**DIOCESAN SYNOD: PRESIDENTIAL ADDRESS**

**March 2023**

The Gospel today includes the words: “Love your enemies and pray for those who persecute you.”

Those are words we need to return to in Lent.

To live in such a countercultural way – to love enemies, pray for our persecutors – is a vocation to live the kingdom *now*. It is to anticipate – in our life together before an onlooking world – ‘the Day’ when all shall kneel before the incarnate, crucified and risen One as He wipes away tears, reigns with justice and mercy and lifts up the poor.

Let’s keep this upside-down, (or *right*-way-up) text close by us. We are a counter-cultural community; called to live the kingdom now.

Later on we’ll hear our deaneries outline their plans.

There is so much richness in what is being developed.

If my perspective is a little rose-spectacled, I know you will all bring me back down to earth! But between March and November 2022, we made a *wonderful* journey. It was, from my point of view, a journey or pilgrimage in trust, rather than in the creation of perfect plans. But these plans are good and full of promise.

The plans emerged through dialogue and conversation.

At an earlier stage, plans had been shaped and offered with diligence, faithfulness and care by our deaneries. But, as we all know (and I know *very* well in my own Christian life), things don’t always work out as we hope, pray or intend.

So, between March and November 2022, through the Road Map process, we worked to retrieve, value and honour this previous work – and *reframe* it in dialogue with my early and emerging sense of vision for our diocesan life together and in the light of two priorities I proposed for consideration.

The Deaneries brought real energy and edge as we re-framed the work of the past. We let go of things that were no longer timely, sharpened focus and foregrounded elements well-worth pursuing. We prayed for the Holy Spirit’s guidance at every turn and for every conversation.

What of my early, and emerging, sense of vision?

Through discernment, conversation and engagement with you (and a long-standing participation in the life of the Church of England), I envision the diocese becoming, ever more *Christ-centred* and, thereby, orientated to our Father’s reign or kingdom ‘in and for the world’.

What might we see if you or I were to ‘drop in’, anywhere in our diocese, in 10 years’ time?

It’s my prayer we would rejoice to observe – in myriad expressions and improvisations on the good news of the Kingdom of God – a Christian community abiding in Jesus and living its kingdom vocation.

We’d see children and young people growing in faith, at the heart of things, changing us all; and we’d observe the extraordinary and counter-cultural way in which the faith and well-being of older people is being treasured and honoured.

We’d see a community within which discipleship and common life moves continually between *contemplation and action*: in and for the world. This will be the fruit of joint endeavour, mutual love and service, in Christ.

We are the Church of Jesus Christ. *In him*, we seek God’s kingdom:

Abiding in Jesus, we serve the Kingdom. We seek to put Jesus first, middle and end in all we are and do. And we prioritise the things Jesus puts first: gracious, costly service along the Spirit-led, cross-shaped, way of the Kingdom.

Abiding in Christ, we become a stabilising, prophetic presence in and for the world. From our deep roots in Christ, we receive grace to ‘walk the talk’ in response to poverty, our endangered planet and in responding to humanity’s profoundest need: to know Jesus and the One who sent Him.

Abiding in Jesus, we won’t be found rushing about, frantically trying to do or to be everything. So in 10 years’ time, I’d love someone who had really got the measure of us to say: ‘this crowd spends so much time with Jesus, but see *how* they are engaged with the world!’

Speaking personally, in Lent, I can say there is a long, long way to go for your bishop to enthrone Jesus in every part of his life. But, as St Augustine might have said, “I want to want him more”. Is this your desire too?

Three of the deaneries have taken the Bishop’s Staff Team through their deanery plans.

We’ve asked deanery teams three questions: ‘Would you take us through your plans?’; ‘Would you allow us ask us questions about your plans?’; and ‘Would you tell us how we can support you in delivering your plans?’. The tone, the note of service and enabling are each vital in the developing culture the Bishop’s Staff Team.

We’ll hear from all seven deaneries in our meeting today.

In conclusion, I’d like to offer a few reflections on the General Synod debate on Living in Love and Faith (LLF).

The House of Bishops has established a number of work streams to develop the prayers and pastoral guidelines for further debate at General Synod in July. I hope we will return more fully to these vital people-shaped concerns at Diocesan Synod in June.

The House of Bishops (HoB) wanted to test the mind of Synod.

It offered a motion for scrutiny and, as it turned out, eight hours of debate. The motion passed in all three houses; quite closely in the Houses of Clergy and Laity. The HoB’s proposals include the affirmation of Holy Matrimony; the development of a ‘suite’ of prayers, which include prayers for the blessing of a same-sex couple who has previously entered into a civil partnership or civil same-sex marriage; provision for the protection of conscience all round; and the replacement of the document Issues in Human Sexuality with new pastoral guidelines. I supported the motion. Do keep the whole process in your prayers.

I would like to recall us, Synod, to words from the Prologue to St John’s Gospel.

Here we read the mystery that the Eternal Word (the Eternal Son or Second Person of the Trinity) ‘was made flesh’ and ‘dwelt’, ‘tabernacled’ or ‘pitched Tent’ among us. I am so drawn to these interweaving images: the ascended Christ’s Body interpreted as a *spacious tent* within which those who find themselves welcomed in, by sheer and costly grace, find themselves amazed (and perplexed) to find the others Christ has welcomed in!

For we know that it is by grace through faith, symbolised in baptism by water and Spirit, that we become members of one another through being members of Christ’s Body. This has profound implications for our life together, especially at this time when we wrestle with deep and conscientious disagreement *within the Tent*. I believe to wrestle with what it means to live together in Christ – at his invitation, not any of ours - picks up the call to live counter-culturally we noted at the beginning of this address in today’s Gospel reading.

For in union with the ascended Christ, in the Tent that is His Body, we find ourselves sharing life (and some of our deepest hopes and fears) with those who disagree with us – perhaps even viscerally – on a range of matters, not least over the interpretation of scripture.

Just as today’s Gospel calls us, counter-culturally, to ‘love our enemies and pray for those who persecute you’, so we abiding in the Tent of Christ’s Body are called to do all in our power to stay within, in forbearance and love of one another, because He first loved us.

We keep a few moments of quiet.