**DIOCESAN SYNOD: March 2024**

**PRESIDENTIAL ADDRESS**

I put two documents on the altar as I came in, as I’m searching for the right way to respond to them. I commend both documents to you as Lenten reading. The one you may know is from the Trussell Trust entitled *Hunger in the UK*. It was published in 2023, but the data it is drawing on is still pretty good. It illustrates a deep scar on the face of our society and on the face of Christ, which so often is presented to us in the little ones of life and the world.

The second one is *UK Poverty 2024* from the Joseph Rowntree Foundation. It was designed before election season and in election year to give some solid data and some background on what is actually happening in our society. Over a million children are now living in destitution, and the definition of that is there in the appendix: very deep poverty. It’s growing. Children are coming to school without food in their stomachs, and increasingly coming from poor accommodation, either temporary or unsatisfactory.

One of my priorities as we serve Christ in the world is to address poverty wherever it manifests itself. I know that you know this, because you are so faithful in ministry in your communities. You will have stories to tell, but we must speak up, we must find ways of bringing to attention the devastation of child poverty. On almost every count, an early experience of destitution leads to the most appalling outcomes later in life. And we are the community centred in Jesus, rooted in his grace and love, and seeking the Kingdom, longing for the day when what has begun with the resurrection will be completed in all its fullness. And until that day, we will stand with Christ among the poorest, the most disenfranchised, and enable their voice and their agency wherever possible. And wherever that is not possible, we must speak up for and alongside them.

I’m two years in as bishop now, and I want to say thank you for the consistency of the prayers and the love that you have shown to me and to Christine. We love it here. We love being here to serve you and with you. Some of you will remember the journey we have made together. In that first year, we swiftly put together a roadmap that would deliver us a plan. It’s better to have a plan, especially an organisation like ours, a complex organisation called by Jesus to seek the Kingdom.

You may remember that an array of lay and ordained leaders in our deaneries met with me to look at the plans you had previously drawn up. I said that I have a vision tested in discernment, and you have plans – and bags of vision too – and I asked you to bring what you had from the years preceding my arrival, and then to do me the great kindness of hearing me out. I had a vision for a Church that is in and for the world, that has Jesus at its centre and heart, where all our thinking comes back to him, seeking the Kingdom that he embodies. It’s a Church, I said, that’s got older people flourishing in it – the church of today, not yesterday – and in which children and young people are finding their voice, and finding a place at the heart of our communities – the church of today, not of tomorrow.

Those plans that you had forged and fashioned were renewed and re-shaped in hundreds of conversations with your new bishop. And in our Diocesan Synod of November 2022, we voted confidently for them: a plan that would give us forward movement and a common purpose. It was not a perfect plan, it never could be. But it was a plan that enabled us all to say: “I’ve been heard, I have a place and we are on the way again.” And since then, deaneries have been delivering on those plans, and they’ve been refined as they’ve been shared with the Bishop’s Staff Team. That’s a team that knows itself to be standing under the diocese, not over it and not ahead of it but *under* it – cheering it on, enabling and resourcing its work. And I know there’s a work of refreshing plans going on at the moment because that’s what we do with a plan: we see where we’ve got to, rejoice in what we’ve done and move on, making more plans as we listen to Jesus.

While you’ve been doing that, and there has been so much to celebrate, the Bishop’s Staff Team has been working on the very idea of a diocese having a vision and a strategy. It’s a good question: how on earth can you say with any integrity, validity or authority that a diocese has a vision and strategy – surely that’s impossible in a Church like ours? We’ve come to think it’s not impossible. Inspired by the vision and the plans we see in our parishes, in deaneries and now in the national Church, we have got a plan and an outline to show you later. You’ll get the first look at where we’ve got to.

It's a settled view among the Bishop’s Staff Team that we’ve probably got our new guiding vision for our life together as a diocese. I see communities that rejuvenate, colleagues whose ministry is rejuvenating, life-giving and speaks of the life that is found through Christ Jesus – a life that is shared sacramentally in bread and wine, in service, in proclamation and preaching, and in speaking grace for those who miss out in life. So the first part of our vision is that we think our diocese ‘longs to be a rejuvenating community’ – longs to be, doesn’t think it’s arrived.

We are a diocese that longs to be ‘Jesus-centred and Kingdom-seeking’, which is what seemed to emerge as I looked at the paperwork to come here, and as we looked at what the diocese might look in 5, 10 or 15 years. Then, we hope you can cut us through the middle and you’ll find Jesus. It’s Jesus who ministers to us first, that we might minister to others, and then in all kind of community work we follow Jesus in seeking the Kingdom, joining him wherever he beckons in society, amongst the most vulnerable and marginalised, where people are living in destitution. Do look at that report: a million children living with not enough food, living in damp or temporary accommodation, and a security system that was based on Christian thinking – Beveridge, John Bailey George Bell, all of those Christians coming out of the Second World War. The welfare state was rooted in a Christian understanding that when people have fallen on hard times, we don’t judge and condemn, but we get people back on the road with housing, a decent wage and a safety net.

We are a diocese that longs to be rejuvenating in every respect, and Jesus-centred, like the national Church. It’s an idea that comes from Archbishop Stephen Cottrell, my friend. As he said, it’s all about Jesus, the gospel, what God has done for us in Jesus and is doing for us in Jesus, and that leads to all that Jesus is for: the Kingdom, the reign of God that is breaking in. So: **the Diocese of Portsmouth longs to be a rejuvenating community of Jesus-centred, Kingdom-Seeking disciples.** That’s what we are, that’s what I am, a disciple of Jesus. Is that a vision you’re longing for too? We are called as Synod to go forward responding to Jesus, our joy, our life, our love, in all that we are and do.

So we have a vision to propose and a big chunk of time will be given to our strategy as it’s unfolding. There will be loads of opportunity to clarify and to flesh out, but my hope is that we come back to Synod in June to give thanks to God for the vision that guided us, Live | Pray | Serve, and the values that informed it; and to embrace the vison that God has laid on my heart, on many of the hearts open to me over the two years, and certainly the heart and vision of your Bishop’s Staff Team.