

Diocesan Synod

March 2023

DS23(12)



Presidential Address of Rt Rev Beverley Mason, Bishop of Warrington

Friends,

Jesus says to us, in Matthew's Gospel, *'Come to me all you who are Labour and are heaven laden, and I will give you rest. Take my yoke upon you, and learn from me, for I am gentle and lowly in heart, and you will find rest for your souls. For my yoke is easy and my burden is light.'*

In seeking the mind of Christ and in our desire to serve Christ in the Church and the world, the burden doesn't always feel light, does it?

These are extraordinary times: We continue to live with the post-traumatic-stress of Covid, which is affecting all of us, in the church and beyond at different levels.

There are, of course, the positive stories to share, among which, we are seeing non and de-churched people joining our congregations. However, there are those members of the church family, for whatsoever reason, who have failed to return. And this remains a cause of sorrow for many of us.

The lack of financial resilience, has been exposed and exacerbated by Covid, and compounded by the cost of living and energy crises, these are huge burdens for us in the parish and for the diocese. The major concern is of course, the impact of this upon the affordability of clergy stipends!

Immense work is taking place behind the scenes, to secure funding from the Church Commissioners, to ensure that we are firstly, sustainable and secondly, transformational. Thank you for the gratitude you expressed earlier to our diocesan secretary and to colleagues who are working over and above for this funding. We know Liverpool has particular challenges in terms of low asset base and significant deprivation. But equally, we have a particular determination to respond creatively, committedly and humbly, as we faithfully ask God for a bigger church to make a bigger difference. Please pray that God will bless and make fruitful, the conversations and funding application to those who hold the purse strings!

Alongside this, we have the implementation of our Diocesan Strategy, Fit for Mission, which is filling many with excitement and enthusiasm and many with fear at the personal cost and as they try to comprehend how this will look and work.

Its worth remembering that Fit for Mission is our borne out of a long obedience in the same direction, through diocesan wide conversations and consultations over a number of years which honestly and transparently looked at, what was called, *'the burning platform'* issues: the broken buildings often not fit for purpose or in the wrong location; the ageing and declining congregations, the dearth of children and young people, the reduction in giving; the declining and over-burdened parish leaders, buckling under administrative burden, with overstretched volunteers. Alongside this, there is declining wellbeing of clergy, the concern around clergy working in isolation and all in leadership becoming distanced from the missional priorities. These are named in Fit for Mission as 1) introducing people to Jesus, 2) deepening discipleship; 3) developing Christian leaders; and 4) doing justice.

Diocesan Synod

March 2023

DS23(12)



All the FFM restructuring that is taking place is aimed at addressing the burning platform stuff and the 4 missional priorities. Yes, this is bumpy! But where FFM is being implemented, we're already seeing the difference in terms of new people hearing the Gospel and coming to church; we're seeing a huge number of people coming through Cultivate and receiving discipleship and leadership training and we're seeing excellent networks of social justice – thousands of people across the Liverpool diocese are being fed weekly by our churches and Christian volunteers. This is humbling and inspirational.

These are still early days for FFM, but what we're finding is that where there's resourcing, and a re-imagination for mission and ministry, we're seeing a missional shift. We're seeing seeds of growth!

And what we continue to learn is that when we're intentional in addressing and bringing about things that haven't or aren't working, and when we study the scripture, theologise and pray about these things and seek God's wisdom, guidance and blessing, we begin to notice a transformation. It begins with us, and then with others, and then begins to shape the world around us!

We believe our four missional priorities are inspirational and motivation; but they are also deeply challenging, especially as we continue to work for justice. Our Racial Justice Office, Jennie Taylor has highlighted the injustices that continue to pervade our society and indeed our church in terms of ethnicity. Liverpool has been challenged by the Chair of the Archbishop's Racial Justice Commission, *'Where are the African, Afro-Caribbean' people in our churches and in our leadership?* When we look around this room and look across our churches, these are questions we should all be asking ourselves, along with, what are we doing about it? It isn't enough that we notice – we must act to bring about the change we desire.

In 1948, 75 years ago, our nation called people from the Caribbean countries to relocate to England and help re-build our nation after the World War. Afro-Caribbean's came to what they called the Motherland, and they brought with them a lively Christian faith. Only when they landed, they discovered they were not welcome by the people whose land they had come to help rebuild, neither were they welcome by the Church. And by closing their doors to these siblings from foreign parts, the Church of England shut their doors on the blessing that these are sisters and brothers brought with them. Ever since, our church has been declining whilst the Pentecostal churches have been growing exponentially.

We have work to do to make amends for this, and for the legacy of the Trans-Atlantic enslavement of people, which impact our society, still today. I commend the work of the Triangle of Hope and the Slavery and Truth Project ... and with our Racial Justice Officer now in situ, bringing together our racial justice vision and strategy, perhaps for the first time, we are really in a position to make a difference.

Last Sunday, I met a faithful woman from UKME heritage who was well into her 70s. Her dad and siblings had all been pastors. I asked her if she'd ever thought of being a teacher of the faith! She pondered for a moment before laughing and saying, 'I'm far too old now!'. The invitation had come to late! I wonder, how many vocations have we/are we missing, simply by not having conversations and asking the right questions.

Diocesan Synod

March 2023

DS23(12)



The body of Christ is broken and it feels very heavy-laden. The conversations around LLF that have emerged since the General Synod in February, are causing so much fear and anxiety. For some, there is no trust in our bishops (I don't want to know how many times in the past 6 weeks, I've been banished to Hell's fire!).

Friends, we are more aware, today, of difference, and the complexities of what it is to be human and of the importance of justice and righteousness. It is wrong that anyone should find themselves not welcome in our churches because of their skin colour, their residency status, the disabilities they live with, their neuro-diversity, their accent, age, their social status, their gender or identity, is it!

Thanks to the work of LLF, Christians from across all denominations of the Church, are acknowledging that the treatment of LGBTI people has been wrong. And there is repentance. But the reparatory work – that Jenny and the Racial Justice Commission has highlighted for us, of how we live in love and faith continues.

The Next Steps Group were tasked by General Synod to bring revised commended prayers and Pastoral Guidance back to the July Synod, where they will be examined and voted - either for or against. Nobody knows what the outcome will be – what we do know is there is a lot of fear and anxiety and premature positioning. The bishops will be meeting several times between now and July, in order to bring the proposals to Synod.

I'd like to publicly thank the people who have been in touch with me about their concerns and those with whom I have been able to meet up with, with Bishop Rob Munro, Bishop of Ebbsfleet and Hon Asst Bishop of this diocese. I'm immensely grateful to Bishop Rob for his collegiality. These are really unsettling and weighty times - because we care and we take seriously Christ's call to love one another, to hold to the unity, to test his voice... to look deeply at the Scripture and the teaching and we're discoursing about things that significantly impact the lives of individuals and the church. But friends, we are called to such a time as this.

When I'm tempted to walk away, I'm reminded of Cleopas who walked away, and of Jesus meeting him and enabling him to see things differently so that Cleopas was able to return to his rightful place among the disciples. The fracturing of the Church was a significant concern of Jesus throughout his earthly ministry.

I would like to thank all who have accepted my call and committed themselves to praying this Lent for the unity of our church and this diocese and all who've joined the Wednesday night prayer gatherings on Zoom.

With the very many things that weigh on your heart and mind, I ask you to hold fast to prayer and worship, to mutual collegiality and to the Word of God as revealed in the Holy Scriptures.

Let's commit afresh to serving Christ as we walk together as the people of God; introducing people to Jesus, deepening discipleship; raising up new leaders and doing justice. And please, especially in this season of Lent, make time and find space to refresh and restore your soul, finding your rest and restoration in the gentle God who is lowly of heart.

In Jesus' name. Amen.