

dlbh003f Bishop's address at
the diocesan synod 3 Sep 05

Speech by the Bishop of Gloucester to open the Environment Debate at the Gloucester Diocesan Synod on 3 September 2005

Mr Chairman:

A few months ago I went to see the Prince of Wales, whom everybody knows to have a deep commitment to questions relating to the environment and the stewardship of the planet. I took with me, with a certain amount of pride, this little book, *Sharing God's Planet: A Christian Vision for a Sustainable Future*, pride because it was produced earlier this year by the Church of England's Mission and Public Affairs Council and because we had given time to it, and at least identified crucial issues, in a debate in the General Synod a couple of weeks before I saw Prince Charles. There is always a danger that bishops and even synods will pontificate on issues on which they do not entirely understand, but that is not as great a danger as the one that we keep silent on issues with which every man and woman and child ought to be engaged, because they affect the future of God's creation.

And so I came back from both the General Synod and from Highgrove clear in my mind that we ought in this Diocesan Synod to try to grapple with the issue of wise environmental policies and to invite others to grapple with them and, like us, to follow up words with actions. I do not doubt that here in this room are many people who in their working lives come up against some of the issues and who have particular expertise and experience to share. I hope that they will stand to contribute to this debate so that we can learn from one another. I am grateful to Adrian Slade, Kingsley Jones and others who have helped to prepare the debate and the booklet, *Sustain and renew the life of the Earth*.

The motion before the synod is in four parts. Part A is addressed to the churches and parishes and asks them to devise appropriate environmental policies. It is important, before we call on government and other agencies to put their environmental house in order, to be seen to be doing our part in our own localities and church communities. Although environmental issues are urgent, I recognise that parishes are heavily committed for the next few months to the MAPPING process and I accept that it may be in 2006 that people begin to work with *Sustain and Renew the Life of the Earth*. When they do, they will find that, instead of a centralised policy being imposed on them, there is an invitation to devise their own. There are suggestions to help, but nothing is imposed. Each community needs to do its own thinking and implement its own policy.

Part B does commit Synod to asking the government and the local civil authorities to actively pursue sound environmental policies. Government, local and national, needs to know that ordinary citizens have understood how crucial these issues are and how dissatisfied they are with half measures. If the Synod passes this motion, I shall be

writing to the appropriate authorities to tell them of our debate and decision and I hope the local media will also give proper coverage to what we are doing today.

Part C is nearer home. If the churches and parishes are asked to put policies in place, it is all the more important that diocesan officers and departments do the same. In this case there is a timescale attached and a report is requested in 12 months time.

Part D tries to ensure that we will not imagine that, after this debate, we have “done the environment”. Here is an issue of universal and theological significance to which we must return. Part D makes sure we come back see where we, and the world of which we are part, has got to in three year’s time.

The environmental debate has become the new apocalyptic! The end of the world is something people contemplate, as climate change, the rise in oil prices, the concerns about recycling and energy-conservation all keep hitting the headlines. This sort of talk is, however, not the Christian emphasis. For our concern for the environment is not because the end of the world is nigh, but because we believe it to be a God-given responsibility laid upon us to care for our planet, to be its stewards, and to care for its people, both its present population and the generations to come. Christianity at its best is passionate for the future of God’s world.

Christianity is passionate because the world, and all that is in it, was given to us as a blessing. In the very first verses of scripture, the story of creation as Genesis tells it, creation is declared by God to be good. Creation is a gift to us, a gift we need to conserve and nurture so that the gift can be passed on to succeeding generations.

Christianity is passionate because we realise and acknowledge our inter-dependence on each other. We understand more than our forebears that things that happen in faraway places affect us all. We are all dependent on the earth and on each other. We are beginning to grasp that great Christian truth that we are all one global family, and that, if one person suffers, we all suffer, and, if we care for one child, then all the children of the world are served. We are gradually realising that we can no longer treat our environment as a resource to be exploited. We need to learn to live in an effective partnership with nature, respecting and caring for it.

Twenty years ago I was chaplain to John Taylor, Bishop of Winchester. John was one of the Christian prophets of his time. In what was, I suppose, the first landmark book within Christian theology in relation to the environment, *Enough is Enough*, he began a process that has gradually made us more aware, though we have learned very slowly. Twenty years on there are more prophetic voices in the Church calling for action for the sake of God’s world. The Archbishop of Canterbury writes, in the Foreword to *Sharing God’s Planet*:

The Christian reason for regarding ecology as a matter of justice, then, is that God’s self-sharing love is what animates every object and structure and situation in the world... To be aware of this is to enter into relationship, for the self-sharing love of God is not simply

something we admire, but something in which we fully participate. We are not consumers of what God has made; we are in communion with it.

That's a striking sentence. "We are not consumers of what God has made; we are in communion with it."

Mr Chairman, we are, as a Church and as a nation, more aware than we were of what the environment means and more willing, I believe, to be on a journey caring for the whole earth. At least there is a journey that has begun, some are already walking it single-mindedly and together we need to fall into step with them, Christians to the fore in working for a sustainable future for the planet. Now is the time for this diocese to take seriously the call in Sustaining and Renewing the Life of the Earth to "strive to safeguard the integrity of creation and to sustain and renew the life of the earth". It is time to take the call seriously, to back up words with action and to join the insistent call to the international community to take decisive action before it is too late.

I beg to move the motion standing in my name.