This Address is delivered when we are again facing significant and severe restrictions in many aspects of our lives, including legal restriction on our right to worship freely and together in church. While it is very important to say that such corporate gathering is not the only way for Christians, and others of faith to pray, I am disappointed that the huge efforts made in parishes to provide safe and secure services has not been recognised. I place on record my gratitude for the thinking, creativity and hard work many have put in to enable worship, study, prayer and discipleship both in church, at home and virtually. Though disappointed I am aware, like you, of the plethora of voices in society seeking different or special treatment and I don’t believe it would be right to join those strident voices. Our continuing priority must be to worship God and to serve our Lord, however that is possible, in generosity and solidarity. That was the pattern of Jesus’ life and ministry; he came down to share our humanity and to be one in solidarity with us, and he lived and died serving both God and others generously, indeed sacrificially.

Let solidarity and generosity be our watchwords in the coming weeks and months, even though these are, like earlier in the year, more demanding the longer we cannot be sustained by corporate and eucharistic worship. I hope that period will be short, but in it I ask you all to seek from God the strength and the courage to continue to serve the people of our communities in Christian care and love. I hope we will champion the needs of those falling into poverty, living rough, isolated from loved ones in care homes, and all in need or distress. Solidarity and generosity is our way.

I have begun with those words about our current situation but I want also to address the deep hope and faith which we hold not only in the midst of pandemic but also for our communities and nation beyond these restrictions. The seasons we keep in November and December are consistently forward looking and hopeful. The Kingdom season began on All Saints’ Day – the winter celebration of Easter – and points us to earth as well as heaven reflecting the reign of Christ; tomorrow and this coming week we are reminded that peace and justice characterise the Kingdom. Advent similarly points us towards the transformation which is promised when Jesus comes again in glory. And at Christmas the birth of Jesus as a child celebrates not only the beginning of a new human life but the potential for salvation and transformation.

These weeks help us to focus our Vision. It is wonderfully timely that as a diocese we are using these weeks, and into the new year, to give substance to that aspiration and intention so that we can fashion our ministry to serve that Vision of hope and transformation in Christ.

This is something that most of us, me included, find quite challenging. In our ministries, in the roles we occupy and the posts we hold, in the leadership we show in our parishes, chaplaincies, communities and diocese, most of us are, or have become good at making things happen. ‘I or we will sort it out.’ We’ll do the best that’s possible.’ I’ll make it work.’

How often have we said that sort of thing, or heard others? We are generally very good making the best of a situation, ‘fixing’ things, and ensuring we achieve the best possible outcome. We have seen ample evidence of that capacity during lockdown and restrictions. And it is admirable. There will be a time for those talents and experience to be well used much more, but first we have to use gifts that we have had less practice using. For the desire to discuss how to sort things out follows from knowing what we need to have as our vision, what we are called by God to be and to do. The presenting challenges of pandemic tempt us as a diocese and parishes into a problem solving approach, but the Gospel imperative calls us to address today’s circumstances within our vision for outreach and mission, evangelism and service, proclamation and transformation.

So I’m asking you to hold to one side for now our deep practical urge to fix things or to do structure, and to ask first what we must do for the transformation of lives and communities or, to put it another way, to build the Kingdom, embrace the Advent hope and share Christmas joy. We need the broadbrush picture before the detail, the vision before the plan.

I believe there are four essentials in our vision. You will want to add to these, deepening them, filling them out, but here are four essentials for us in this diocese.

We need visionary leadership. And that is not the bishop or archdeacons alone, it is you because, as I’ve said before, you as members of Synod and in your other ministries are key leaders along with lay and ordained people in every part of the diocese. The best leaders, and that’s the sort God deserves and the church needs, enable others to lead and do, give permission, take risks, they pray, and they know themselves needing to grow and mature in being disciples.

We need to be members of teams on a mission. With clarity of vision and purpose we must not be individual leaders but serve together in resourced teams, collaborative, lay and ordained, bringing complementary skills to a shared mission in context.

We need to be disciples of Jesus. We must find our identity in Jesus rather than in going to church. We need to have a clear rhythm of life in discipleship and prayer, and be renewed in it every day because conversion is a daily event.

We need structures to enable growth. Growing in depth, impact and number we must be nimble, as we often say we are in this diocese, so that we take opportunities quickly and have a ‘can-do’ approach to mission.

There’s a wonderful prayer which prays to God, ‘In the renewal of our lives, make known your heavenly glory.’ Today I’m inviting you and the whole diocese to help in the renewal of our mission, our diocese, our structures and processes, our parishes so that there is renewal not only of lives already touched by Jesus but also a deeper and more profound renewal of hope for our people and communities. I invite you to share that Vision and live it.