

## **The Bishop of Coventry's Presidential Address to the Diocesan Synod, Tuesday 23<sup>rd</sup> June 2020**

Dear Members of Synod, when we were last together in the flesh in November, I opened my address with a greeting from Bishop Paul, Bishop of Kapsabet, our Companion Link Diocese. I do the same now, and I make Bishop's Paul's words my own as I pay tribute to the whole Diocese – parishes, schools, chaplaincies and our cathedral – for rising to the challenges of the times.

Allow us Bishop Chair and the Leadership of your Synod to join you to most sincerely thank the Clergy and Lay Leadership of the Church for their resilience, commitment, creativity, sacrifices, flexibility and their obedience to their higher calling that have been demonstrated crystal clear in their ensuring that the ministry landscape and the presence of the Church remain consistent and adaptive in the face of shifting realities and complex challenges posed by the COVID-19 global pandemic.

Bishop Paul goes on to say, 'We appreciate you: we thank God for you: we are proud of you!' I echo those words.

'Unprecedented' has been, understandably, the word of the times. In terms of the long history of the Church, though, there have been greater moments of challenge and opportunity for the Church that may put this one in perspective. And so let me offer a framework to place the present experience in the context of the deepest history of the Church: that of the death, burial and resurrection of Jesus Christ, the Lord of the Church.

For many of us lockdown was a Good Friday experience. So much of that which we loved and our ways of serving our parishes and communities were taken from us. It felt like some sort of death. It was as if we were plunged into a sort of Holy Saturday existence: a disembodied form of life where we had to learn how to connect as Christ's people virtually – we could call it spiritually – without physical contact, and find ways to reach out to people we longed to serve pastorally and missionally by all sorts of means short of being in the same place together. Amazing things have happened over these months, and, perhaps, a little like Jesus who descended into the abode of the dead and 'made proclamation to the spirits in prison' (1 Peter 3.19), we have been able to reach some of those who, beyond our reach before, were just waiting for the welcome of Christ to be made known to them. Although, as 1 Peter tells us, Jesus had been 'made alive in the spirit', God, of course, had more for him, for his followers and for the creation for which he died. God purposed nothing less than the resurrection of the body, the renewal of creation, the fullness of the fully social reality of the kingdom of God.

On the day of resurrection, when Jesus came and stood among the locked down disciples, that was only the beginning of the necessary journey of recovery. Despair and disbelief needed to be dispelled by faith in the resurrected one. Fear needed casting out by peace. Feelings of failure and disempowerment needed to be overcome by the breath of God's Spirit and the commissioning of Christ (John 20.19-29).

As we come out of lockdown step by step, there will be need for us to recover – to recover our buildings, our public worship, our sacraments, our patterns of pastoral care, our finances. Recovery will be different for us all: church communities, schools, cathedral and, even our remarkable chaplaincies who have ministered so faithfully in these times. And each of us, personally, will need to recover.

But the first disciples did more than recover, because Jesus did more than recover. Jesus was raised into life. Life consistent and continuous with what had gone before but new and transformed life. Life that brought – and is bringing – the whole of creation into the renewed, redeemed life of the kingdom of God. The disciples were invited to step into the flow – a mighty, unstoppable tidal flow – of God’s powerful purposes present in the reality of the risen life of Jesus.

That same invitation comes to us in its own way, shaped for our particular circumstances. We will need to recover, of course, but we are called to do more than recover. We are called to renewal, to resurrection, to keep moving with the purposes of God fulfilled in Jesus who died, was buried and rose again for us and for our salvation. Now as in every time, especially times of threat and danger, we are invited to receive the power of God that raised Jesus from the grave.

That is why our focus in the Diocese will need to be both realistic about the need for recovery, and the resources that are necessary for that, and also ambitious for everything that God wants to continue doing among us and for us. For around the past 10 years, we have made health a priority. We’ve wanted to see healthy church communities. That groundwork needs to continue. We’ve wanted to be a healthy Church so that we can be a growing Church. Health nurtures the missionary energies of the Church. We long, because God longs, to see more growth in the life of the Church, to see those missionary energies rise up among us and be released across the Diocese, bringing new life. Healthy churches are growing churches and growing churches are churches that bring life not only to themselves but to their communities and to other churches. Healthy, growing churches are propagating churches – they propagate new life, and so, from a mustard seed buried in the ground, grows, as Jesus said, ‘the greatest of all shrubs and puts forth large branches, so that the birds of the air can make nests in its shade’ (Mark 4.32).

Let this Synod, let this Diocese, let each of us keep our eyes on Jesus Christ, the Lord of the Church who speaks his word of peace to us and who sends us out in the power of his risen life to make disciples of all people. For his promise abides: ‘Remember, I am with you always, to the end of the age’ (Matthew 28.20).