

Well, first of all, I'd like to begin by saying what a delight it is to have everybody here for this service and for our first in-person synod in six years.

I know we only missed one, but it still counts to six years since the last time we had all of Synod together in one place. And yes, the miracle of Zoom did help us in the interim in 2020.

But I don't really count that. It's not the same thing at all. You all look very different from here. And you also give off a really good energy as we are gathered in this room. The spirit of God moving amongst us. It is a beautiful thing. Indeed. It's a beautiful thing indeed.

I should just say that we do have guests that are going to be with us. Archdeacon Junior Ballantine. Archdeacon Ballantine is from our Companion Diocese of the Windward Islands. I have not experienced it firsthand, but I understand that when they have synods in the Windward Islands, the Bishop's Charge goes about two and a half hours long. So I will do my best. I don't think I can get there, but we'll see what we can do.

So that line from the Gospel, just to sort of state it again up front, that stands out for me as I listen today. "Do not fear those who can kill the body, but after that can do nothing more."

Yes. "Can do nothing more." Hmm.

Well, I'm going to start off with three anecdotes. I've never named a sermon before, but I was thinking "Three Anecdotes and then a whole bunch of boring stuff that you'll have to endure after that".

Quite a few years ago now, there was... I'm not going to name any specific names, just say... a major denomination in Canada that held a national convention. And a big part of their conversation in their convention was about the declining numbers, about the shrinking church and about the loss of not only attendance, but of members. After they were through, I don't know what they talked about, but at the end of it, they were interviewing one of the leaders of that denomination and asked, "What is the church talking about? What does the church have to do?" And this person said, "Well, the problem is that Jesus is a huge liability when you're trying to make inroads in this culture."

Now, my purpose in conveying that is not so that you could all laugh or go, "Oh no," or "Those nasty people!" or anything like that, but rather, what came to mind as I was thinking about this for this evening as we start our synod, is that it is actually emblematic of what happens in the life of the church when we subtly get sucked in by changing from

*being* church, being *about* church, being about the gospel, to being about institutional survival.

It's what happens when we stop thinking about the gospel and being motivated by the gospel and start thinking about institutional survival. Now I understand thinking about institutional survival. I get it, I get it, I get it. For one thing, all of us, we go to church every Sunday and we don't want that to stop. We want it to be there for us. We want it to be there for other people. We've come to love it and to gather together. It's a joyous thing and we want it to continue on. Absolutely. I have to say that for the clergy and lay leaders, there's also the added piece of, you know, we don't want to be the one who's in charge when the door closes. Right?

Because what does that say? It says we failed. That's how we hear it, is that we failed. Right? But nonetheless, it is a subtle shift.

It's a subtle shift to go from being about the gospel to being about institutional survival. It's a subtle shift, but it has a profound impact on what we do. And it has a profound impact on *how* we do what we do.

Because instead of thinking about, "How do we celebrate the love and the grace of God in our midst?", we start thinking about, "What program can we do that people will want to come to?" What program will people do that other people want to come to? And we start thinking about tactics and we start thinking about, "These are the things that we need to be doing if we want to..." Or, we look at some big churches that are really, really big and we say, "Well, what do they do? We should be like them." And again, you can understand why we would do that. Right?

You would understand that because we see them with lots of people and we think, "Well, obviously they're doing something right." And maybe they are, in their context, but we're no longer, when we do that, thinking about what is the mission of Jesus Christ? What is the gospel to which we are called?

Okay. So second anecdote. This is not really an anecdote. It was something that I heard on the radio. I'm aware that we gather here at a time when there have been horrific events in the world. Always there are horrific events in the world and we often don't know what they are, but we have had in the news and before our faces the brutality of the attack by Hamas upon Israel and the hostage takings. I think I said to somebody the other day, I don't know that there's any other description for this than this is pure evil. It's pure evil. But I was listening to an interview on the radio where they were talking to a Palestinian living in the Gaza Strip and living in the midst of the bombing. And he was saying he was in a bomb shelter and he was describing their life as they live in the bomb shelter. And then, whenever there's something of a reprieve, somebody goes out and tries to get something that they need - food or whatever - and then come back and they're back down in the bomb shelter. And the interviewer said, "Well, I understand that they're working to opening channels and paths so that people can get out. Are you waiting for your opportunity? Are you looking forward to the opportunity to leave?"

And this man said, "Leave? Why would I leave? It's better to die with dignity in the place that is my home, where I belong in the place of my hopes and dreams than to escape."

Saying this in the midst of bombs is a different thing than saying it in a church at St. Peter's Okotoks.

I just want to acknowledge that it's a different thing. That man is in the midst of it and he's living the reality. And yet the thing that touched me so deeply about it was the underlying truth that he speaks about so much in life. Now, you know, I'm not talking about staying in a place where the bombs are falling for him, but what he said was, "Why would I leave the place where I belong and the place of hopes and dreams in order to go somewhere else?" And as I was thinking about this, as we gather as a synod, and thinking about that easy shift from the Gospel to institutional survival, I was suddenly struck. Why would we go to something else when the place of our hopes and dreams, the place of our belonging, is Jesus Christ, the good news of the Gospel, that has brought us together, that has given us life and hope and joy.

This is the place of our hopes and dreams. Jesus is the one who is our hopes and dreams. And Jesus said, "Those who seek to save their life will lose it." And, "Those who seek to lose their life for my sake and for the sake of the Gospel will gain it for eternal life." It's not just dying with dignity.

Jesus said, those who seek to save their life will lose it. But those who give up their life for Jesus, for himself and for the sake of the Gospel, will save it for eternal life.

We'll save it for eternal life. That is the heart of what the gospel is about, taking the risk in the midst of a culture that may not have any interest in the gospel. Trusting. Did you hear Paul's letter to the Romans? I know it's all stuff about Abraham justified by faith, not by works. At the heart of it is, the ones who trust in God, the ones who have faith, despite the conditions in which they live, despite the things that are going on around them, they have faith, the call to risk, to be true to the gospel of Jesus Christ, and to live it out in the best way that we can. Even if it seems like foolishness. Even if it means that it looks like we're dying in the face of the world, because you see the world, it can kill a body, but then after that it has no authority of any kind whatsoever. And life is in Jesus Christ.

Third anecdote, and this one is new because I just heard this this morning. I was talking to Michael Harvey, of Back to Church Sunday. He and I talk on a regular basis, and he was telling me this story.

He's also part of a thing called Faith and Science Initiative in the United Kingdom. He's the head of that. And they go into schools with the school's cooperation in partnership, and they teach kids about faith and science, and they talk about science. But it's being talked about by people who are of faith. And they talk about how their faith intersects. Normally they go into classrooms of 10 and 11 year olds. A few weeks ago, apparently,

they were invited by a school who wanted them to come to their seven and eight year old class. And he said, it seemed a little young, but you know, that's what they wanted.

One of the people who was doing the talk said, "What we know from science is that all of us are a product of the explosion of stars in the galaxies in the universe, and all of that stardust then coalesced. And so, every one of you is made out of stardust."

And immediately this eight year old boy sticks up his hand and he says, "If we're made of stardust, how come we don't shine?"

If we're made of stardust, how come we don't shine? I love that question.

Now, Michael did say that the person leading the class immediately tried to explain the physics about why we don't shine, missing out on the brilliant opportunity, which I'm going to take because I asked his permission to use this story. We are the body of Christ, and if we're the body, how come we don't always shine? How come people don't always see in us Jesus Christ? How come they don't see the love of God? How come they're not being drawn in? Well, that's a complex question, but the point isn't to answer the question at this point. It is to raise the question: if we are the body of Christ, how come we don't shine? Well, I think that that's the question that should guide our thoughts and our hearts as we consider what it means to do ministry and mission in our churches.

How do we shine? Well, I have to say first off, we shine when we allow Christ to dwell in us; we shine the more that the Holy Spirit is at work in us, the more that we cooperate with and surrender ourselves to the work of God. By the spirit in us. The more that our lives shine with the light of God.

With the fruit of God's spirit growing in us: in love and in patience and in goodness and kindness and gentleness. I absolutely believe that. And people who have heard me far too many times, I'm sure, will know that I've got all the fruits of the spirit listed off.

This is what happens when we allow the Holy Spirit to get a hold of us and to change us. The fruits of the spirit are love, joy, peace, patience, kindness, generosity, faithfulness, gentleness, and self-control.

Wow! Well done people! You've been reading your bibles.

Jacqui's daughter is deaf and does American sign language and she taught me ten years ago.

This is American sign language for love, joy, peace, patience, kindness. You're making the letter K with your fingers.

Generosity, faithfulness. Gentleness and self-control. Reign it in people. Yeah. I just love that. It's a bit of a spiritual exercise that I try to do on a regular basis, just to recite and do the actions, because the body effect is really important.

How is it that we can shine well? How can the Holy Spirit take more of us? But also it's important for us to think about our life in the church, our life in the parishes, in our communities of faith. Thinking about them in ways that are not about tactics, but about, what are the disciplines of our church? What are the practices that we do that will, in fact, engage people, engage all of us to grow more deeply in the life of the spirit, in the life of Jesus.

Some of you will have heard my list of Five Marks of a Healthy Parish, and yes, you're going to hear them again.

So, the five things, and of course what we as Anglicans are really about, of course is: number one – worship. Lively, engaging worship in which we come together before God, offering ourselves in love and receiving in love from God. But even more, the act of worship is a discipline because it is about us reordering our lives. It's about us reordering our lives and putting God on the throne where God belongs and us not on it. Where we tend to take up residence whenever we're not thinking about it carefully enough. Am I the only person who does that? I'm in charge and I'll sit in the seat and God can take a back seat until I'm ready.

Then the second thing that goes along with our worship, is that we need to attend to our, I'm going to use the boring word, fellowship. Now, why is that the boring word? Because the real word that we're tending to is our communion with one another. Which is a much better word because fellowship can mean we get together at coffee hour and we have a nice polite time and then we go home. Communion is about the reality that the Holy Spirit binds us together in one in Christ. And when we are living out the Gospel, communion is what we're being drawn into in the body.

It's when we are together as one where we rejoice with those who rejoice, when we weep with those who weep, when we are there for one another and for any who come to us. We are there and present and offering of ourselves, fellowship, communion in God.

There are things that we need to do as parishes to foster that communion, to encourage it to grow. Sometimes even more strongly than just encourage. Sometimes we've got to put people together and say, "This is who we are, this is what we do. We need to be here for one another."

The third thing that we have to be doing in the life of our church is we have to be attending to our growth as disciples of Jesus. That is about our learning, to study scripture together, to pray together outside of Sunday service, opportunities to learn about fasting, and to learn about giving, to have our lives more practically shaped on a

day-by-day basis as disciples of Jesus. The learning of the head that is also comes down to the heart so that our lives can be shaped.

A fourth thing that we need to be about as marks of the body of Christ is that we need to be about loving service, loving service for one another. Yes, absolutely within the community of faith, but loving service directed outwards towards the world in which we live. One of the most profound ways that we shine with the light of Jesus is when we are in the community, the way Jesus walked amongst people upon this earth. When we are reaching out to those who are in need to the broken and to the hungry, and we are reaching out to feed and to heal, being aware of the community needs in our local place, so that we can be an expression of God's love, and that the work of Jesus can be seen to be done in us.

And number five. Evangelism, right? Yeah, I'm seeing some nods and some smiles, too. I'm not sure whether the smiles mean yes or whether the smiles mean, "Yeah. That's never gonna happen." But evangelism is a fundamental, irreplaceable part of what our life together is in the life of the church.

Jesus went around proclaiming the good news of the kingdom. We have this good news and we are called. It's central to the commandments that Jesus gave to us, and to his disciples. To go and to proclaim the gospel, to make disciples of every nation. I've been around long enough to know that Anglicans have all sorts of unhappy ideas about what that means - it's about pushing your faith on other people. Uh, no it's not. It's about sharing, sharing our faith with others. It's inviting them in gentle and loving ways to join us.

Now when I say those five things, it's not because it's some kind of complete and comprehensive list of everything that we could do. It encompasses what it means to shape our lives in a way that we shine with the light of Christ, not just as individuals out in the world - because that's not what we are - but as the body of Christ, as the people of God, with the light of Christ shining through us.

Over the years we've talked a lot about what it means to be missional? To be missional means to be shining with the light of Christ and doing what that means. It means a complete change of mind and heart so that we are not thinking about how do we get this institution to survive another x number of years. I heard once, not here, but somewhere years ago, "Bishop, you know, we get what you're saying, but we just want to have the church open until the last key funerals are done and then you can have the church back." Um, I'm quoting, by the way, but none of you would've said that, right?

Because you're ready and ready to go and to shine with the light of Jesus. That's what we're about. That's what we're about.

So, these are the Marks. This is how we shape our lives so that we can do this work in mission. Somebody once said, "You know, mission's become a bad word because of its historic implications," but actually, mission simply means the sending. It's to go out. We

all have a mission and it's what God made us for. That's what it means to be called the body of Christ. Yes, it's lovely to be the body of Christ.

When we gather in worship and we gather around the table and we've received, that's lovely. But to *be* the body of Christ means to be out teaching and speaking and witnessing and reaching out in healing, loving, shining a light in the world. That's what we need to be about.

In terms of priorities in the diocese, this is the only part that's going to sound like a Bishop's Charge actually. We're all the diocese, but from our perspective, our existence is to facilitate the church of Jesus Christ.

That is this particular body of it, in shining with the light of Jesus, in doing the mission in its local context. That is our whole purpose in the Diocesan Office, is to serve that and to make that grow, to deepen that, to help people to be equipped to do that work more fully. These things that call us to shine with the light of Christ. I'm going to just end with a little quote from St. Augustine of Hippo. One of my favorite guys, and I end with this because so often we love that language of the body of Christ, the gathering together and what that feels like for us.

And we come to communion. We come to receive the bread and the wine, we receive the body of Christ. St. Augustine had a line that went like this as he held up the elements:

He said, "Behold what you are, become what you see."

Behold what you are, become what you see. And that is the call for all of us. We are always becoming as God transforms us by the power of the Spirit to be God's mission, to carry God's light, to do the work of ministry in our context, in our places, in our communities. May God give us the strength to carry out that work, to be that light that he has given us to be. Amen.