into a relationship with God through Jesus, it doesn't end there. At our Confirmation, we were given the opportunity to make a public response to that call. The Bishop then laid his hands on our head and anointed us with chrism oil, praying "Confirm and strengthen with your Holy Spirit this your child, and empower him/her for service" (AAPB 1989:376). As those called by God to be his children, we are called and commissioned for service.

I believe each one of us has been challenged again this Synod to ask of the Lord, "What am I called for? How do you want me to serve you now?"

We are the body of Christ – we are blessed in the Anglican Church by being a 'rich mix' of all sorts of people; we are a wonderfully diverse community of believers. As different members we have different functions, but we remain one body. God made each of us unique, and has given us different gifts and abilities which are to be used for the benefit of others and for the building up of his church. We are not all the same; nor is our calling the same – imagine a church with only ordained clergy! That would be like a body made up of eyes only, which would in effect be a monster! Each of us has a particular contribution to make, and we need one another in the diocese if the body of Christ is to be healthy and function properly.

In order for the church to be effective and fulfil our mission and calling, we need to LISTEN to the voice of God (both individually and corporately). Let's not rush ahead – 'good ideas' are not necessarily 'God's ideas'! Maybe you say, "I don't know what God wants me to do?" That is precisely why Jesus says to us, "*Until now you have not asked for anything in my name. Ask and you will receive*".

Earlier this week we prayed this prayer, which I believe God wants us to pray as we leave Synod. "Give your people grace to hear and receive your word, to find and follow their true vocation, and to bring forth the fruit of the Spirit" (AAPB 1989:75).

Jesus said, "*I tell you the truth – my Father will give you whatever you ask in my name. Until now you have not asked for anything in my name. Ask and you will receive, and your joy will be complete*" (Jn . 16:24).

Let us ask God to deepen in each of us a sense of calling and vocation; to show us more clearly what he wants us to do and be.

## **2. Lord, EQUIP us by your Spirit to be obedient and faithful.**

We listened and God has spoken clearly. God has shown us that we need to recover and rediscover our understanding of God's mission. We have been challenged to align ourselves with his vision, because God's mission = God's vision.

God spoke to us through the Bishop's charge to the Diocese. Whereas the spiritual needs of God's people are important, God's vision is bigger than that. The cross has a vertical and a horizontal dimension. We need to pay attention to the vertical – the spiritual needs of people – but we must not neglect the horizontal aspect. This involves reaching out to address the physical needs we see around us.

As shepherds and pastors of God's flock, we are to reach out to the broken, wounded, traumatised, and marginalised members of society – including those of the Gay and Lesbian community (as we were so powerfully reminded in the video from IAM – Inclusive and affirming ministries). We have all been challenged, clergy and laity alike, to move out of the church building and into the world. Rather than waiting for people to come to us, we must go out into our communities. We are called to be the 'salt of the *earth*'; not of the *church*! Salt that remains in the salt cellar (church building) is useless – it needs to be sprinkled in the world around us. (Salt is a preservative – it prevents food from decay.

That is our task. Salt brings out the flavour of the food – that is our task in the world). We have been challenged to get the church back into the schools (education), into the clinics and hospitals (health), into agriculture (use of the land). It was suggested that perhaps we need to get a 'skills data base' so that all the people in our congregations can identify and share their gifts, talents, expertise – that together we can make a difference.

We have listened. We have heard God speaking to us and challenging us to action. I am reminded of the powerful words found in the book of James: "*Do not merely listen to the word, and so deceive yourselves. **Instead, put it into practice. Do what it says** (James 1:22).* Let us not become guilty of 'sins of omission. Let us not be fooled- hearing God's word is a useless exercise if as a result we DO NOTHING!

We are called not to be successful – but to be faithful and obedient to our calling. Let us ask the Father to continue to stir us, guide us, give us courage to put his word into practice. Let us ask the Father to equip us by his Spirit, that we might be able to carry out the tasks he has set before us.

### **3. Lord, COMMISSION and send us out to be your Missionaries.**

Finally, I wish to suggest one last thing we can ask of God as we leave this Synod.

We know that missionaries in the past have unfortunately receive rather 'bad press' yet at the same time we have also been reminded that much good came from them as well! Let us not 'throw the baby out with the bath water'. Let us ask God to commission us to be his Missionaries at this time in the life of our country and diocese.

I believe that God is wanting to do something new in our diocese and in our land. A new 'missionary diocese' is about to be born! Yes, that will mean that we will experience 'labour pains'. It will not be easy. It might be costly. God is prodding us to move us out of our comfort zones.

As we prepare for the birth of this new 'missionary diocese', we might ask of God: "How will we give birth? Who will be the 'midwives'? Who will be the 'missionaries'? Who will implement the vision?"

One thing is sure: if we leave this Synod, saying "What a wonderful and inspiring time we had together" and we continue our lives "business as usual" – the vision of the 'new diocesan missionary baby' about to be born will end up as a "still birth". The baby will die. What a tragedy that would be!

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We asked – and we received. God spoke. He has given us a fresh vision and calling to be his 'Missionaries' in the very best sense of the word; to give birth to a new, 'Missionary Diocese'. I believe we need to ask God to commission us to be his Missionaries.

But now, God has something to ask of us – of you and of me.

He asks: "*Whom shall I send, and who will go for me?*" (Isaiah 6:8)

Are you willing to have the faith, the willingness, the courage and the obedience to respond: "*Lord, here am I, send me*"?

If so, I invite you to stand and respond personally to these questions:

*"Who will be the midwives to assist in the birth of this diocese? Who will be God's missionaries in this diocese? Whom shall God send, and who will go?"*

**"Lord here am I, send me". AMEN.**

