

I am deeply honoured to be asked to address this Diocesan Synod today and my especial thanks are due to Bishop Arsir for his warm welcome to my wife and to myself.

It is my joy that the pectoral cross that I wear each day is that of the old Anglican Province of India, Burma, Pakistan and Ceylon – now superseded with the wonderful establishment of the Church of South India – which of course is in complete union with the Church of England.

Like your Church here I believe that the genius of the Church of England is that it is a national ecumenical experiment or partnership. It is designed to be as broad a Church as possible, and that, for two good reasons:

1. It does not believe that one group can have the monopoly on God's truth – if it actually did, it would be God.
2. Second, the C of E does not believe that our differences are a design fault – but rather a gift of the God of love, given to teach us that truth is not so much about different statements as about relationship.

*[The Truth is that God is love - and love is a relationship not so much a statement.]*

So, within God's love we seek to be a family of different gifts, different temperaments and even different opinions.

Unfortunately, this means that the Church of England is almost impossible to manage or to lead! And when we then expand that to think of global, multi-cultural Anglicanism, then we inevitably run into all sorts of problems as you will have heard – although all things are possible with God, and we therefore pray earnestly for our international church.

We do however have some specific problems to address in the UK.

First, and most significant to my mind: we are perhaps the most secular country in the world – and it shows. For a long time, if a politician said that he was a member of a religious organisation, he may never win a vote again. (although that is quite recently beginning to change.)

The vast majority of people have no time for faith, do not believe there is a God worth caring about – and indeed many believe that the world would be a lot better without religions – they cause so much trouble..

There is ‘faith’ but it is faith in money and self-fulfilment. Half the people living in central London now live alone, no longer choosing to live in the family circle. Most of them have a very high standard of living economically – but I would not call it ‘quality of life’.

It is an ‘I AM’ culture, very much at the mercy of the whims of global capitalism. That’s why we have shifted to the politics of identity. What you look like, what you wear, what you buy, (and now, even what faith group you might belong to) – all this now matters as never before. And it breeds new tensions.

So the Church has an uphill battle. Some say that the answer is to change radically so that we are user friendly and very much in line with the best parts of modern culture. Others suggest just the opposite and say we should look back to our roots and stand firm against the prevailing cultures and values.

And how do we govern ourselves in order to address such complexity?  
Like yourselves, the Church of England has two strands of governance.

The bishop has oversight – positioned, by virtue of his constant travelling in the church and the world, to see the thing in the round.

And the second strand of governance is the Synods, a word which means literally, walking ‘together in the way’.

Most of our decisions are made by ‘the Bishop in Synod’ – the holistic oversight of the bishop met together with the whole body of the people “walking together in the Way”.

But we have to be careful. Sometimes I think that our Synods have more potential to stop things happening than avenues through which to get things going! And the challenges are too great for us to stagnate.

On the other hand, this careful democratic balancing of power does also make for tremendous stability. We can continue to deliver even when many other denominations are pulling out of difficult areas.

Not everyone has what it takes to be an Anglican and some veer off either one way or the other. Our system leaves us vulnerable to that – but I firmly believe that that vulnerability has a Christ-like quality that no Church should be without.

In our Synods let us therefore listen to the prophetic words of Micah, who asks: “So what does the Lord require of you?” (Micah 6:8) And his answer is an answer that I pray will be our church’s guiding principle For he tells us that what the Lord requires is that, “we do justice, love mercy, and walk humbly with our God.” That is what ‘Synod’ – ‘walking together in the Way’ – should truly be all about. “Doing justice, loving mercy and walking together in the Way, humbly with our God.”

Everywhere, in the UK and here in India, let us walk together in the Way.

Amen.