

## Visitation Charge October 2015

This is by my reckoning the fifth Visitation service we have held together in October. I cannot recall now why we started the series in October, but I do recall that when we began, the whole concept of a Visitation was alien to many. We borrow some elements of the service from those held in the UK, but essentially for us this is an occasion of coming together, and sharing together in worship, in a context where there can be reflection on a year past and commitment to our task in the year to come. The service brings together some of those who are most responsible for making Church happen in our parishes, and that is a wider constituency than in the UK equivalents, where the congregation is made up essentially of licence holders and wardens. Services in the UK are held in May, in order that Wardens can make their declarations before the Bishop or Archdeacon, soon after AGMs have been held and as the year of office begins. Our own Wardens' Conference earlier this year recommended that we do the same, and so from next year on, the Visitation service will be held in May. So, there's only seven months to wait for the next one.

Each time of year has its own ethos in the Christian calendar, and May is a time when we are recalling the early church's first tentative steps towards putting some structure around the new community of faith in a context of post-resurrection euphoria. That is not a bad theological context for a Visitation. But October also has its ethos. This is a time of gratitude and thankfulness, and one of the really heartfelt tasks for me is to thank every one of you (and I do so on behalf of the Bishop) for the contribution you have made to church life this year. Serving as a Warden, a Council Member or a Eucharistic Assistant can be made to seem sometimes rather a thankless task that the congregation as a whole hardly notices and largely takes for granted. We do not take any of that for granted. A prayer by the former bishop of Oxford speaks of 'those who come early and leave late and somehow need to meet God for themselves in between.' That, I know, is many of you. Thank you for that.

This time of year is important also in terms of our congregational demographics. It is the time of what David Attenborough might call the great return, following the mighty migration to cooler climes during the summer. Hence it has the feel of a new term, a new start, a new season. The timing of Back to Church Sunday encourages that, and gives a sense of anticipation to our meeting. But third, this is harvest time, and that is always a time for reflection on the past. What has been garnered in? What has worked, what needs to be changed or worked at in the coming year? These are harvest questions and also Visitation questions. So what is our harvest this year? What does mature reflection on the past year bring to mind for us?

I think it is true to say that last year saw a culture of anxiety descend upon the diocese as a whole. This was largely due to the situation in Dubai, still unresolved totally, and to the unusually large numbers of clergy changes taking place or anticipated. There were issues around whether our ambition was too great, whether our present patterns were sustainable, and whether resources could be found to enable us to function as a church should. These anxieties were reflected in the Meeting of the House of Laity in Synod as well as at our own Island Forum Meeting. Call me a hopeless optimist, but I do believe there is a new sense of hopefulness taking the place of that anxiety. Here we have made appointments of a new dean, Fr Jeremy (to whom I am personally grateful for his willing

accommodation of this service today), and a priest in Agia Napa and Famagusta, Fr Gabriel. It is good to welcome them and their families to our midst. We anticipate an appointment in Paphos before the end of the year, but are really sad to see Andrew's contract end, and to have to say goodbye to him and Rosemary.

Things have moved on in the forming parish of Ammochostos. A shadow Council is now operative and enthusiastic. The Student Chaplaincy is attracting funds from as far away as Australia, and Harry is settled in new accommodation, which also acts as a drop in centre and meeting place. Limassol parish is celebrating its centenary, and also celebrating the growth of its Pissouri congregation now meeting twice each month. New youth work has been started in Kyrenia, among a raft of creative outreach initiatives, and the Council there is considering a new kind of partnership with JEMT in relation to some of the properties owned there by the Trust. Income is exceeding budget forecasts in some parishes. In Larnaca this is helped by the opening of a second Charity shop in the village of Perivolia, which is also acting as an outreach setting. The first service will be held there next week.

Mention of JEMT prompts me to say that still we have not got our reporting process up and running properly. The request is that a six-monthly tick-box form be completed in the name of the wardens, possibly delegated to a Fabric Committee Chair, and returned to the JEMT secretary. Rob Findlater has outlined the procedure and made himself available to all Councils on the island. Let's make sure we get that system working. On a positive JEMT note, conversations have begun with Dean Jeremy, who in turn has been discussing this with the Cathedral Council, which I hope will develop to include a wider audience, on the best form of management and utilisation of St George's in the Forest. It has been good that the cathedral has been willing to take a management responsibility for this property and we are grateful to them and have no wish to minimise their role. But in truth St George's is not actually near the cathedral or indeed any of our churches, and has the capacity to be of use to all of them. What might make sense is to encourage a kind of "Friends of St George's" with a membership drawn from interested people from around the island, to bring creative energy to both using and maintaining this unique church.

Our Finance Officer has been involved in a project to enable parish payrolls to be administered centrally, and that has now become available as an offer to parishes on the island. The first to take advantage learned that in the past they had overlooked one procedure, which Evangelia was able to pick up. The result was that that parish is 1100 euros a year better off and the employee in question is over 100 euros a month better off. Ye who have ears to hear...

On the training, teaching and learning front there have been developments. Three people have been selected for training as the result of a Selection Conference held earlier this year – two from the island. Justin and Harry are now involved in training programmes and we look forward to their ordination in due course. In June we welcomed Chris and Geoff as new deacons – the first to be ordained as a result of following the Exploring Faith course. I am pleased to see new Learning Groups being set up across the diocese, including one here in Nicosia. We do have an urgent need for new Readers, as well as clergy and I do urge every one to consider their call. It is good to report that two people have responded to this particular call in recent weeks.

Synod this year had a new and different format. Much time was given to group discussions, in place of some of the plenary sessions and video reports. A single video was produced outlining particular news from the year, and this was generally welcomed and will be repeated. The theme of the discussions and of the Synod as a whole was 'Our Common Life,' a theme demanded by the challenge to that concept by some within the parish of Dubai, but also by a process of constitutional review which seeks to begin from what we actually believe about ourselves. That approach was also warmly welcomed, and will be repeated in the coming year. For those who missed the discussions, the document, 'Our Common Life' is available on the website. Groups looked at three questions: what should the church be, what should the church do and how should our church be financed?

Next year the theme is 'Our Common Mission' which will focus on these kinds of questions: what do we believe our good news to be in our context; what structures, initiatives or funding streams are necessary to give that news maximum practical effect, and what should be the criteria for a diocesan project?

Of course, such discussion is not simply administrative and objective. It needs to reach within each of us, to prompt us to think about how we contribute to God's mission and what we do to help people to see his presence in our actions.

One definite conclusion of Synod, emerging from the discussion groups was that a diocesan initiative on Stewardship was an urgent necessity. Standing Committee has the task of doing some research and reporting back to Synod next year. I think it worth saying at this point that there is no magic bullet contained in a Report about Stewardship, and it is much easier to talk about initiatives than to put them into effect. As they say in Pembrokeshire, you don't fatten a pig by weighing it. Stewardship is an integral part of discipleship and should be part of every aspect of church life. Producing a Report or recommending a particular approach will not solve the perceived problem.

Theologically speaking, there are three useful perspectives on stewardship. One is what we might call 'God and me.' This would recall all that God has done for each of us and all that he means to each of us, and the need to make some thankful response for all the blessings of this life. A eucharistic life does not stop after the final hymn. It begins there. The second approach could be called 'the church and me.' This would concentrate on the responsibilities of membership. As a baptised and practising Christian, what is required of me? What are the responsibilities of belonging? In turn that leads to questions about the place and priority of the church in my life, the extent to which I see my possessions in a spiritual perspective and my understanding of generosity. One Stewardship project, which is popular in the UK, is based on this theme. Its title, The Responsibility is Ours (TRIO) says it all. A third approach is simply 'me.' That approach begins from an understanding that stewardship and the generosity and concern that is involved in it, is a mark of the mature Christlike humanity into which we are attempting to grow. To be a giving person is to be a truly human person.

That perspective struck me particularly some years ago, listening to an account of a visit to Zimbabwe by the broadcaster Pauline Webb. She was there to present an exotic Songs of

Praise that would involve the contribution of a remote tribal village, whose members were going to do a dance. From the start nothing went well, everyone was hot and bothered, there were technical problems and resentment grew between the crew and the villagers. Eventually the film was in the can and they prepared to leave, but as they did the dance started up with a new vibrancy and from the midst of the ranks of dancers, there emerged a man with a basket. The basket contained gifts: a necklace for the producer, something else for the sound man, the basket for Pauline herself and for the camera man, the best paid of the lot, 5 Zimbabwean dollars – a few pence. The effect on the crew was dramatic. These were no longer a few useless natives kicking up dust. They were givers. They were recognised as human in their giving – and so are we.

Stewardship is not therefore just a way of making money or increasing funds. It has real spiritual depth, and it has wider implications in other aspects of our lifestyle choices. The whole area of environmental sustainability begins from an understanding of stewardship. It is the stuff of which a useful Lent course can be made, on which testimony can be based, and which should be a part of all church teaching and discussion. Yet we are embarrassed or reluctant to offend by talking openly about it, particularly as it relates to money and possessions. There are 2350 verses in the Bible that deal with money and possessions. It says so on the Church in Wales website so it must be right. If it has that priority in the Bible, why does it not have that priority and that honour and respect in our communities of faith? These are among the questions Standing Committee will be looking at later this month.

Among the other areas where we must improve, is that of communication. Consistent appeals for parish correspondents seem to fall on deaf ears, but we can only communicate effectively within the diocese and between the diocese and others who are interested in us, if we have something to say and people prepared to write it. We are more than happy to offer help, to run workshops or do whatever is necessary to achieve a better result. Please do get in touch. From this year we shall have a new webmaster, Jon Lavelle and I hope this will be the prompt for a new formation of the Communications Team. If you think you may have something to offer I would like to know. On the other hand the Spirituality work is thriving, and repaying our faith that with the right resources this could be an area of real growth. Throughout the year many have benefited from the personal retreats, the opportunity to see a spiritual adviser, the chance to participate in a workshop, and to experience something new and creative in worship. Fr Sean Semple left the Spirituality team during the year for an appointment in England and we pray constantly for him and Cathy and their family.

It has been good to see the continued enthusiasm for common church activity throughout the archdeaconry, of which spirituality is one example. Others include: the Forum, the work done by the Diocesan Group for the Protection of Vulnerable People, the Community of Cyprus Treasurers, the regular meetings of both Readers and Clergy, and latterly, what I think is going to become an annual Conference for Wardens.

Every year we try to find a new way of symbolising that inter-relationship and this year we have chosen the theme of mosaic. Each parish has made and designed a mosaic cross. That is a work of stewardship in its own right, acknowledging the gifts that make it possible. Each parish will give its work to another, and that is a further act of stewardship as we share

together and accept our inter-dependence. The mosaics themselves are like our churches and church members. They are unequal pieces of stone, each beautiful in its way but more beautiful in combination. They have rough edges and need cement to hold them together, and at times when the work is in progress that must be frustrating. And they form a cross. We are like that. People of the cross: more beautiful, more useful, more effective in combination.

Thank you once again, and in this coming year may God bless you richly in all that you attempt in his name.