

The Bishop of Coventry's Presidential Address to the Diocesan Synod, March 2021

Dear members of Diocesan Synod, there is much to be grateful for at this point in our long struggle with Covid-19. The vaccine programme is a remarkable success and the numbers of infections and tragic deaths are reducing in very hopeful ways. The government has set out a credible roadmap to return us to a more normal social existence. Parish churches are gradually opening across the land, welcoming parishioners back in person. My hope is that after the sacramental deprivations of the last year, the people of Coventry, Warwickshire and the segment of Solihull we serve will be able to receive their Easter holy communion in their parish church or in a parish church nearby them or at an open air service.

The last year has placed great challenges upon the ministry and mission of the churches, especially the Church of England with our responsibilities to every parishioner, not just every congregation member. We have had to rethink how – in the words of our purpose statement here in this diocese – *we worship God, make new disciples and transform communities*. There's much to say about the remarkable adjustments we've made in each of these and the blessings that have abounded even in the face of such adversity. Let me focus for a few moments on the third – *transforming communities*.

A recent report by the All-Party Parliamentary Group for Faith and Society following its research on partnerships between faith groups and local authorities during and beyond the pandemic found that:

- 60% of local authorities involved food banks operated by a faith group or faith-based organisation as part of their response to the pandemic;
- 67% of local authorities report that there has been an increase in partnership working with faith groups since the start of the pandemic;
- partnership has grown most since the start of the pandemic in relation to food poverty (up from 66% of local authorities before COVID-19 to 78% now) and mental health and wellbeing (up from 43% to 48% now);

- 91% of local authorities describe their experience of partnership with faith groups as 'Very Positive' or 'Positive';
- 93% of local authorities consider wider sharing of best practice in co-production between faith groups and local authorities to be 'Very Important' or 'Important';
- 76% of local authorities expect that new partnerships undertaken with faith groups during the pandemic will continue afterwards.

And there are countless other examples of the churches – and other faith communities – of our land serving their communities in ways that don't involve a formal relationship with their local authorities.

The transformative activity for the vulnerable, poor, hungry, needy, isolated, elderly, shielding and lonely people across our own diocese is too numerous to name in full. So I simply mention by way of example the stunning work of the Saints' Project for young people in Nuneaton, the energetic efforts to address food poverty in Willenhall, Coventry, the amazing work in Warwick, providing food and activity parcels to eight schools for children receiving free school meals, unstinting work in Kineton addressing stress, joblessness, housing crises and the list goes on in every corner of the Diocese. Thank you to everybody in these and so many other parishes for loving your neighbours with such dedication through these times.

There is much to look forward to in the future and there is much to celebrate over the last year. But there is much to reflect on as well. Next Tuesday, 23rd March, has become a Day of Reflection for the nation and we have some very good material on the diocesan website to help us to engage with it and minister through it.

I was helped the other day by a comment by Baroness Maeve Sherlock, labour front bencher in the Lords and a curate in Durham, that Long Covid – the condition that many people who contracted Covid now endure – may be a helpful analogy of where we *all* are. The Covid-19 pandemic will live on, not only in the sense that the virus will remain with us, continually mutating and will require us to find ways to live with it, not without it, but the pandemic will also remain with us by the *effects* of the last year.

The UK economy will take a long time to recover after the contractions and borrowing of the last year. The health, physical and mental, of the

nation will take a long time to mend after the trauma and losses of the last year. The education of young people will take a long time to put back on course after the restrictions of the last year. The life of the Church, our finances, our health, our learning the faith will take a long time to fully recover. And, despite the amazing adaptations to on-line worship, retreats, teaching, fellowship and more, the spiritual damage to the souls of many, especially those who have not been able to engage with on-line church will need very tender care, pastorally and evangelistically.

I have spoken before about how these months have been a wilderness experience for many, and for some it has felt like an exile. Like God's people of old, we have found the presence of the Lord with us in the pillar of cloud by day and the pillar of fire by night. And we have found ways to sing the Lord's song in a strange land. But it has been hard none the less and it has taken its toll on our finances, our numbers and probably our health, spiritual as well as physical and mental. In the midst of this journeying though, as for God's people in the wilderness and the exile, there has been renewal of life and we have kept our sights on the God of re-entry to the promised land, the God of return to the holy city after exile and on the God of resurrection who raised our Lord Jesus Christ from the grave and conquered the plague of sin and the scourge of death.

As we continue our journey through this pandemic our faith remains strong in the God of resurrection – the God of life so powerfully set in stone and glass and art in our great Cathedral that tells the story that connects deeply with fundamental human experiences of suffering and renewed hope and that proclaims to the world the Christian vision that all the destructions that human history throws at us are no match for the God of redemption and reconciliation who triumphs over our darkness with the blazing light of unconquerable divine love.

Let us live by that Easter Faith and proclaim to the world with renewed vigour. We may be on the threshold of a new missionary age for the Church because one effect of Covid has been to cause people, communities and nations to re-think their lives and values, re-set their priorities and to long to build a better ways of living. The best way for each person, each community, each nation and for the whole world is the way of Jesus Christ. We will have new opportunities to 'go and tell' the gospel, to show the way of the just and gentle rule of Christ, and to say to the world, 'come and see' Jesus and find healing for your soul.