

## God's Own Countries

### Diocesan Synod

Wednesday 17 June 2009

Just a couple of weeks ago I read a new novel by Ross Raison, set in the North York Moors. Its title is *God's Own Country*. I'm sure you'll all approve of my reading a book with such a title. It's a gripping tale and pretty disturbing. It's about a lad in his late teens, working on his father's farm, having been excluded from school. I often find novels about children and young people most disturbing – and often the most riveting to read.

At the heart of this story is a lad who is almost irretrievably locked in his own world. You long to release him, to show him wider horizons, to help him see with real perception into other people's worlds. Only towards the end of the novel does he encounter two or three very different worlds and this time not of his own choosing. You long to know, as the book closes, what he will make of this and whether it will change him.

Now I begin here since it made me reflect on three quite different facets of life of which we shall all have encountered in these past few weeks. Let me begin at home and with this Synod. Our last meeting deliberately opened itself up to meet with Roman Catholics living in the same part of Yorkshire as our diocese – from their dioceses of Leeds and Hallam. I received an extraordinary number of cheerful comments from you and from our Roman Catholic Friends. At least a couple of you reflected to me: 'Why aren't all *our* synods as worthwhile as that has been?'

Now there are lots of reasons for it feeling different. First there is simply the matter of novelty. If we did it every time like that and with all those people it might lose its freshness. Second, of course, we used quite a different format and we might be able to learn from that. But my guess is that perhaps the key to the experience was being opened up to the wider world. We were sharply and encouragingly reminded that the Church of God is bigger than us, than our parish, bigger than our diocese, bigger even than the Church of England and the Anglican Communion.

It's not obvious from the New Testament that Jesus intended to found a Church. It is clear, however, that within a few years of Jesus' death an embryonic Church had grown. St Paul, dying probably in the late 60s had already coined the image of the body. Bodies cannot function with lots of limbs or organs cut off; they are organic – each piece needs the other pieces too.

My second reflection is about government, Parliament and public life. I need not repeat any of the scenario to you; the Daily Telegraph has sold several thousand more copies daily by raking through the railway tickets, hotel bills and mortgage arrangements of countless M.P.s Next Monday I enter the House of Lords and become myself a 'Member of Parliament'. Its most immediate effect upon me is that I cannot now vote in General Elections! But I am apprehensive for quite other reasons.

Once again the undoubted corruption, confusion and insecurity that has been uncovered issues from people being turned in on themselves. How else could so many people have entrapped themselves into such intricate ways of feathering their own nests? Yet, I am sure that the majority of MPs entered Parliament for the very best of reasons. I am sure that they believed they could work for a better world. I still believe that parliament can be an instrument in achieving that.

But for me there is an ingredient in all this that dare not be missed. It is keeping our eyes on the vision of God. Set our eyes on God, as we encounter God in Jesus and we cannot remain obsessed with ourselves. God takes us out of ourselves and directs us toward heaven and towards others. This is my message to myself for next Monday.

Finally, we have seen extraordinary scenes in these past days in Teheran. They are not new scenes. Tianenmen Square, Harare and too many other places have mirrored similar scenes. Teheran is more chilling still, however, since religion is offered as the foundation for such behaviour. Islam is a religion turned out to the world, but not in the person of President Ahmedinejad. So again it is breaking out of our own self-imposed world.

In the coming months as a diocese we are being called to a similar process. Deanery transformation is about parishes looking beyond themselves and Deaneries doing the same. Our clergy conference in September is about *God and Change*. Breaking out of ourselves is a direct result of turning daily and even hourly out to God. In a stirring piece, St Paul told that tiny part of the early church in Corinth: 'From now on, therefore, we regard no one from a human point of view.....if anyone is in Christ, he is a new creation; the old has passed away the new has come.'

We, then, are the new creation. Let us take heart and remember that we are nothing less than ambassadors for Christ, God making his appeal through us. Let us break out of ourselves and help break open all of God's world to become the *new creation*.