

Charge to the 69th Synod of Edmonton by Bishop Stephen London

October 18, 2024, All Saints' Anglican Cathedral, Edmonton

What's the vision? What's the big idea?

The vision is Jesus.

Simply **Jesus**.

Beautifully, profoundly, deeply, dangerously, undeniably Jesus.

It has always been about Jesus.

For centuries, and centuries and centuries it has all been about Jesus. Why? Because Jesus changes lives. The first apostles, men and women, found strength and courage in Jesus to spread churches across the ancient European and Asian world. Because Jesus changed their lives.

Many in the next generation of Christians gave their lives. Why? Because they refused to betray Jesus. Christians over centuries have built communities and churches, places of sanctuary and peace and worship, because of Jesus. For centuries, they fed the poor, clothed the naked, raised up the destitute, why would they do that? Because of Jesus. He transforms lives.

And this is not just ancient news. There are hundreds of inspiring modern stories. Desmond Tutu, Dorothy Day, Martin Luther King, Jr., Dietrich Bonhoeffer.

My own father... had lost his way for a long time... following a messy divorce and bad decisions, he stumbled back into an Anglican church in Ft Worth, Tx. All Saints'. He found a community of people who loved Jesus who welcomed and loved him, who helped him find himself again. And that summer, in my own time of questioning life, who I was, in my own self-doubts, he invited me to go to church with him. And I found my own way home in that church. I came to faith in that church. I found Jesus; I was changed. I cannot tell you how much that has meant to me. Everything.

I have been following Jesus ever since. Jesus has taught me how to love, how to have joy, how to walk hard paths, how to know in my heart that I am loved, beloved of God.

This has always been the vision. Jesus sets a table of grace, healing, forgiveness, welcome.

Jesus sets a table of love where the hurting find healing and wholeness and where the whole find purpose and meaning and calling.

The good news of the Gospel is Jesus. In Jesus, God the creator has come into creation to heal creation. In Jesus, God has reconciled the world to himself. 2 Corinthians 5: 19. Reconciliation is a relationship term. *Katallasso* in the Greek New Testament. It means back in good relationship.

This is what the *Gospel* is *all* about. That is what *we* are *all* about: good relationship. Holy Relationship. A community of reconciliation. To love God. To love your neighbour. On these two commandments hang all the law and the prophets. There is no commandment greater than these.

My friends, we are gathered tonight as the inheritors of those who came before us in faith. And each of us have our own faith stories. Our own reasons why we support and love our parishes.

Why do I start my charge by preaching the Gospel? Because as we come into our synod, we keep the Gospel at the center. It is our identity, our calling, our purpose, our mission. It is the why of why we exist. Jesus Christ.

For some of you, this may be your first diocesan synod. It is great to have you; thank you for volunteering to come and see what a synod is all about. For some of you, you are veterans. You have been to many of these. It is great to have you. Thank you for volunteering; you knew what you were getting yourself into.

Every synod is important, looking at the business of being a family of 46 parishes spread across central Alberta. But I do believe that this synod is special. We are starting a big work. We have to start a big work. Why?

Because the world is a different world than it was 100 years ago, 10 years ago, 5 years ago.

What has changed? Many, many things. But if I had to pick an all-encompassing label, the best one is perhaps Secularism. Secularism is just the move from having one particular religion at the center of society, to having freedom to explore a multitude of paths. And I don't say that with any negative judgment because I have much gratitude for the secular revolution that started 550 years ago.

But it is to say that we are involved in historical forces that are far beyond anything that our tiny diocese of Edmonton is going to change. As a church, we are simply in a storm, and to use the phrase popular now, it is what it is. You know it is affecting your churches. There is no denial now. It has been pointed out to me that there are clergy here who knew this truth 30 years ago that this was coming. From our perspective, this is the slow-moving storm, but now the 30 years have gone by, and here we are coming to discuss a report about the blessings and challenges of our diocese.

And it is a sobering report. It is an outside set of eyes that we have asked to look upon our life together. The list is long of our challenges:

- Declining finances,
- Declining volunteer base
- Rising insurance costs
- Fewer clergy

I could go on, but you have read the report. More importantly, you have experienced this in your own parishes. Let me be clear:

I BELIEVE THAT WE ARE IN THE SINGLE GREATEST CHALLENGE IN THE HISTORY OF THE ANGLICAN CHURCH OF CANADA

That is a daunting truth, and that is why I said that this synod is special.

So, as we come to this conversation, there are three things I believe that you need to know. Three things that will be important.

Number one:

We are not alone in this struggle. All of the Christian churches are facing this struggle. The Southern Baptist Church. The Catholic Church. The Episcopal Church. The Church of England. The Lutheran Church.

But as I look to these conversations across denominational boundaries and national borders, I see two kinds of conversations.

One kind of conversation is about fear and resignation. We are tired, and we are done. I get it. I understand. In so many ways, this is a hard place to place, and we grieve.

But there is a second kind of conversation about meeting the moment with creativity and faith.

These are hard conversations to be sure, and they come with sacrifice, but humanity is always at its best when we rise to the challenge, and I am here to tell you that there are Christian siblings out there who are rising to the challenge,

Who are refocusing us on the centrality of the mission of Jesus Christ with the Gospel at the center.

We can partner and learn. We can be creative. We can rise to the challenge. We are not alone.

Number two:

In the midst of this storm, at this very moment of difficulty, paradoxically we are also in the midst of a new reformation, a new revival of the church. A new vitality. Exciting things are happening in the church. God is doing a new thing.

Over the last century, our Mainline churches have learned the articulation of a generous, good and beautiful vision of the Gospel of Jesus Christ. We have learned so many things through the struggles of the last century that have all come together in this moment.

Just a few examples:

We have learned through 1920s Fundamentalist controversies that we can be friends with scientific discovery and grow in our understanding of what God is doing. Truth is truth. We deliberately made this choice and found new energy.

In the 1950s, questions of racism and segregation in the churches came to the forefront. It was ugly. Again, fundamentalist churches at that time wouldn't deal with the historic sin of racism, but on the whole, the Mainline churches embraced the vision of Martin Luther King's vision of the beloved community. And were transformed.

I could tell story after story of Christian Ecumenism, women in ministry, the affirmation of the dignity of every human being, repenting of our colonial past, finding a new and beautiful engagement with the first peoples of this land, of full inclusion of the LGBTQ community.

All of these stories share in common the vision of Christ tearing down the boundaries that we humans continually and sinfully throw up to separate ourselves from one another and from God.

And each story leads to a cumulative vision of Jesus Christ, the son of God, fully human and fully divine, dead and risen again setting a table of inclusion and welcome for all people. The great community of love with Jesus Christ at the center.

My friends, this is an inspiring vision that we need to proclaim with passion and gusto. The Kingdom of God that Jesus preached is a vision of a world made whole and a relationship that goes beyond death into eternity. Don't forget that in the midst of our struggle, we have good news to share.

Finally, **number three:**

The promise that Jesus always meets us where we are in our challenges. In the Gospel reading this evening, we read of two followers of Jesus who are at rock bottom because everything they have worked for and fought for and hoped for three long years has all died. They are disillusioned. They are trying to process all of this walking seven miles together to the town of Emmaus. When they meet a stranger. A stranger who invites them into a much, much bigger vision.

The problem with humans is that we all too often think too small. Our fears and anxieties make our world so small. We forget that God's world and vision and plan is vast and beautiful and amazing and always transcends what we worry about.

That is why at every church service we exclaim: "Glory to God whose power, working in us, can do infinitely more than we can ask or imagine!!"

Jesus invited those two disciples to live in that much bigger world of God's imagination and saving love outpoured to transform lives and hearts and communities:

- To heal the sick
- Raise up the oppressed
- Forgive the sinner
- Heal communities
- Give dignity to the lost
- Hope to the hopeless
- Meaning and purpose to the searching
- And above all love.

The word for all of these things is salvation.

My friends, we don't have what we once did, but we do have what we need to do the work Jesus has called us to do. I am excited to journey this path with you starting tonight.

At the end of the Gospel story, the stranger broke the bread and they knew it was Jesus. They knew God was doing a new thing. They exclaimed, were not our hearts burning within us!

This is the theme of our synod. Hearts burning within us. What is really important in the church is not what we can put on a spreadsheet. It is the energy that comes from a life and community transformed by Jesus. It is that energy you feel when you walk into a church that is good and lively. They may be small and poor. But their hearts are burning.

Tonight, we are breaking that same bread that Jesus broke so long ago. May we become the Community of Burning Hearts. May we also know the risen Christ who transforms our hearts. May we become communities of joy and welcome, healing and hope. May we choose hope over fear, love over division.

The new thing that God did so long ago is still happening today. What's the vision? What's the big idea?

The vision is *Jesus*. Simply Jesus. Beautifully, profoundly, deeply, dangerously, undeniably Jesus.

It has always been about Jesus. Amen