Visitation Charge 2019

When I was considering what readings to choose for this, the last and ninth of my Visitation Charges, I had no hesitation in looking to Paul’s Letter to the Philippians. You could almost describe that as a final Visitation Charge. It is written with warmth to a church for which Paul obviously has great affection. Some would say this is evidence of its being Paul’s favourite church. There is no angry letter here, as there is to Corinth, and he does not call the congregation fools, as he does the Galatians. Rather he describes them, as we have just heard, as ‘partners in the Gospel’, using the word for ‘partners’ (sichtos) koinonia, that he uses elsewhere to describe the things that he believes give a church legitimacy and integrity: sharing, fellowship and communion are all possible translations of that word.

The church at Philippi is one of the churches of Macedonia which Paul holds up as examples of true Christian action in their willingness to share what little they have, even though they are poor and vulnerable. They support his idea of a collection to help mitigate the effects of famine elsewhere, when more prosperous churches are less forthcoming. Paul is one of the few NT writers to make a theological virtue out of weakness and vulnerability. Another is the author of the letters to the seven churches in the book of Revelation. The strongest, wealthiest church, Laodicea, attracts nothing but criticism: the weakest and most vulnerable, Philadelphia, nothing but praise and encouragement. Paul uses the experience of the Philippians to reflect on what it was for Jesus himself to become poor and lowly – and this is a letter of praise and encouragement which echoes my own sentiments as I think of my time among you.

And actually, I think many churches are feeling particularly vulnerable at this time. Most churches on the Island report falling numbers in their congregations, largely due to circumstances beyond our control, it should be said, though that does not mitigate the anxiety and responsibility that church officers and councilors feel when they look at the situation and feel there must be something that they are failing to do, or otherwise doing wrong.

On any objective view, congregations are to be expected to decrease at this time. Our first lesson today from Jeremiah describes the attitude which many expats brought to this Island twenty years ago. But the gold rush of UK ex-pats around twenty years ago, attracted many people in their late fifties and early sixties, who are now in their late seventies and early eighties. Many of them are anxious about the potential loss of security and benefits that may result from Brexit, and have either left already or are deeply unsettled. The High Commission reports that UK citizens are leaving the Island at a rate, and that the proportion of ex-pats from the UK is falling as compared with those from other places. Younger people are not being attracted here to work, and Brexit affects that as well. All this leads to lower church incomes and anxiety about maintaining ministry, and even about the viability of the church in the longer run. Add to that the uncertainty about the future of the Diocese (as you will have seen reported in sense/synod) and the probable dissolution of the Province, and it is no wonder that people have a sense of fragility and vulnerability, not unlike that which obtained in Philippi.

What Paul does is to remind them that they should hold their nerve, remember the power of example, both his and theirs, and stick to the things that give a church authenticity. But he begins with thanks for their partnership in the Gospel, and that is where I want to begin.

It has been a real joy to hold the office of Archdeacon in Cyprus for me during these years. Of course, individual churches have had their thanks from time to time, but there has been a core of dedicated people who have maintained authentic church life, and many of you are here today. There are congregations member completely unaware of just how much work goes into preparing even one Sunday service of quality. In Larnaca, we reckon it takes 17 people to make the service happen, and in some places that number may even be increased. I want to take this annual opportunity, on behalf of Bishop Michael as well, to thank you all sincerely, to tell you that the work you do is noticed and valued, and that it is crucial to the wellbeing of the churches on the Island. The theme of our service today is celebration and that is not an empty epithet. There is indeed much to celebrate.

Once again, we are giving concrete expression (probably an unfortunate phrase) to our celebration through the gifts of cake (for which many thanks). They look delicious. May they lift your heart out. This year we have some additional gifts which come from the Chaplaincy in Oman on the old spice route through Arabia. They have sent some special frankincense-based oils to us. Each parish or church is invited to take some for parish use after the service. It is a reminder that we are one Diocese, and also of the trueness that relationships often only become real to us in the exchange of gifts.

During the last year we have maintained those meetings and structures which bind us together – which demonstrate our koinonia. They continue to be well attended and give opportunity to learn from each other’s good practice as well as giving opportunity to know more about each other’s situations. Not for nothing is our Treasurers’ Meeting called the Community of Cyprus Treasurers, for that is how it feels. The Wardens meetings and those for Secretaries and Communications Officers have similar energy. We now have a new Diocesan Communications Officer, Rev’d Mike Graham, formerly Information Officer for the Church of Ireland, who is also our webmaster, and who is here today. He is in the process of drawing together a team of communicators to design the next stage of communications strategy, and if you feel you might have something to offer he would be very pleased to hear from you.

A new initiative during the past year has been a Meeting of those concerned with the Wedding ministry, itself a possible victim of Brexit uncertainty. I hope that we shall have another such meeting this year. I expect that most people here are avid watchers of the Channel four programme, Sun Sea and Brides to Be, and so you will have seen the cameo appearance of Rev’d Andrew Burtt in that series. If we ever introduce the equivalent of the Baftas in the Diocese, here is an obvious candidate.

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Another initiative this year was to hold a training day on the subject of all age worship, led by Rev’d Martin Phillips-Last. The attendance was most heartening and the day was most illuminating. I have struggled to think of an award that Martin might qualify for, but I’m sure it’s there somewhere – answers on a postcard. (which reminds me) I must remember to delete the picture on my computer of the Bishop with a puppet at Synod, but then again you never know when you might need these things.

Our most recent gathering has been the Social Outreach Meeting last month. That again was a most encouraging day, attracting, as it was last year, attendees from all over the Island. The Bishop was present for the whole day, and I was heartened to see at least one delegate from every parish or church present. It was a reminder of the extent to which our churches are actually involved in social outreach work. For a long time, this has been an area of church life that has cried out for coordination and there could not be a better person than Anne to achieve it.

On the subject of social responsibility, it would be a mistake to think that this is something that simply depends on partnerships with other agencies. We can be socially responsible parishies in our own right. It seems quite some time now since we could express a degree of pride that we were fair trade parishies, and that, simply on the basis that we serve only fairly-traded tea and coffee at church functions. What could be easier to achieve. Yet I believe we have only one fair trade parish left in Cyprus. It’s easy to pray about justice on a world wide scale where the problems are so huge we can easily detach ourselves from them. It just as easy to pray about
the environment and the sustainability of life on earth, but which of our parishes has a plastic free strategy. I know only of one moving in that direction. Social responsibility is a form of mission that others understand and respond to. We must not forget that one of the marks of mission urges us to transform what is unjust. That is not a passive concept. I am not sure what to do about the Cyprus Forum this year, though in a sense it’s not my call. The problem is that in the past we have arranged the Forum to coincide with the Diocesan Standing Committee Meeting held in the Autumn, growing as it did from the SC road shows of several years ago. This year the Autumn SC Meeting will take place in Abu Dhabi so that will not be possible. A Day conference could of course, still be arranged, and it would be good to have your views on that.

This is the first year I can remember when we are not welcoming a new cleric to our midst. We have said goodbye to Rev’d Christine Golightly who appears to be thriving in London. Through this year we have had the benefit of Rev’d Navena Thompson whom we have taken to our hearts here on the Island. Latterly she has been joined by her husband Canon Andy Thompson and they will be returning together to the UAE very shortly. How we shall miss that impish smile, that keen sense of observation and keen theological intellect. We shall also miss Andy.

As always we have to deal with some more mundane matters, which Paul was spared in Philippi. You will want to know what progress we are making with the parish applications for Association status. There has been informal initial discussion with the authorities about the details of our membranda of Association. If I tell you that we are currently on draft number ten, you will get some idea of how that is going. Moreover, since, now, these applications have to be dealt with at District level, and since there is a large backlog of applications it is likely that this is not going to be concluded for a long time. One option is to apply for Limited Company status, rather than Association status. This could be concluded in a fortuitous, allegedly, but would involve more cost and place extra responsibilities for reporting, but we shall have to see where the balance lies.

JEMT needs a Trustee. Appeals have been made through the clergy to find appropriate people to be considered. At present we do not have a female trustee and that is a shame. I would be pleased to hear from anyone who feels this may be a role they can fulfil. This year money will be short for grants because we have to bear the cost of registering a new office for JEMT in northern Cyprus; this in order to reclaim properties that by default are now claimed by the civic authorities there.

During the year we have become subject to the demands of the General Data Protection Regulation (GDPR). It is important to note that churches are not exempt from this, and are not being given special consideration by the authorities in the UK for example, where fines have already been levied for breaches. The area of most concern for us is the Electoral Roll. On the one hand, permission needs to be given for the information contained on the Roll to be made public, and of course, on the other, some elements of it have to be made public according to our own Constitution. The best way to organise this, I think, is to have a special question on Electoral Roll forms that people can respond to. Also we need to get used to using blind copies on e mails, irritating and inconvenient though that often is, unless the group involved have given their individual consents to their information being used in that way. The Rev’d Geoff Graham will be pleased to give advice on specific issues or questions raised. This also affects the Diocesan Directory, where key official contact details are included, individuals have to give their consent to this. We are also looking at the possibility of a password protected part of the website that might contain sensitive information.

During the year the Safeguarding Group has had a new Executive Vice Chair, Rev’d Ian Nicholson, the first such office holder from the Gulf Archdeaconry. I am pleased to say that we have had no allegations to investigate during the past year and long may that continue. In some places this is still thought of as a child protection group and policy, and rather dismissed in places where there are few or no children, but the policy also includes vulnerable people, including disabled people and we do have many such people in our congregations. We do need to be aware of the special care they require, and of parish responsibilities in that regard. We also need to be rigorous about making sure that all who use our facilities have read our policy and agree to abide by it. There is world-wide concern in the Anglican Communion on this issue and we want to be examples of the very best practice.

The Barnabas Team has also had new members and has worked throughout the year with our new Spirituality Director, Canon Andrew Mayes. The work that the team has done on Intentional Discipleship, following the Synod working groups has been noted by the Anglican Communion Office and mentioned by the Archbishop of Canterbury at the recent ACC meeting in Hong Kong. This year we have also had a home-produced Lent course related to this year’s Synod theme which many have valued.

Like the cunning steward in the Gospel who realising that his time is coming to an end and knowing that he is too old to dig and too proud to beg (I can identify with that bit) and who secures his future by halving the accounts of debtors, I am afraid that I am unable to do anything with regard to maintaining a Diocesan Quota, Share or Contribution. It is important that this is paid in full by every parish. It does not disappear into a black hole. It is used to pay in part our Episcopal visitation costs and of course, to help support ministry here and throughout the Diocese. As access to funds becomes more problematic in the Gulf, every little helps and payments on time in full will be much appreciated.

Questions have been asked about parish support for representatives at next year’s Synod in the Gulf. Final details are yet to be worked out, but certainly there is a desire on the part of Gulf parishes to help subsidise the cost of travel for Cyprus members. Parishes have, of course, been budgeting for a Clergy and Spouses Conference this year which is now not going to happen, so it may be that some funds are available in existing budgets for that travel. We shall keep you up to date. Or more probably, Archdeacon Christopher will keep you up to date.

Normally at this point I would be saying something about themes and ideas for the coming year. For the most part this will be a transitional year, and Archdeacon Christopher will want to take stock of things as they are before suggesting future strategy, I guess. One green shoot I would mention though, which began last year, and which needs nurture and which it would be a shame to lose, is the development of interfaith and ecumenical work. Such as it is, the initiative grew from a scheme in Limassol to form a cookery club where refugees and others could share skills and finally make and share food with each other and a wider community. When that scheme came to an end last Summer it was decided to hold a celebration feast with lots of different ethnic dishes and to invite members of other Christian churches and members of other faith groups. The result was such a success that a further invitation was offered by the Imam of the Hala Sultan Tekke Mosque in Larnaca for those present to come there for a meal and fellowship, and that duly took place in January this year and was reported on the Diocesan video.

The hope was expressed that perhaps similar fellowship meals might take place in a variety of places through the Island, perhaps or even more often, that might reflect, at local and congregational level, the kind of meetings that happen at a senior and institutional level between these religious groups. Amecheostos has been mooted for the next such meal and I would love to see arrangements for that made before I leave at the end of July.

One area where I can look forward to and will have a continuing role for the next two years of transition, is that of Ministry. Over the past few years we have developed a structure for Ministerial discernment, training and deployment. The aim is to provide more and more ministers from within our own ranks, and there is evidence that this is happening. Later this month we shall hold the second selection conference within a year and in June we shall hold our first Diocesan Summer School for those within the training time scale parameters. As Director of Ministry I shall be liaising closely with Archdeacon Christopher and others to form a Ministry team that will enable sustainability in this area of work. There is a lengthy agenda of unfinished work before we can say that our structure is completely robust, but we are well on the way. It would be good to see more candidates from Cyprus. Both recent selection conferences have been dominated by Gulf-based candidates.

Philippians concludes with thanks for the care the church has shown to Paul, with a call not to be anxious, and with encouragement to simply be the church and let that example speak for itself. I can do no more than echo those sentiments. I have been very aware of the care you have all shown me and Sue during times of difficulty prompted by her illness, and indeed my own recent indisposition, and
the knowledge of being prayed for by so many people has been more of a support than you might imagine. In these times of fragility it is important to continue to simply be the church and to let the power of example have its effect. The best evangelism is still the word of trusted friends and the experience of good quality worship and liturgy. I shall continue to pray for you all, that, in Paul’s words, ‘God will supply all your needs out of the magnificence of his riches in Christ Jesus.’ Thank you again: for these years, for these occasions, and in the new future that awaits, may God bless you richly in all that you attempt in his name.

Amen