

Presidential Address

The Rt Revd Dr Martin Gainsborough

Diocesan Synod 16 November 2024

‘I have heard of your faith in the Lord Jesus Christ and your love towards all the saints, and for this reason I do not cease to give thanks for you as I remember you in my prayers.’

St Paul’s wonderful, encouraging, words from Ephesians chapter 1.

And Paul goes on:

“I pray that the God of our Lord Jesus Christ, the Father of glory, may give you a spirit of wisdom and revelation as you come to know him, so that, with the eyes of your heart enlightened, you may know what is the hope to which he has called you.”

It has been a challenging and distressing week in the life of the Church of England and the wider Anglican Communion – in the publication of the Makin report with its account of the appalling behaviour of John Smyth, and the events which led up to ++Justin’s resignation. Our hearts go out to survivors and victims of abuse.

Many of us will have found it hard to find the words to express what we are feeling, the range of emotions.

Clearly, there is much work for us to do in respect of safeguarding – as we repent of past failings, focus on victim and survivors, learn the necessary and hard lessons.

And as +Christopher has said, this is *absolutely* for all of us. Each and everyone of us has a part to play here – and we are all enormously grateful for the very good work that so many of our Parish and Diocesan Safeguarding Advisers – and so many other people, including clergy and lay ministers – do week by week to make our churches safer for everyone.

That’s why I am especially grateful for the timing of Safeguarding Sunday this year – coming as it does hot on the heels of a week where we’ve all been wondering how we might respond and what we might do to improve the culture of our church and churches.

We talk about safeguarding in respect of our fellow humans. But we also talk about safeguarding in respect of the integrity of God’s creation.

And in fact we are learning – learning rather too late it has to be said – that you cannot have one without the other.

Human flourishing cannot be had without the flourishing of the planet on which we depend.

The planet cannot flourish without the care – the safeguarding – of creation by humans.

And two of our items on our agenda today – our renewed Diocesan Environment Policy and our Action Plan for lowering our carbon emissions – reflect our growing realisation of this in the life of the Church.

Our work in this area dovetails with the Church of England’s commitments here – notably its Route Map to Net zero Carbon by 2030

And net zero 2030 – with a backstop of 2035 in Southwark if we don’t quite get there – is a key part of the refreshed Southwark Vision with its focus on being Christ-centred and Outward-focused.

Particularly our priority of healing.

Healing for our communities and our world - which includes care for creation, social and racial justice AND safeguarding.

Remember those words of St Paul.

“I pray that the God of our Lord Jesus Christ, the Father of glory, may give [us] -- may give his Church – a spirit of wisdom and revelation as [we] come to know him, so that, with the eyes of [our] heart[s] enlightened, we may know what is the hope to which he has called [us].”

I am excited by the journey we are on as a Church – the journey this new Synod is embarking on together.

On this journey, we will seek to deepen our understanding of mission and evangelism, of discipleship, of a safe and healthy Church, and *the central place* that care for the integrity of creation must play within all these things.

On this journey we must tackle the very real challenges our world faces, grappling with the results of our living beyond planetary boundaries.

To walk with Jesus, to love God more, to grow into the full stature of our humanity found in Christ, these things make little sense if we don’t do all in our power to care for God’s creation.

We know how Jesus responded when questioned by the lawyer, one of the Pharisees (Matthew 22).

‘Teacher, which commandment in the law is the greatest?’, the lawyer asked.

And Jesus replies:

‘You shall love the Lord your God with all your heart, and with all your soul, and with all your mind’.

This is the greatest.

And the second is like it.

‘You shall love your neighbour as yourself’.

We cannot love God and our neighbour and *not* care for God’s wonderful creation – in all its richness and beauty and diversity – in the incredible way it hangs together.

God calls us to see that we have damaged the earth, with all the consequences we now see around the world.

And that we have been indifferent to these things for too long – kept on living in ways which damage the earth even after we have known what we are doing.

These things point to our sinfulness – the fallenness of our humanity, the insufficiency of our love for God, the insufficiency of our love for our suffering neighbours, taking for granted the gift of creation.

So, we need to repent, to commit to a new way of living, to turn around.

To pray for that spirit of wisdom and revelation that Paul prays for.

And discover – together – a better way to live.

A more fulfilling, more Christ-like, way to live.

And if we do that, Christianity will, I think, be very attractive – we will draw in a generation of young people deeply concerned by the climate crisis, and looking for leadership and wisdom to make sense of it, and their lives.

There’s a theologian at Durham University called Carmody Grey who asks the interesting but not often asked question:

What do we want to sustain?

She points out that it is surprising that in all the discussion about climate breakdown we don’t seem to ask this fundamental question.

What matters to us? What do we care about? What do we want to sustain?

And Carmody Grey’s answer is interesting.

She notes that on the face of it we seem to have a high regard for nature.

Animal charities raise money more easily than human ones. The BBC's natural history unit gets record viewings.

And so Carmody Grey concludes in answer to her question:

'It is not lack of love for nature that will kill us. It is lack of love for ourselves'.

Not to care for creation is not to sufficiently love ourselves – it is to fall at the second commandment.

And continuing, Grey says...

'What we want to sustain is the possibility of a genuinely human life'. (Hans Jonas and Romano Guardini)

Which is to make the case for a better theological anthropology – a better understanding of what it is to be human, engaging people about their deepest desires – their longings.

Not bombarding people with facts or science – as this doesn't move people (and they remain passive).

Desiring to sustain a genuinely human life – a life in Christ – should not be seen as an unhelpful anthropocentrism (or human-centredness) but rather as a route to proper care for all creation, which includes ourselves, our fellow human beings.

A genuinely human life will care for creation (that's the point).

It is because we are not living genuinely human lives – that what we have come to in the history of our species is so compromised – that we don't care for God's creation.

So we are back to repentance, back to *metanoia* (turning around), to find a more fulfilling, more Christ-like way to live.

That's the task for the Church – and I look forward to journeying with you on it.