

Our Conversation; Our Future

Enormous changes are taking place in society and the wider world, and Bishop James is seeking, in the light of this, to develop “a new framework for our life and calling ...[to] enable us to work with God in the building of his kingdom in the parishes, chaplaincies and places where we work.”

Diocesan strategies have often in the past been developed by the leadership, the Bishop and his Council, without much reference to anyone else. This time, however, he would like as many people as possible to be engaged in the process of discernment, ‘*Our Conversation; Our Future*’. When some of our congregation attended a recent diocesan Quiet Day, they were asked if they would complete a simple response form on the subject. Those of us who attend this year’s Lent Course will be given the same opportunity. We can of course go to the diocesan website and complete the form whenever we like, but there is real value in doing it in the context of a prayerful coming together.

Discerning God’s Will is never easy. Many of us may try to do it on our own (on occasions we have no choice), but as Bishop James recently observed, the Bible often describes it as a corporate activity.

“Where two or three come together in my name,” Jesus said, “there am I with them.” (Matthew 18:20)

When the early Church began to grow and to experience a large influx of non-Jewish converts, they were faced with the thorny question of how far the Law of Moses (the first five books of the Bible) should apply to non-Jews. Were the males to be circumcised? Were all Christian converts, whether Jew or Gentile, duty-bound to obey the Levitical rules on ritual cleanliness (eg Lev.11,13)? Not surprisingly, opinions differed, so the apostles and elders of the Church came together for a special meeting in Jerusalem. They thought and prayed about the issue and eventually came to a common mind. St Luke describes what happened in Acts Ch.15. They arrived at a conclusion which “seemed good to the Holy Spirit *and to [them]*” (Acts 15:28).

Now the Council of Jerusalem not only highlights the importance of coming together to seek God’s Will, but also hints at a number of potential dangers. First, the Church is more than a democracy. We do not simply seek a majority opinion or whatever ‘seems good to us’; rather, to quote from the Council’s conclusion, we look for “what seems *good to the Holy Spirit* and to us.” When we listen *to* each other, we should try to look beyond the personal opinions that are being expressed and discern, as best we can, what God’s Spirit may be saying *through* what is being said. Listening to God’s Word in the Scriptures is also of course very important. But the Scriptures need to be read and interpreted in the light of Christ, and we need to realise (as the apostles and elders had to do at the Council of Jerusalem) that some parts of Scripture (like the Levitical laws on ritual cleanliness) may no longer carry the same weight as they had before the coming of Christ. Finally, whatever conclusions or decisions we may come to, we should be able to sense that they are genuinely ‘good’, positive and wholesome (that they are “what seems good to us and the Holy Spirit”). For they should reflect the underlying nature of the gospel, the ‘good news’ of Christ: “I have come”, said Jesus, “that you might have life, life in its fullness.”