**DIOCESAN SYNOD, November 2022**

**PRESIDENTIAL ADDRESS**

First, it’s good to welcome Sir Jonathan Montgomery to Diocesan Synod today. Jonathan chairs our Council for Social Responsibility, through which we seek to proclaim the good news of the Kingdom of God within society and for the most vulnerable within it. Jonathan, I look forward to strengthening the work we do together.

As a nation and society, we are living through a cost-of-living crisis. Many of the people we serve in our communities are terrified at the prospect of this winter. We must keep them uppermost in our prayers, concern and be ready to act. Canon Nick Ralph, who leads CSR, is currently working on some ways in which deaneries and parishes might respond creatively to the crisis; he’ll share these possibilities in the next week or so.

I visited a school on the Isle of Wight yesterday.

Forty per cent of its pupils are now eligible for Pupil Premium (a reliable indicator of poverty), with another group of (ineligible) children living close to the poverty line. The breakfast club run by the school is full, such is the need. None of us can learn much with an empty stomach.

My brothers and sisters in Synod, we note at the heart of our meeting today, the reality that children and young people are facing poverty and the consequences of deprivation *within* our diocesan community. As those who believe that Jesus comes to bring life, ‘life in all its fullness’, we must surely be ready to serve the poorest in our midst and to speak up about the poverty which chokes life and limits the lives of many.

Second, I note today we will be asked, as a Diocesan Synod, to dissolve the Diocesan Board of Education as it is, in preparation for it to become a new entity - a Charitable Incorporated Organisation - from January 1 2023. I want to pay tribute to the significant work of our Director of Education, Jeff Williams, and the education team as a whole. This is a government-led transformation in the way in which schools operate. It has required professionalism, expertise and resilience to respond so effectively to it. I ask you all to hold Jeff, and his exceptional team, in your prayers. Church schools, so often in partnership with community schools, remain a crucial part of our life, plans and future mission as a diocese.

Important preliminaries complete, I felt I ought to offer a brief word at this Synod about Living in Love and Faith (LLF), as a number of key steps in this national process will have happened before we meet again as a Diocesan Synod next year.

Many of us have participated in the LLF process.

The College of Bishops met this week in High Leigh as LLF moves into its discernment and decision phase. We worked together on a paper which will eventually be brought to General Synod in February 2023. Together we were explicit in seeking the Holy Spirit’s wisdom, grace and guidance in enabling our calling to offer the Church of England leadership in the contested areas of identity, sexuality, relationships and marriage. As I approached the meeting I did so with some trepidation. There are strong, conscientiously held and differing views within the bishops of the College (as there are, of course, in the wider church): not least over the matter of how to respond Christianly to same-sex relationships.

I am pleased to report that it was a most gracious meeting with plenty of listening and learning from each other. It was expertly facilitated.

The differing perspectives among the bishops, theologically, pastorally, and liturgically are likely to remain although plenty of common ground emerged – not least in the widely expressed desire to preserve the unity that is already ours through baptism into the Body of Christ, a unity which is the Spirit’s gift to us and which, arguably for some, runs deeper than differences in understanding, doctrine or practice.

The issues we discussed go to the very heart of who we are and how we are. I was heartened by the way in which bishops approached each other and discussed deeply personal issues. It is my prayer that we’ll be able to walk together in love and faith and offer a model of good disagreement in the days ahead.

I’d like to share with you where I stand, in this discernment and decision phase. Especially, in this presidential address, where I stand as your brother and bishop.

I’m drawn to the phrase from John’s gospel, in which we read: ‘The Word was made flesh and dwelt among us’. The Greek word for ‘dwelt’ actually means ‘tabernacled, set up tent’. It’s a beautiful picture of what God, in humility and grace, has done for us all in the incarnation of Jesus Christ: God offers us, in the Body of Christ, a ***big tent*** to dwell in.

The Word became flesh, pitched the tent of his Body with us, and invites us - by faith and through baptism ‘in water and the Spirit’ - to dwell in his incarnate, crucified, risen and ascended life. We don’t get any choice about who Jesus invites into the tent of his Body or, to change the picture, calls into *ecclesia* or Church on earth. It’s a Big Tent, Christ’s Body, with room in it for all of those who, by repentance and faith, receive His gracious invitation.

As your bishop, I will be fierce in my love for you all without exception; in seeking to ensure that everyone, of whatever persuasion and conscientiously held perspective, continues to have an honoured place within the Big Tent of Christ’s Body.

As we travel further in discernment, decision and, in all likelihood, continuing disagreement, I will seek to ensure the diocese remains a big and spacious tent. I will seek to ensure all those - already united in the Big Tent of Christ’s Body by grace alone - are valued, whatever their conscientiously held position on these profoundly complex and difficult matters.

So what of my particular views on these matters?

I do believe it is time for a change, and I will be arguing for change from the floor of General Synod. But this is, for me, a secondary priority and consideration. My primary calling - as your brother and bishop – will be to promote and protect the unity which Christ has already given us. A unity not conditional upon ethical or theological agreement in contested areas of conscience (however profound or vital to human flourishing and discipleship), but rather a unity which is the Spirit’s gift to us - an invitation to dwell or abide in the Tent of Christ’s Body, by grace through faith.

I hope this sets a context. Please pray for each other; with thanksgiving for our unity in Christ and for the Church of England: that we will be granted the abundance of God’s wisdom and grace in the journey of discernment ahead.

The Diocese of Portsmouth is a big and spacious tent; and I feel privileged to have been invited into it with you. Those whom Jesus has welcomed into the Tent of his Body, let no one push out!

*Based on the Presidential Address given by*

*Bishop Jonathan*

*Diocesan Synod, November 2022*