**DIOCESAN SYNOD, February 2020**

**Presidential address**

You will have heard me say that it is right that we act generously in the cause of what is good, just, compassionate and righteous, and even better not only that we are clear why we are engaged in this way but also that we can explain to others why we as Christians do this. In fact you have probably heard me say this more than once. We are called to give an account of the hope and the faith we have.

So when we volunteer in the food bank it is, of course, because we believe that the gap between rich and poor in our society is a political issue, but we first proclaim that in God’s economy the dignity of children, women and men is diminished by the poverty in which many people live.

When we open our church halls overnight and keep watch so that those otherwise homeless on the streets can have some sort of rest and sleep in warmth, it is out of human sympathy for those out all night in the rain but it is much more because we know that the son of man, who came to share our human lot, had nowhere to lay his head and so often from the stable to the tomb was reliant on the compassionate hospitality of others.

So when as individuals or in the parish or as a diocese or as the Church of England we share our concern for the environment it is not only because the effects of our ignorance of the impacts of our decisions, or often our sheer and simple selfishness when we know but chose not to care, are becoming so blatantly obvious but because we have a theology.

We believe that this is God’s creation, all this that we inhabit, use, and enjoy is a gift of a loving and generous God. Everything in heaven and on earth is yours, Lord. We cannot claim to wish to honour, worship and to praise God when we pay scant regard to other people made in his image and are ready to exploit or be careless with the air and the environment, the earth, the sea and their health, the thriving and sustaining of plant and animal life.

This year there is a heavy focus on environmental concerns, on the integrity and sustainability of this planet, on carbon emissions and footprint, on pollution, on rising temperatures and tides. We are, it is often said, waking up just in time – and these issues are major factors in our politics and in the concerns of our neighbours and friends around our communities. I would be unwise to say that I or you are not perhaps in some ways motivated in our concerns by the threat we feel for ourselves, and for our children, grandchildren and future generations. But our responsibility, as we focus on this later this morning, is as stewards of God’s gifts and goodness. We who claim to be children of God and fellow heirs with Christ of a Kingdom of truth, justice and righteousness must proclaim that the earth is the Lord’s, and we honour him when we honour his creation. As stewards of the earth we are properly mindful that much is required of those to whom much is given. I hope and intend that this year, and this Lent in particular, we rise to this challenge.

First we must reckon with our relative ignorance, and consistent with my beginning to this address, we need to recognise our limited understanding of the environmental damage humanity has been doing through its conscious or ignorant priorities and decisions, and also of our thin theological consideration of these issues. Ruth Valerio’s book, ‘Saying Yes to Life’, the Archbishop of Canterbury’s Lent Book is good for individual and group use this Lent. Clergy will recall that Ruth was a speaker at our last residential conference. Study and prayer come first so that we are ready to speak up, and I recommend using Ruth’s book this lent.

Second I draw your attention to this year’s Bishop’s Lent Appeal. Once again I invite you to support this and so directly help the work of national and local charities. As usual fifty percent of the proceeds go to a national or international partner, A Rocha this year, and the other fifty percent to local charities. We have already committed to support the Sustainability Centre in Petersfield Deanery and we welcome your suggestions about other local groups that could benefit, particularly where a modest or small amount of money can make a significant impact. You may wish to contribute directly so please gift aid the donation if you pay income tax, or thorough your parish by one of the many activities offered, from simple Lent lunches to special events, to retiring collections to sponsored events. On Maundy Thursday here you can enjoy soup home made by the Cathedral clergy and make a donation after the Chrism Eucharist. The Bishop’s Lent Appeal is a wonderful part of this Diocese’s life. For seven or eight years your generosity led to increasing totals raised but that has levelled off in the last couple of years. It would be good to have a bumper year when the needs are so great and the issues so important.

Thirdly we need as parishes and the diocese, as well as individual Christians, to take practical steps. The Church of England is aiming to be carbon neutral as soon as 2030 and that is a very ambitious target. This morning’s presentation will say more about the task group which will help us to play our part in doing what is right. I am grateful for the excellent work the members of that group are doing with us and for us. But we are the diocese; all of us, not me and a few others. What can we do and what can I and the central diocesan staff do to support you?

You could begin the journey to become an eco-church, beginning with bronze level and looking towards the gold award achieved so far only by one parish, St Helen’s, in this diocese. Congratulations to them and a challenge and encouragement to our one hundred and forty of so other parishes.

Our buildings are many and often large. A few years ago we added solar panels to over a dozen vicarages; I pledge us to look again, but not all our houses are suitable for such installations. However, all but a handful of our churches are aligned east-west and so have plenty of south facing roofs. A few parishes have found ways to install panels and managed to persuade the Council planners to agree. But times are changing and Councils seem to be becoming much more receptive. We know that such an application and decisions about heating churches are complicated, so I have proposed that the diocese through the Archdeacons and the Diocesan Secretary with the Diocesan Advisory Committee work with a specialist team to help you make good decisions for your parish and for the environment. At the same time we can only know the scale of the challenge when we know how much harm we are currently causing. The Church of England now provides a tool to measure the energy foot print of your church and hall, and it will be available in March. I urge you to use both options and we will let you know how to do so.

As this special year goes by I hope to make further initiatives so that we can do what we must not just for the planet – that is what everyone says – but for God. He has entrusted us with the privilege of caring for his world and his people. He who calls us is faithful; may we be faithful of his trust.