



THE EPISCOPAL CHURCH IN JERUSALEM AND THE MIDDLE EAST
DIOCESE OF CYPRUS AND THE GULF

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PRESIDENTIAL ADDRESS

Diocesan Synod, 1 February 2016

Forty Years On: as well as being a knowing and satirical revue by Alan Bennett abetted by Russell Harty, that's the title of the Harrow School Song. It views the prospects that stretch out before those leaving school for the wide world and that will stretch back later for those with long memories.

One verse runs

*Forty years on, growing older and older,
Shorter in wind, as in memory long,
Feeble of foot, and rheumatic of shoulder,
What will it help you that once you were strong?*

Pretty depressing, given that forty years plus the school leaving age is about 58; but perhaps you can relate to it. Too much heartiness on the sports field, I say.

Anniversaries tend to be bathed in half-sentimental, half-rueful retrospection: looking back. I'm all for history. During this year we hope to publish a brief diocesan history. But as we celebrate in 2016 forty years on from 1976 when we were founded, we're called as Christians to look in two other directions: around us, and forwards. Christ walks with us and we walk with Christ, wherever he leads us; and wherever he leads us and we follow him will always be deeper and deeper in and into the Kingdom and it will always be closer and closer to the heart of God. Always, whether we see it or not.

In the year since this synod last met, the horrors have become evident of what calls itself the Islamic State and aspires to be the purest continuation of the seventh-century Muslim caliphate. Though its works of terror now affect other parts of the world its base is in the heart of our region. Of course, its leaders and followers are Muslims by self-description, just as Koran-burning extremist Baptists in Texas were Christians by self-description. But the non-negotiable Islam that IS proclaims and imposes is unrecognisable or at least abhorrent to all other Muslims except the one, currently very influential, stream of neo-conservative, hyper-puritanical, fascistic, literalist-fundamentalist bigots from which they draw their inspiration and, largely, their money. Their look and their direction is backwards: to an idealised Medina, established and defended by war, and – surely – to a God who is defined by their narrow limits, though they profess the exact opposite.

But we must look around us, and forwards, and trust our walk with Christ.

In Iraq, it hardly needs saying how tough life has been for Christians. Alongside other Iraqis they suffered in the aftermath of the ill-thought-through and unconscionable invasion by the Americans and the British in 2003. Now IS, *Da'esh*, has taken Mosul and the Christian heartlands of the biblical Plain of Nineveh and the Christians there have been torn from their roots and possessions in towns and villages that long predate Islam. Some who could have left the country, but most not now for favoured and once not impossible places like Canada but rather for a miserable life in hard-pressed surrounding nations. Others are within official Iraqi borders in the Kurdish Autonomous Region, and others still have come to Baghdad. These now constitute an acronym: they're *IDPs*, internally displaced persons. Yezidis have suffered, and indeed many Muslims too, not least Shi'i and non-compliant Sunni; but Christians most certainly have been and are persecuted by the vile phenomenon of IS. In Syria it's the same, and there the politics and the prospects are even more complicated and desperate than in Iraq.

In the Yemen, which is also in this diocese, Christians are lying low. Church buildings have been damaged and previously unapologetic public worship has had to go underground at least for a while. IS fighters are certainly present. So too are Saudi sympathisers, Al Qaeda factions, South Yemen secessionists, and Shi'a Houthi forces.

But we who are Christians must look around us, and forwards. In Baghdad St George's continues to be open to anyone who wants to enter and longs for what it offers: a holy place, worship, a welcome, food, assistance, the clinic, the school, dependable love. The congregation, partly stable, partly shifting and renewed, is the praying heart of the compound, but St George's serves all in their human needs, not least Muslims. Funds from the wider Christian world are channelled through our diocese and through Fr Faiz to help the relief efforts of the mainline Churches in the north as well as in local situations like an IDP camp in Baghdad in the grounds of the Assyrian Christian Zowa'a Party headquarters. We look around us. We look forwards.

In Aden our priest and other Christians had to leave in the worst of the fighting and have necessarily not returned in the political chaos that has no end, but the church building and the words *Christ Church* on the compound gate still stand as a witness. The work of the clinic, our defining ministry of service there, was suspended for a while, but only as long as it had to be. In September it resumed. Our staff now carry on doing what they've always done, in the most difficult circumstances imaginable. They're all Muslims and almost all young women. They, and most especially the extraordinary man who is our general manager and administrator, a devout Muslim to whom Christ Church and the Ras Morbat clinic, and (I dare to say) the Christianity that is the *raison d'être* of our presence in Aden, are very dear, are committed to the ethos that Christ Church has always stood for: look around; look forward.

St Paul's heartfelt words in 2 Corinthians 4, written out of his own apostolic life, could have been penned with Baghdad and Aden in mind:

We are pressed on every side yet not straitened, perplexed yet not unto despair, pursued yet not forsaken, smitten down yet not destroyed, always bearing about in the body the dying of Jesus, that the life also of Jesus may be manifested in our body.

Paul prefaced that by telling Christians that

We have this treasure – that is, the light of the knowledge of the glory of God – in earthen vessels, that the exceeding greatness of the power may be of God, and not from ourselves.

Forty years on. But this diocese has a pre-history. There were Anglicans in Cyprus, and Iraq, and the Gulf, long before the reconfiguration of geography in 1976 that set out to serve the region better by subdividing the large Archbishopric of Jerusalem and by incorporating into a new self-governing Province of the Anglican Communion much of north and north-east Africa as well the

existing Diocese of Iran. Indeed Christ Church in Aden has the proud date *1864* on a stone in its gable. And in that pre-history there have been many hard or confusing political and personal times. The Ottoman Empire cast a mostly lethargic but always obstructive and sometimes cruel pall over its territories, which included all of the lands this diocese now serves. When St Barnabas Limassol celebrated the centenary of its present building last year it reminded me that in 1915 huge numbers of British but also Indian and other soldiers suffered and fell in Mesopotamia in an enormous military disaster. They're memorialised in the North Gate cemetery in Baghdad: row on row. In the wider region the forcible establishment of the State of Israel in 1948 caused upheavals that engulfed and dispersed many Christians as well as others, and the events of 1967 and 1973 reverberated everywhere in the Middle East and have affected Muslims, Jews, and Christians. What happened in Cyprus in 1974 was grievous to all in its consequences. The civil war in the Lebanon, just afterwards, brought many to Cyprus, not least a Christian diaspora. The first Gulf War traumatised Kuwait, our congregation at St Paul Ahmadi and especially our priest among them.

But we – I speak corporately – looked around, and went forwards, and *the exceeding greatness of the power was of God, and not from ourselves.*

It was and is our common mission to walk with Christ; to be his Body; to recognise and inhabit the Kingdom; and in every sense to stay present. The Five Marks of Mission that will be an *aide-memoire*, as in this synod we explore Our Common Mission, are a formulation that does the Anglican Communion proud (and they make for a far healthier statement, to ourselves and to the world, of who we are and what we therefore must do than recent painful and agonised anathemas and caveats and warnings and regrets). But they articulate what mission has always been: telling everyone, as best we can, about Christ who shows us God; handing the faith on as imaginatively and confidently and intelligently as possible; looking around to notice who's crying out for love and justice, and then acting; standing up to what's diminishing and demonic, and standing for what makes for the peace of God; and rejoicing in the truth that the world is the Lord's and all that is in it, and therefore reverencing it as his Creation. Express it how we will, this is our mission because it is Good News and the mission of God in Christ.

We who have this treasure and task in earthen vessels – in our congregations, in our churches, in our councils, in ourselves – have always in this diocese (again I speak corporately) continued the divine and apostolic mission, even when daunted and dismayed for a while by things great and things petty. And we should know that, if we deem ourselves unready for mission because we say our church life or our Christian faith or even our human existence is fragile, God in Christ was fragile before us. The Feast of Candlemas falls in the heart of this synod. That's why the icon is on the front cover of the booklet. The Word of God Incarnate, through whom the world was made, needed Mary to bear him, and Joseph to carry him, and Simeon and Anna to recognise him, and to recognise that he had come to his own Temple. It seems bewildering that God could choose to need us, as bewildering as the truth that by being made fragile flesh he gave life and hope to the fragile. But he did, and he does, forty years ago, and forty years on.

+Michael Cyprus & the Gulf

