

Fel Na Choller Dim ❖ That Nothing Be Lost

A Conversation to Preserve the Breadth of Welsh Anglicanism

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The English Experience of Living with Diversity

Address by the Rt Revd Rachel Treweek, Bishop of Gloucester

Almighty God, to whom all hearts are open,
All desires known,
And from whom no secrets are hidden:
Cleanse the thoughts of our hearts
By the inspiration of your Holy Spirit,
That we may perfectly love you
And worthily magnify your holy name through Christ our Lord. Amen

I have had the privilege of being Bishop of Gloucester for just over a year and I am acutely aware that not only have I been living a new experience for myself, but what I have been living alongside others has also been something new for all of us in the Church of England. I often use the language of ‘living in a new landscape’ – and for all of us that is bringing new discovery and new challenges.

Today I intend to try and give you a window onto my own personal perspective and I hope this will provide a basis for some reflection together in our discussion later. What I am sharing is my *English* experience, given the history of where we have come from and where we are now. At the start I want to stress the importance of recognising that the past and the present are very different in Wales.

Some of you may know that one of my interests and passions is the transformation of conflict. This is connected to an interest I have in systemic thinking, rooted in family therapy, and I have found it particularly helpful to look through that lens at issues within the Church. If you have ever done any work around conflict you will no doubt have heard people say that ‘conflict is normal’. In many ways that’s stating the obvious, but it needs to be continually repeated: ‘conflict is normal’. What matters, is how we handle it.

And conflict is normal because diversity is normal. Each one of us is created in the image of God and yet a unique individual. We can marvel at that and celebrate it – and we do and we should – but let’s also name the truth that such immense diversity among human beings brings with it so much potential for conflict. Yet, let’s also not forget that conflict and reconciliation are at the heart of our gospel and every Eucharist in which we participate.

So, with all that said, as I reflect on the English experience of living with diversity I have chosen to speak to three key headings. There is so much that can be said, but I only have 20 minutes, so I’m going to touch on three headings: a commitment to intentional relationship, mutual flourishing, and a willingness to live with hopeful imagination.

A Commitment to Intentional Relationship

Relationship is at the heart of who God is. We are created to live in relationship with God (Father, Son and Holy Spirit), with neighbour and with our created world. We glimpse the wonder of that here on earth, but we also see the painful consequences when that relationship with God, with neighbour and with creation is fractured and broken. It is there in nearly every news headline.

In the Church of England, the House of Bishops' Declaration on the Ministry of Bishops and Priests uses the vocabulary of *mutuality* and *reciprocity*. These are words of relationship. What we discovered in England is that the way forward had to be lifted out of the territory marked only by legal fences and boundaries. The problem with approaching the issue of women in the episcopate from a purely legislative angle was that as soon as the fences and gates worked for one group of people and gave them the security and provision which they wanted, it offended and diminished the lives of another group of people who held a different theological perspective. Of course, it's important to note that in England we were living with the history of already having the 1993 Episcopal Act of Synod. General Synod was wading into ever more detail in a quest to balance an equation which cannot be balanced. We had to find a way of living with paradox and contradiction, and that meant making our starting place a framework of relationship. The five guiding principles hold together the opposites and provide some clear signposts for navigating the new landscape. Diversity is affirmed. Incidentally, it's important to note that the House of Bishops' Declaration has '*simplicity*' as a key word alongside *mutuality* and *reciprocity* ('Simplicity' is different from 'simplistic', and I will return to that later).

Whilst I was on General Synod, I realised that I needed to move towards those with whom I vehemently disagreed – it needed to be about encountering one another not simply in an adversarial way in the debating chamber or exchanging pleasantries in the coffee queue. When I arrived in Gloucester, I took the decision that some of the first clergy with whom I would meet for one-to-one conversations would be those who I knew would be struggling with having a diocesan bishop who is a woman. Being intentional about relationship is not about niceness or politeness, it won't always even be about friendship, but it is about human connection founded on respect, honesty and authenticity. When connection is strong, the relationship can cope much better with disagreement and robust conversation. Incidentally, it is also very important to be praying for people as individuals.

I think that many people in England would identify a turning point in the General Synod's processes of finding a way forward regarding women in the episcopate, as the session when people spent time together in facilitated groups. We were able to meet as fellow human beings and to voice our hopes and fears as we shared our theological perspectives. I confess that I was quite shocked at how liberating and enlightening this was for some people.

Two days after my inauguration in Gloucester I met with a PCC of a parish which had previously had resolutions A and B in place. The PCC members had recently passed a resolution to request that arrangements be made for it in accordance with the House of Bishops' Declaration on the Ministry of Bishops and Priests, but the Anglican worshipping community was divided over the whole issue of women ordained to the priesthood and the episcopate. I wanted to ensure that one of my first meetings was with that PCC and said something clear about my intention to build and develop relationship.

Underpinning mutuality, reciprocity, simplicity and the five guiding principles, is a deep conviction that our starting place is not our different theological perspectives but our commonality as children of God and followers of Jesus Christ.

At the start of my service of inauguration in Gloucester Cathedral I was met by a child who asked me ‘Who are you and why have you come to us?’ And the first line of my response was ‘I am Rachel, a pilgrim and servant of Jesus..’ In all our diversity, we are all, first and foremost followers of Jesus Christ. Identity is important in all of these discussions. If we are to live a holy network of relationships loving the Lord our God with all our heart, soul and mind; and loving our neighbour as ourselves, then that last part of ‘loving our neighbour as *ourselves*’ is extremely important. I believe that if we are not constantly working at knowing ourselves then we will struggle to live this new landscape of diversity, because we will constantly be deflecting our own internal brokenness onto something external. As Christians we declare we are the Body of Christ and we speak warmly of unity in diversity and being different parts with different gifts, but actually we would probably all feel much safer if everyone was just a little more like me or enough like me so as not to be a threat. In most situations of conflict in our world there is an intolerance and even a hatred of the other – Those who are from a different nation, a different religion, a different And my personal reflection is that this arises from a place of fear deep within. People fear that they are insignificant and not valued or deserving of love. Arrogance is often rooted in deep insecurity. In situations of conflict, when people can define themselves and feel secure in their identity which embraces their weaknesses as well as their strengths, it enables them to engage with others rather than be threatened by them. And I say all this because this has been an important part of my foundation in living the English experience of diversity. If we are to inhabit this new landscape well then we need to encourage one another to go on finding our identity in Christ and who we are called to be as followers of Jesus Christ. Woe betide the day I believe that being a bishop somehow enhances or increases who I am in Christ.

Let me briefly say something about ‘tribalism’: It is important that we don’t confuse the goodness of strong identity with the destructive notion of tribalism. Whilst affiliation to a particular organisation or group can encourage and nurture our growth as disciples of Jesus Christ, it is not healthy if our affiliation to that organisation or group is what defines us, particularly if it is underpinned by anxiety. If people are fearful deep within of being abandoned or rejected then the tribe becomes both attractive and dangerous. I have been both perturbed and saddened when I have heard people express concern that if they dissent in any way from the behaviour and beliefs of ‘their’ group, those people will ostracise them. That will not make for a healthy future in living with diversity. We need to keep permeable boundaries around our groups and organisations: something more akin to low foliage borders rather than high walls.

At this point, I briefly want to say something about complexity and simplicity. My experience as I and others have made an effort to relate to one another is that we have stopped being simplistic and have entered a place of deeper complexity involving both the head and the heart. As I mentioned earlier, ‘simplicity’ is different from ‘simplistic’. When things are *simplistic* then division and conflict is far easier: this is right and this is wrong – you are good and you are bad. However, *simplicity* is about holding fast to a few key tenets and recognising that those will take us to a place of complexity – a place where shades of colour enter the picture often in quite a perplexing way.

Let me try and give one personal example: When someone with whom I am building a relationship says that they do not believe that women should be bishops (and I respect that), the logical progression for me is that they therefore do not accept that I am being the person God has called me to be: a bishop in the Church of God. However, when I have voiced that to people I have usually found a desire to avoid that territory, and sometimes people have even said that they *do* believe I am being true to my calling. That's a conundrum. There will be times when I want and need to challenge, but at other times it's important to simply live with the complexity.

And I don't want to be naïve about this. For all of us emotions run high at times and we have the choice to withdraw from relationship or to stay connected, committed to honest and robust conversation – although sometimes you can't do that there and then: you have to step away.

[I haven't commented on that concept of 'non-anxious presence'. Some of you will be familiar with that terminology. Basically, it describes an outward calm and measured pace which stays connected with the other, whilst internally all sorts of firework displays might be taking place! It's a necessary part of all those one-to-one honest conversations. Without it, it's not easy to build relationship.]

Mutual flourishing

So, holding all that I have said about relationship, I want to say something about a commitment to mutual flourishing. It is of course there in the C of E's House of Bishops' Declaration. Sadly, I think that *flourishing* has become something of an overused word in all of this, but it is such a *good* word because it says something significant about the heart of God and our desire for the well-being of all people. God's desire for people's flourishing is not about maintenance or survival – it is about transformation, the fullness of life, wholeness and fruitfulness. Is that truly what I want for those who hold a different theological perspective from me? I won't pretend that's not a challenging question ...for all of us, because flourishing is about more than survival. If we truly believe that the person who holds a different theological view is made in the image of God, part of the Body of Christ and loved and redeemed by God, then unless we believe that the theological territory they inhabit is evil, we cannot desire them to wither on the vine. In the English experience of living with diversity it has been vital to be committed to the flourishing of the other even if our natural desire is not to want their theological perspective to grow and flourish. And once again we are back to the issue of simplicity and complexity. When people start raising anxious questions it's often because they are still trying to live with neat equations: they don't exist.

And of course in all of this, **trust** is a vital ingredient. I know you have already spoken about this in an earlier session, so I won't say more here except to say that enabling and deepening trust is a vital part of the English experience of living with diversity. When I met with that PCC in September last year, and as I've met with individuals across the diocese, I hope I have begun to develop a greater sense of trust between us. Those elements of a commitment to relationship and mutual flourishing have been key in the way Bishop Jonathan, Bishop of Ebbsfleet, and I have conducted our business. And I believe it is rooted in a sense of trust. It would have been easy for the two of us to simply have exchanged faceless letters, or worse still to have asked others to do that on our behalf – to tick the boxes and complete the formalities, but I believe it's been important that we have met with one another as fellow human beings.

Hopeful imagination

And that brings me to my third reflection. If we are to live this new landscape well then we need **hopeful imagination**. Hope keeps our eyes on the future and that which is unseen. I believe we cannot live this new landscape of diversity unless we live the present with our eyes and hearts set on that ultimate future when all will be brought to completion and God's kingdom will be fully here. We will be fully who we are, our 'becoming' will be complete, and we will be God's people dwelling in unity with God forever – a place of Shalom (Revelation 21:1-4). It is at our peril if we strive to live present diversity without keeping our eyes on that day when we will each see God face to face.

At the beginning, I said that conflict is normal. I've also talked about complexity and holding paradox. Well here is a paradox: conflict is normal, but if we are Easter people then there is nothing normal about life. If the empty tomb was a surprise beyond all surprises, we need to have hearts which are far more expectant and minds of far more imagination. Sometimes I do wonder if the truth of the resurrection has really taken hold of us.

For me, hopeful imagination quenches people's fear and even fans the flames of excitement. It was one of the main reasons for me and Bishop Jonathan affirming the beginning of a new chapter in North Cheltenham with a simple public act of worship. This was not about trying to paint everything with a shiny gloss. It was about acknowledging that the Lord is our God, 'we are his people and the sheep of his pasture' (Psalm 100: 3). We both want to be faithful to God, recognising our weaknesses and God's perfection. And we are beginning in a place of hope, knowing that journeying forward will require imagination. There is no given map as we explore the landscape. It's why we need that intentional commitment to relationship, that commitment to mutual flourishing and an ever-growing trust as we live the highest degree of communion possible.

I believe we still have a long way to go with hopeful imagination. That came home to me recently: When we placed the advert in the *Church Times* for a new rector of the North Cheltenham Team I naively thought that there would be a number of people out there who would be excited at leading a benefice which probably reflects most of the spectrum of tradition within the Church of England, including a female team vicar and a parish where pastoral and sacramental oversight has been entrusted to the Bishop of Ebbsfleet. I was wrong. However, I'm delighted to say that we have now appointed someone and we have an exciting adventure ahead.

And if we're going to live new landscape with hopeful imagination we need to be willing to take risk. Once more, trust becomes the key word. When we take risk, we will sometimes find we have crossed a boundary, or entered territory which provokes a strong and negative reaction in someone else.

You will know that in the Church of England part of this new landscape is having an independent reviewer. I recognise that for many people of all perspectives that's been an important part of the process and has better enabled people to embrace trust. However, I do believe we need to avoid the danger of letting our default position be such that whenever anything upsets, threatens or angers us we immediately appeal to the independent reviewer. This will prevent us from living with hopeful imagination and taking risk. Of course there will be things which are appropriate to raise with the Independent Reviewer, not least so that we continue to signpost this new landscape and live it in a life-giving way, but it should never be *instead* of mature conversations (Note: Matthew 18:15)

Final Words

There is obviously so much more I could say, and I feel as if I have only just touched on this enormous landscape of living with diversity, but let me stop here so that we can have some discussion together.

In summary, key to my experience of living the English experience of diversity in a healthy way has been a commitment to intentional relationship and mutual flourishing, and a willingness to live with hopeful imagination.