

Presidential Address to Chelmsford Diocesan Synod, 17 June 2017

Among disqualifications for pastoral office Gregory the Great in his *Pastoral Rule* includes 'ignorance of the light of heavenly contemplation.' This determination to step back, to see yourself and your agenda in the light of a higher purpose and from the perspective of a timespan greater than tomorrow's headline or today's tweet, to reserve judgement, to look at things from many angles because truth is rarely one dimensional and Christian truth often found in paradox as well as revelation, is one of the marks of great leadership. Jesus wrote in the sand while others cast stones. His judgement was always on the sin and not the sinner. And when others – his disciples, as it happens – cast aspersions on those who were not in precise accord, his capacious vision, born of quiet and persistent intimacy with the Father, said that those who aren't against him must be with him (See Luke. 9 50).

We could do with such heavenly contemplation in the Church. Too many of us are still too quick to jump to conclusions and exclude those who do not agree with us precisely.

It is the same in the world, where even as such horrors as the fire in Grenfell Tower and the terrorist attacks in Borough Market and on Westminster Bridge and in Manchester unfold an over excited and mawkish media chatter and comment. Others leap to offer answers and solutions, hand out blame and conspire with one another to stir an already anxious pot. But inequalities of wealth and opportunity are still considered normal. Symptoms are stamped on. Causes neglected. Even this morning one newspaper suggested EU building regulations were to blame for the fire at Grenfell Tower. They weren't. In Germany the materials used on Grenfell Tower are banned.

The perspective of heavenly contemplation offers a different sort of leadership and witness, recognising that time and space, silence, and an expectant waiting are more likely to bear the fruit of wisdom. Yet at the same time contemplation demands we look at these horrors face to face, hear the unmediated cries of those who suffer and do not forget them, and offer nothing less than God's desire for justice and for peace, which through contemplation of the things of God has become *our* desire: "Blessed are those who mourn" says Jesus, "and Blessed are those who hunger and thirst for righteousness." These two always belong together in the Christian mind.

As I have written and spoken about elsewhere, my first lesson in this way of leading – which by the way I don't pretend I have mastered, but still aspire to every day – was when I was a boy scout, and a friend of mine fell thirty feet from a zip wire and landed winded and unconscious at my feet. I thought he was dead. I ran to fetch the Scout Master from the neighbouring field. I failed to communicate the urgency of the situation. He walked back with me across the field to my fallen friend; and as far as I was concerned he was going too slow. I was cross with him, and felt he'd let us down.

Later that day, when my friend was recovering in hospital, the Scout Master took me to one side and explained how he knew I was frustrated with him, and how it was obvious the situation was of great urgency, and that there were reasons why he had not run across the field to my friend: first, he needed to collect his thoughts, to remember what needed to be done; he needed to make sure that his first decision was the right one, because he may not get a chance to make a second; and, secondly, because he knew that you can't give mouth to mouth resuscitation to someone if you are out of breath yourself. And that is exactly what he gave to my friend. And in so doing saved his life.

Wisdom requires perspective. And perspective requires us to stop, to step back, to look at a situation from another angle, to seek the views of others, especially those who see it differently. It does not mean we never make decisions, but it does mean, that working together, and testing different hypotheses, and daring to wait, we are more likely to make good ones.

So, on what matters should we be seeking perspective?

Many political commentators in the heat of the moment of an unexpected General Election result said that everyone had lost. Wisdom and perspective, however, might put it differently and say that nobody has won. And if no one wins then at a time of huge challenge for our nation as we renegotiate our place in Europe, even allowing us space to think again, reaffirm what it means to be a United Kingdom, re-assert our desire to work for lasting peace in Northern Ireland, and at the same time face the even bigger challenges of war, terrorism, famine, climate change, and the mass movement of people, then being forced to work together in a Parliament without clear winners might be the best way of rebuilding divided communities and serving the common good.

And on those big issues that face our world you undoubtedly will see them differently if you look from a different perspective: at climate change from the perspective of a Polynesian fisherman whose very home is under threat from rising sea levels; at immigration from the perspective of a Syrian family fleeing for their life; at economics from the perspective of a mother whose child was killed by one of the weapons sold by a British company whose shares form part of our pension portfolio; at social housing from the perspective of a grieving resident in a tower block fire.

In our diocese we must look to the future, and to the shape and ministry of Church and mission that God is calling us to.

We want to be a church with a viable future. Encouragingly our plans to form Mission and Ministry Units are bearing fruit and it will not only enable each church to have a sustainable ministry, it will also enable us to plant new churches. To that end, and with the help of a Church Commissioners grant, it is also encouraging that we have now appointed a Director of our Church Planting Project.

We want to be a Church that is growing in faith. Our School for Disciples initiative has been very well attended. By the time the deanery visits conclude next week about 2,500 people will have participated. I now encourage every church to think carefully about how it nurtures people in the Christian faith so that each of our churches is a school for disciples and so that every Christian in this diocese feels encouraged and equipped to live a distinctive Christian life in and for the world.

We want to be a church that knows where it has come from as well as where it is going. Wisdom and perspective requires us to look to the past as well as the future, so that we can be refreshed by those well springs of faith in scripture and sacrament that nourish and sustain us, and by the example and lessons of church history and of theological reflection.

Last Monday Rowan Williams spoke in the Cathedral. His title was provocatively challenging: Was Calvin a Catholic? Today it is very good to welcome Charlotte Methuen to our Synod as in this 500th anniversary of the Reformation we reflect on Luther's legacy and what it can teach us in the Church of England today.

These perspectives from the past allow us to see our present challenges differently, not least how efforts to reform the Church can also, unwittingly, undo the unity of the Church.

We want to be a prophetic church, speaking God's word of hope and joy and justice into the concerns and challenges of the world. But this too begins in silence and in waiting upon God, though as Sarah Coakley has observed silence does not mean *silencing*. Rather it builds up "the courage to give prophetic voice".

Finally, therefore, all this is only of lasting value if it leads us closer to God, if it allows us to make decisions which reflect the mind of Christ, summons within us the courage to speak God's word, and enables us to be a Church that serves the poor, welcomes the outcast, shares the gospel, and builds the kingdom.

And the alternatives for church and world are grim indeed.

For the world, we will institutionalise and embed division and prejudice. We will build more walls, more bombs, and post more sentries. But there can never be peace and freedom within a prison cell, no matter how gilded.

For the church, we will become not an ark but a fortress. We may gain everything we want, a church that is perfectly in tune with our own particular understanding of the gospel, or perfectly cut off from the world, but we will probably inhabit it on our own, and we will lose our soul.

But with and from the light of heavenly contemplation we will step out of our comfort zones, lay down our arms, and build a Church that is bigger, more generous, more complicated and, I suspect, with rather fuzzy boundaries. But such is the scandalous hospitality of the God who is revealed in Jesus Christ. This church will not take itself so seriously, but live to serve others. It will be the presence of Christ transforming the world.

It might also help a fidgety world sit still for a minute. And that would be a very good thing indeed.

+Stephen Chelmsford