

# DIOCESE OF ABERDEEN AND ORKNEY

## DIOCESAN SYNOD 2012

### The Bishop's Charge

On September 10<sup>th</sup> 2011 Dr Courtney Coward of Trinity Church, Wall Street, New York City presented 'Thought for the Day' on BBC Radio 4's *Today* programme. The date is important. It was ten years on from the four aeroplane attack on the United States.

In that broadcast she reflected on the text Rowan Williams used for his sermon the following day back in 2001. He too had been in downtown Manhattan very close to the twin towers. He quoted this from Ephesians, 'But now in Christ Jesus, you who were once far off have been brought near' and asked the question whether the conversation that had been initiated by the terrorists was to remain in the terrorists' language. Or was a new language to emerge.

Courtney Coward then went on to speak of how she had moved through New York in the days following 9/11 encountering pockets of extreme fear and hate where the language of the terrorists was being spoken in revenge and bitterness.

But at the same time, and on other street corners, a new language was indeed being voiced. When it was conditions changed. A new and different language changed the reality.

She gave illustrations.

- How orphaned survivors of the original Ground Zero in Hiroshima and Nagasaki delivered messages of condolence to her church in Wall Street.
- How street folks came as a gang and gave the cups of coins they had begged to help the church in its relief effort.
- How 15,000 people dug for a year to retrieve human remains.

She spoke of how extreme acts of love drove the darkness out. In the sharpness of that tenth anniversary weekend last year her point was clear. *The language we use creates the reality we experience.*

And this comes close to home. The way we word our emails, for example, says much about who we are. And the more cutting our correspondence then the more unhelpful becomes the reality thus created. The boundary between constructive and necessary criticism and destructive manner is a very fine line, all too easily crossed.

Meanwhile the gently encouraging word releases a smile all round. The more such words are used the warmer becomes the atmosphere. Relaxation and trust rise in mutual proportion. People feel good, are encouraged. Spoken language and body language together create the reality they signify.

Sometime last summer I was in one of our churches chatting idly with perhaps three or four from that congregation. Much as I tried I could not lift the conversation from the vortex into which it kept falling and within which it surely kept accelerating.

The talk was of decline. Of 'having tried it all before'. Of 'not being able to get new things going'. Of 'just waiting for the inevitable closure'. New ventures had been suggested with each 'successively vetoed'. Dispirited and willing volunteers had left and gone elsewhere to another congregation if indeed they had gone anywhere.

Clearly in the context of a sixty minute conversation I could not reverse all of this but a chord of truth sounded clear when I heard that 'Thought for the Day' almost three days later and the message I drew from it: *The language we use creates the reality we experience.*

At about the same time, and it's providential how these experiences often come together, one of you said to me that the word 'mission' is over-used. I think the sentiment is arguably true and yet, quite unapologetically, I'm going to go on using it. And, yes, I'm going to keep on talking about evangelism, and unashamedly you'll still find me banging the drum for church growth – numerical growth and qualitative growth.

I have to. Indeed we all have to. Because if we use the language of mission, evangelism and church growth we might actually wake up one day and begin creating the reality it signifies.

If we don't use the language of mission then we can evade its necessity that bit more easily and that mustn't be. The truth that we are sent out to build God's kingdom, to make more people aware of it: to remind the lapsed of what they had let go and to enable non-Christians to make that vital life-giving discovery of salvation so painfully won for us by Christ.

To do this means having to operate multiple acts of juggling all at the same time. For oneself it means having personally to grow and deepen in the stature of Christ whilst navigating towards the removal of your pews through wearying vestry meetings, whilst building enthusiasm for the all too necessary stewardship campaign when people think the church should be above money, and whilst working out how you're *not* going to contribute to rising secularism by acquiescing to someone else's aggression towards stuff to do with church.

And then don't forget your reluctance about Alpha courses, or your vulnerability about youth work or your unwillingness to let a visiting preacher into your pulpit or your nervousness about open prayer at the intercessions. All of these are things to be overcome

in our striving towards mission and I encourage you in every way that I can. Once you've overcome the inhibitions you can then enjoy the reality!

But more fundamentally, somehow, somewhere in all of that we must not forget what Christ has done for us. If it were not for his thirty three short years of life and his three days of death we might as well pack up. The *language of salvation* needs to come through our normal discourse and shine from us. It needs to be there in our comportment and conduct towards one another and with those beyond our number.

So then, continue to use the language of mission, evangelism, church growth (in both numbers and in quality) and do so in the name of salvation. Use this language for tomorrow's church today and get ready for the reality of growth.

Amen.

†Robert Gillies  
3 March, 2012