**Bishop David’s homily to Diocesan Synod – October 2024**

Synod, you’re a pretty mixed bunch. Actually, I need to correct that, Synod, we’re a really mixed bunch. As I look around the room, I see women and men, older and less old (though we could do we strengthening our younger membership). I see different ethnic backgrounds and different mother tongues, I see people with disabilities and those who identify as LGBT+. I see a whole range of church tradition, varied educational backgrounds, and different types of personality. I have ,and will use the power to co-opt a small number of others onto Synod, which I will use to strengthen areas where we are perhaps not as diverse in our skills, experiences and back stories as we could be. But I rejoice that we are such a mixed bunch. At times over the three years that lie ahead, we will hear some very diverse opinions of the matters we are deliberating. It may mean that we do not always come to a consensus on some matter. But we will be stronger, and the decisions we reach will overall be better, because we listen to, and value, varied views and perspectives.

I love how the Common Lectionary throws up readings that are so apt for the occasion. And that first verse form today’s passage sums up why, for me diversity matters not just in human terms but at the heart of our faith. “Everyone who acknowledges me before others”, says Jesus, “The Son of Man will acknowledge before the angels of God”. If Jesus acknowledges each and every one of us before the angels of God, how much more must we also acknowledge one another as sisters and brothers in Christ? Now in 2000 years of the Christian Church some clever theological minds have managed to convince themselves (and others) that anyone who disagreed with them on whatever doctrinal matter was at stake was not really acknowledging Jesus before others. Just read some of the polemic of the Reformation Era if you need examples. But that degree of sophistry flies in the face of the Elizabethan Settlement which allowed first the Church of England and then the Anglican Communion to develop into the broad church both have. We don’t need to let it detain us here. Rather, let us inhabit what Jesus says, and acknowledge each other, even as he acknowledges each and every one of us.

I’d have been happy with just that one verse to reflect on today. But Luke and the Lectionary give us more. Specifically they give us this enigmatic comment about the unforgivable sin, the blasphemy against the Holy Spirit, which Jesus tells us is far graver than any blasphemy against him. What’s all that about? I reckon you’d think I was ducking the challenge, if I didn’t have a go at it.

A former priest of this diocese, sadly dead some 20 years or so, said to me, when I was a young man, that whenever he heard a preacher take a piece of scripture out of context, he was minded to take as his own text the following Sunday, “Hang all the Law and the Prophets”. If we’re going to understand this strange saying of Jesus, we need to see how it follows what Jesus has just said in the previous couple of verses. The blasphemy against Jesus is, by that reasoning, the refusal to acknowledge him, not least when he is at work in those around us”. The blasphemy against the Spirit is similar - it is to deny that God’s Spirit is at work in those with whom we disagree, and to attribute the fruits of their ministries to some secular, or even demonic, origin. It grieves me when I hear people grumble that someone else’s ministry is only bearing fruit because it is being favoured with an unfair allocation of resources. Rather, let us do what Archbishop Rowan always said was the prime task of the Church, to notice what the Holy Spirit was up to, and join in! Resources follow vision, imagination, passion for the Gospel, and the desire to work on those Five marks of Mission that make us distinctively Anglican, far more than they give birth to them.

Finally, Synod, Jesus has one more word of advice from today’s short Gospel. It’s about the Spirit giving us the words to defend ourselves when challenged and threatened by external authorities because of our faith. I remember many years ago visiting a church where the vicar took it so to heart that the Spirit would give him words that he stood up in the pulpit and proudly proclaimed that he had done no preparation whatsoever and was going to leave it to the Spirit to inspire him. what followed was probably the most dreadful fifteen minutes of sermonising I’ve ever had to suffer. Again, he was only taking half the passage. This is not Jesus telling us we don’t need to bother to prepare for a meeting or conversation. It doesn't mean clergy and Readers can just open their mouths and see what comes out. It’s specifically about how God is with us when we face threat and persecution. Our sisters and brothers in Lahore Diocese, where Bishop Matthew and his team are today, could teach us much about testifying to Jesus under threat from the powers of the age. We will pray for the Holy Spirit to guide us in our deliberations throughout the next three years of the life of this Synod. But we will also assume you have read the papers in advance, and prepared yourselves prayerfully and diligently for the work we have been elected and appointed to do, as the wonderfully Jesus loving, Spirit filled mixed bunch that we are.