**Inclusivity. At what price?**

I am thrilled to be a part of this incredible gathering here and all over England and all over the world! And how wonderful and absolutely right that there are these many, diverse groups with their stalls representing the various facets of what it is to be a Catholic, to be a human being, and all the things that we represent.

I am in awe of these amazing people who have spoken before me from the Catholic world. These huge iconic figures who for me have contributed huge, thought provoking talks which really got me thinking, scratching my head and thinking, wow I really need to look that up! And that’s wonderful isn’t it, when you are challenged. And I have to say that they cast this massive shadow. And it is not a bad shadow, it is positive shadow. We are all inhabiting a world where there is strong sun that is scorching the earth and scorching our spiritual lives. And I think what they offer us is a refuge where that shadow gives protection, which nurtures us and gives us strength and gives us time to think. And most importantly they offer us ways to articulate the difficult things we are going through and things that we experience and show us ways to navigate the landscape. What they also do is to give us insights and show us a way forward on that long and winding road, and to take it step by step.

Quote for Pope Francis

*“The purpose of this synod is to inspire people to dream about the church we are called to be, to make people’s hopes flourish, to stimulate trust, to bind up wounds, to weave new and deeper relationships, to learn from one another, to build bridges, to enlighten minds, warm hearts, and restore strength to our hands for our common mission”*

*“We must personally reach out to the peripheries, to those who have left the church, those who rarely or never practice their faith, those who experience poverty or marginalisation, refugees, the excluded, the voiceless, etc”*

Some suggested questions the Vatican asks us to consider are *“To whom does our particular church ‘need to listen to’* and I loudly say US!and *“how are the laity, especially young people and women, listened to?* As my dear friend, a missionary once said “with your eyes and ears wide open and your mouth closed!

*How do we integrate the contribution of consecrated men and women? What space is there for the voice of minorities, the discarded, and the excluded? Do we identify prejudices and stereotypes that hinder our listening? How do we listen to the social and cultural context in which we live?”*

So what I would like to talk about for a few minutes is how we as Church can learn to be inclusive. How we as community can learn to be inclusive. How we as individuals can learn to be what we want, need and demand the institution of the Church to be. Inclusive. I will sometimes use the words I, me and you inter changeably to mean us. And I will also like I to reference it to the clergy and the hierarchy too.

A few days ago we had the panel on Embracing Diversity, and all the contributors were insightful, challenging and informative. Fingers crossed that I too might be able to hit some of those marks.

Nontando Hadebe’s reference were to the vibrancy and diversity of the natural world, the flora and the fauna. The wonder and the awe of God’s creation in all its unique and amazing difference and beauty. And of course each one of us fits into that incredible kaleidoscope of God’s work

And then there was James Alison who mentions the **we** and the **I**. How the many I’s make up the we. How we can see the I and the we in the other. And there are always the other isn’t there? Within any group we have the marginalised, on the periphery, the excluded. So who are they, and how do we recognise them?

If I may I will talk a little about cultural practices, and how they change over time.

British society has learned to embrace the different foods and cultures of the stranger, the other. It has learned to eat food differently, to eat with their hands not just with a fork and knife. Has learned to share a pizza, a bowl of nachos and not just to order a personal individual order of the steak and chips for one. A stereotype I know.

A friend of mine told me how she used to vigorously safeguard her portion of food in what she called a ‘dog eat dog’ mentality growing up in her ‘hard knocks of life’ upbringing. They were from a poor and dysfunctional family, the father was an abuser. There was very little money in the house, there were four kids in the house and the mother would scrimp and save and equally portion out their food at meal times, and they would not share their food. So, going out for an Indian meal was a big mindset for her to get used to, that idea of sharing.

I lived in Egypt for two years, and eating the traditional way sitting around a big platter was so enjoyable and immediately connected you with your companions. The same can be said for tapas, meze which are great examples of equality through sharing.

A very dear friend of mine Suresh was a high caste Brahmin who renounced everything to work with the marginalised and the voiceless. On a production about tribal ecology he served food to the hired help, the crew. And that was his policy that he was as equal as they were. Even though they were the paid workers, he made sure everybody was served food everyday and only then he sat down to eat. For me that was the essence of being a human being. For me that was Christ in action and that was wonderful to see. Suresh totally trusted in the universal god and believed in mother earth and mother god. And he believed that in whatever he did and wherever he went God was guiding him, and that he was always going to be in the midst of equals. Not with the high caste Brahmins but with the ordinary, everyday people. I learnt a lot from Suresh. I learnt of his wisdom and his generosity of heart.

Slides on types of church

**The Rarified Church** is Judgemental and Excluding

**The Welcoming Church** encourages people to come and listen. But is not open to their truths and needs

**The Accepting Church** Loves the sinner but hates the sin. Is still judgemental

**The Inclusive Church** leads by the example of God’s love for all and welcomes the gifts they have. Makes ‘them’ a part of us as equals.

So, we live in a society readily that adapts and enjoys the cultural appropriation of music, dance, fashion, hair styles and food. But have we learned to welcome and embrace the other for who they are, not what they bring? The outsider, the modern day Hanson disease sufferer, the marginalised, the refugee, the trans person, the HIV Aids sufferer, the gay person, the disabled person? How much do we reach to understand and accept them as a part of us? That is our challenge.

There is this idea of sharing of bread. Not the separate individualised pieces of bread but the actual breaking and sharing of that bread, that one loaf of bread that we have, which is probably more than we need, are we able to give that and share it with others? Are we able to accept that actually being generous is part of being Christian? Or do we just hoard everything for ourselves and accumulate and accumulate at the expense of the other? Are we just paying lip service to our Christianity? And if we do, then what are we really afraid of? Is it the loss of our self identity? The fear of the unknown? Having to give up some of our own inherited privileges, whether we be white, male, or of a particular class, dominant culture or perceived status? What we know and what we learn about who we are is invariably what our parents and society teaches us, which more often than not teaches us to be a self sufficient, self reliant and self absorbed individual.

So, the question I am asking is Inclusivity. At what price?

Well yes there is a price to be paid. And yes it is a big price. But let me assure you that the benefits for that price being paid are countless. And those benefits, those riches are about the kingdom of God right here and right now.

So let me give you some examples that I have encountered in some of my leadership roles. As a teacher my job was to always find ways to educate and empower students to understand new things and new ways of growing in maturity through problem solving. The knack was to always make the student believe that they had come up with an idea or a solution when all along you were planting the idea in their head. The joy was not to say ‘I told you so’ but to see the that person grow in self confidence into becoming a critical thinker.

And in the LGBT+ world I have more often than not faced resistance, sometimes from men, sometimes by straight women, even from gay women, with the work at hand. And what is that work we do? For me the biggest idea a student had to learn was of not being precious**.** The work at hand is what matters, not the the sense of I or my ego. So the work that we do on social justice has always got to be about the community we serve. The drive has got to be to empower members from the community to take up leadership roles and for us to not speak on their behalf. We cannot and must not disempower people. After all isn’t this what we continually accuse the Church of? Can we not get away from those power structures that hold us back? Can we not find ways to be more authentic, more generous and giving? To do onto other what we would like them to do onto us?

Samuel Well recently wrote about the notion of an inclusive church. He said *“we are too fixated about the outsider rather than where the community needs to go.”* It is that aged old accusatory finger pointing the finger of blame at the other. But what we never wish to acknowledge is those other three fingers pointing back at us! So, it is never about *“Where are you, the stranger (singular) coming from?” but actually “Where are we (plural) going?”*

What and how do we create heaven on earth?  If we think that we can be transported to heaven when we leave this mortal coil then surely the kingdom of God should be modelled here and lived out now. We need to act like Christ did when he walked this earth. To welcome the stranger. To accept and nurture differences. No point expecting to travel with all our prejudices and weaknesses to those pearly gates and expect to be let in. And God forbid that we manage to blag our way in, how on earth do we fit into such an alien way of being where we are not the important person but the other is? Can our fragile egos work with all those different ways of thinking and behaving and being? Can we, can you, can I be the model of church that we want the hierarchy to be?

What do we do next, where do we go from here, how do we do it? I would like to throw down a challenge to you. I did this several years ago from New Ways Ministry called Next Steps Ministry where at the end of the weekend you make a promise to yourself. And you say ‘I am going to this, whatever this is, it’s not proscribed, you decide. ‘I’m going to do this, and I am going to do it in six months time or in a year.’ And we can all do it, we can all do just one thing to make that journey to change our church. Because collectively, it’s amazing the power we have. Individually, we can’t do it but if each one is chipping away at the edifice that dam will break and change will happen.

Thank you.

Ruby Almeida

Root and Branch Bristol Synod 2021