

HINTS, HOPES AND HORIZONS by Meurig Williams, Archdeacon of France

SOME REFLECTIONS ON A HAPPY & HOPEFUL 2018 FRENCH ARCHDEACONRY SYNOD

The gloriously warm weather in Brittany in the third week of April ensured that the Archdeaconry Synod of France and Monaco began well at the Abbaye de St Jacut de la Mer, from 18th to 21st April. Members of the Synod enjoyed the generous hospitality of the community, which helped to mitigate against the emergency structural repairs taking place on the guest accommodation.

The warm sunshine was also welcome because so many dark clouds threatened to overshadow the opening of the Synod. Rising political tensions on the world stage had resulted in France, Britain and America carrying out bombing raids on Syria in the days before we met. The painful, but necessary, process of admitting how we have failed to make the Church a safe place for the vulnerable, and how the abuse of power went unchecked for so long, had been laid bare at the Independent Inquiry into Child Sexual Abuse in London the previous month. We also knew that, by the time we meet as a Synod in 2019, those of us who possess only a British passport will have formally ceased to be full citizens of the European Union.

As we settled down to a varied pattern of worship, inspiring and informative presentations by our visiting speakers, and the delight of one another's company, it became clear that the sun was here to stay!

Our Bible studies (<http://northernambo.blogspot.be/2018/04/citizens-of-nowhere-citizens-of.html?spref=tw>) were led by one of the Church of England's passionate Europeans: Michael Sadgrove, Dean Emeritus of Durham. Taking two sections of the Passion narrative in John's Gospel, Michael spoke incisively on the theme of citizenship and identity, as we were invited to consider what it might mean to be citizens of nowhere, citizens of everywhere, and citizens of the kingdom of God. Combining deeply rooted scholarship with perceptive human insight, Michael illuminated the Gospel text with a keen awareness of our present context and our future. As he put it 'When we meet as friends of Jesus Christ and citizens of his kingdom, we always know that we are subjects of the same rule and authority, and this transcends all other kinds of belonging, whether it's the tribe, the race or the nation... Instead of pulling up drawbridges, we need to reach out to one another in truth and friendship, celebrating the citizenship we have in common both within the human family, and as brothers and sisters under God.'

Grace Davie, Emeritus Professor of the Sociology of Religion at the University of Exeter, has a special place in the life of the Diocese, as one of our Lay Canons. Over many decades, her work has had a profound influence on our understanding of the place of religion in Europe, and has given us a memorable way of speaking about how many people do not worship regularly in churches but still describe themselves as 'religious' in her phrase 'believing without belonging.' Grace's presentation helped us to understand the context of our mission and ministry 'from within' and 'from without.' In particular, how the church grows where there are migrants; and that the decline in religious commitment we see around us is a European exception: 'large parts of the world are as furiously religious as ever' she insisted. Grace also challenged some of the lazy assumptions that we encounter: '

Don't ask if religion causes conflict.... ask under what circumstances religion becomes embroiled in conflict.'

Knowing that Brexit, and the confusion it is producing, is causing worry for many people in our chaplaincies, I invited Matthew Lodge, Minister at the British Embassy in Paris (and a former Ambassador to Finland) to provide some clarity on the progress of the negotiations. He very helpfully disentangled fact from media hype; just as he was candid in saying there will be real changes after 23rd March next year, and that we still cannot fully know what they will look like.

I am glad that the Bishop has committed to being with us when we meet as a Synod, and his two presentations were very well-received. The Bishop's first address, which explored future strategy, including current financial challenges, for the Diocese, served to remind us that 'the Diocese in Europe is the European conscience of the Church of England.'

His second address, exploring how we minister to growing numbers of migrants in the Diocese, spoke with particular insight to the developments taking place in the Pas-de-Calais chaplaincy, and our partnership with the Diocese of Canterbury and USPG, as we recruit a new chaplain to serve this challenging context. The Bishop also presided and preached at the Synod Eucharist in the Parish Church of St Jacut on the final evening.

Mike Fegan, our Interim Diocesan Secretary, spoke candidly about the financial plan which will impinge on all of us throughout the Diocese, if we are to take our mission and ministry seriously. He answered the many questions with grace. In fact, the time we gave to the financial plan and to the daunting increase in Common Fund had a positive effect on proceedings: we face our financial challenges together, knowing that as fellow members of the Body of Christ, we belong together across many nations and will continue to cherish our common belonging in Christ.

Our ecumenical calling as Anglicans in France is of the very essence of who we are. We were delighted to welcome Mgr Ginoux, Bishop of Mauntauhan on behalf of the French Conference of Catholic Bishops and Pasteur Emmanuelle Seyboldt, president of the national council of the Eglise Protestante Unie de France. Our relations with both churches go from strength to strength, as we seek new ways of expressing our common belonging, in the practical sharing of resources and by drawing from each other's well of spiritual resources.

It was good for me to share with Synod something of the shape of my diary since last year's synod at St Jacut. I hope it shows how more of you have seen more of me. Because this is the first time France has had an Archdeacon who, on being appointed, does not have chaplaincy responsibilities, it allows me to be out-and-about in a way that was simply not possible for my predecessors. Although I receive my stipend for being the Bishop's commissary and chaplain, and that's why my base is both in Brussels and in Limousin, I do enjoy travelling to chaplaincies throughout the Archdeaconry – and I am very grateful for the way our three Area Deans, Tony Lomas, Debbie Flach and Giles Williams support this ministry of oversight.

I left St Jacut on the Saturday morning, like so many others who had enjoyed the Synod, full of thanks and feeling thoroughly energized by our time together. Next year's Synod will be in Domaine Lyon St Joseph, just outside the center of Lyon from Thursday 16th to Saturday 18th May. It may be a shorter synod but I promise it will be as full and as dynamic as this year's!