

Deanery Conference 2011 – a personal reflection

The Deanery conference has become de facto the best occasion in the year for members of our far-flung deanery to Celebrate the Liturgy all together and to meet each other while focusing on an aspect of our communal life. The theme of the conference this year was “Love of God, Our Neighbour and Ourselves”.

It would however be a shame to give the impression that this conference was a series of worthy talks listened to by a bunch of goody goody two shoes with nothing better to do. Far from it. The main feeling was one of joy around the Liturgy, to come together as a community at a deep level, some really prayerful presentations, a chance to meet old friends and make new ones, a time to face the world's extreme difficulties with a sense urgency but also of balance and hope, to laugh and be entertained, This year children had their own programme and having children there brought us back to a real feeling of being a family.

The Liturgy is the central event of the conference, and it was “heavenly” with our Archbishop Gabriel surrounded by his clergy and flock – who all took communion together. The choir of diverse singers from all across the Deanery was well directed by Anne Marie de Visser. The radiance with which Archbishop Gabriel greeted us all with the words Christ is Risen at the end of the Liturgy was clear to all.

In all there were five main speakers across four days. The first speaker on Friday evening was Archbishop Gabriel whose joy at being together with us was obvious and profound. Unfortunately Mary and I did not hear it because traffic problems stopped us getting there in time but from hearsay it was short, joyful and included part in which he spoke openly of his own illness and how he is recovering. The final session was a very practical and moving 'round table' discussion at the end to consider the 'Community as an Organism of Love' and considering some aspects of the way forward as a community.

The theme (“Love of God, Our Neighbour and Ourselves”) united the speakers well in that they all showed us different aspects of love and the fact that love gives meaning to everything in life. It is impossible to distil what was said in a four days but here are some personal recollections: Father David Gill from Nottingham spoke practically, poetically and movingly about living a life permeated with the love of God, with some very amusing anecdotes taken from his own life.

Dr Mary Cunningham spoke of Intimate love as expressed in marriage and gave us a sense of the deep love in what is for many of us real life – that of marriage – and, as one participant reminded us, of the pain but opportunities offered when marriage ends through bereavement. Father Michael Evdokimov was sadly unable to attend because he needed to look after his wife who was ill so a colleague read his talk centred on St Seraphim of Sarov and St Francis of Assisi – representing two saints from East and West whose love transformed those around them and who despite their different times and traditions had much in common.

Mary Ann de Trana came from mid west USA to speak of her personal insights gained from the onset of “post Polio Syndrome”. She spoke of how in the midst of clamouring demands of modern life we need, in order to love and live properly, to step back and make time within our own lives because if we are exhausted we cannot help and love others. She then proceeded to give us practical hints and help – but always guided by the principal that God is the centre of everything and love is our best guide.

The final round table included short but pithy contributions from three people on an international

panel which saw the welcome return of Amal Dibo from Lebanon, Costa Carras from Greece who reminded us of the need to adapt as the world faces unparalleled ecological crisis and of the contribution the orthodox make (not least our Patriarch Bartholomew), and the third practical but deep speaker was Father John Muster from Keswick. Karin Greenhead was the perceptive and articulate chair person.

The final spoken gem came from Deacon Peter Scorer who reminded everyone that despite everything, the Gospels start and finish with Joy, and that this with Love is essential.

All this was interspersed with optional discussion groups (I cannot say anything of these as I did not make use of any of them) and a very enjoyable party whose highlight was a delightful play by the younger members based firmly on the biblical readings about Jonah and the Whale including many wonderful moments such as when the whale swallowed Jonah, and a voice of God who kept on demanding and being given the script and a rather shy Queen of Nineveh. Thanks must go especially to the wonderful team who looked after and helped the children. Missing from the conference was Irina Von Shlippe who was away in Russia but we all signed cards for her and wish her Happy 75th Birthday on 10th June.

This was our last year at the wonderful All Saints Pastoral centre as it seems it may be sold. But we are already booked into another fine venue at High Leigh in nearby Hoddeston for next year. Kelsey Cheshire has been the dynamic powerhouse organising the conference for 17 years and needs to step back. She is appealing for helpers to take on aspects of the organisation. One practical aspect is that we would like those who cannot afford to go to Conference to come forward and ask for a bursary – please do this as we would love to see you at conference. So please do not make affordability the reason not to come.

It was and I hope will remain a delightfully 'unchurchy' and 'unstuffy' conference.

Andrew Sherwood