

Strategy Wake-up Call

Do you know what a knocker-upper was? In the days before alarm clocks or mobile phones they went around the streets of the industrial towns knocking on the bedroom windows to let the occupants know it was time to get up and go to the factories. Because the bedrooms were upstairs they used a long pole, or a pea-shooter.

Each year, Advent comes round like a spiritual knocker-upper, with a wake-up call for the Church: *You know what time it is ... it's the moment for you to wake from sleep ... the night is far gone, the day is near.*

Yesterday, our Diocesan Synod engaged with a presentation on the developing Diocesan Strategy: we're starting to see the components of what is scheduled to be completed in time for a Pentecost launch. It feels to me like something of a wake-up call to parishes like ours.

I wouldn't be surprised if the factory-workers faced losing a day's pay if they turned up late for work. There is an element of that in Christ's Advent call: think of the foolish bridesmaids, shut out of the wedding feast because they had to go and buy fresh oil for their lamps. But for the one who is taken, rather than the one who is left, the dawning of the Day of the Lord brings salvation, a transition to glory: to be with the Lord for ever. This isn't a rousing to a day of drudgery in a factory, but an invitation to a celebration, a banquet, a reunion: we should be leaping out of bed at the prospect!

I sense the Diocesan Strategy will come more as an invitation, than a threat. An invitation to join in a journey, with others, in rediscovering what Christ really wants of us in this diocese and turning around the current trajectory of our Church. But there is the threat of that trajectory, of which we're all too well aware, despite the good things which are going on: declining numbers, increasing average age, financial struggle, despair for the future. And the feeling that we might be failing our Lord.

Let me reiterate the main elements of that wake-up call, that invitation:-

- There will be a call to ongoing discipleship: for each of us to renew our sense that we are disciples of Christ: open to where he would lead us and what change he would work within us: open to his transformation. We anticipated Advent at our ecumenical prayers in Acle last Tuesday, which reacquainted me with this prayer of the moderate puritan priest, Richard Baxter:-
 - Keep us, O Lord, while we tarry on this earth,
in a serious seeking after you,
and in an affectionate walking with you,
every day of our lives;
that when you come,
we may be found not hiding our talent,
nor serving the flesh,
nor yet asleep with our lamp unfurnished,
but waiting and longing for our Lord,
our glorious God for ever.

- There will be a call to adopt a missional culture: that we are here, not just to look after our own spiritual interests, but for the benefit of those outside our churches; pastorally and prophetically sharing the good news and *being* good news in our communities...

I said there will be an invitation to journey with others. It's emerging that each church will be invited to locate itself in a stream, with other, similarly self-defined churches: those groupings would then be the focus for tailored resources and mutual encouragement. It's an objective that every church will be able to find a place for itself within the strategy: it's not just for the large, or successful, or evangelical, or urban. And although, no doubt, there will be top-down projects, the emphasis is on facilitating bottom-up growth: revitalising the parish.

- And there will be a call to hope, rather than despair. What are the grounds for that, you may ask? I think this Sunday provides the answer: hope will come from putting on the Lord Jesus Christ. It probably won't come, at least at first, from looking down at the service attendance figures, or the financial accounts, or around at the condition of the church fabric. It will come from looking up to Christ; from being alert to his unexpected coming among us; from seeking his inspiration and empowerment and grasping his invitation.

We may have to wait until Pentecost for the detail of the Strategy; but the knocker-upper is already banging on our windows. The Common Worship Post Communion prayer is drawn from the 8th century Gelasian Sacramentary:-

O Lord our God,
make us watchful and keep us faithful
as we await the coming of your Son our Lord;
that, when he shall appear,
he may not find us sleeping in sin
but active in his service and joyful in his praise;
through Jesus Christ our Lord.