

Friends, good morning. Let me begin with a quotation; I'll tell you later where it comes from. Here it is:

"I pray that your hearts will never grow cold to the love of God and that the Holy Spirit would forever pour His love into your hearts that you might be instruments of peace and justice."

It's very good to be with you. In a couple of weeks it will be April 1, the day last year when I was interviewed by the Crown Nominations Commission for ministry in this role. You may feel that the date was particularly appropriate...

But I know how much the Diocese was praying at that time and in my own prayers I regularly ask God that I may be worthy of your trust and of the responsibility I've been given here.

Since my Installation in mid-November I've sought to meet and to engage with as many as possible: I'm seeing clergy in chapter groups for breakfast at bishop's Lodge; at the recent Churchwardens' day I met the majority of our wardens and was able to share ideas with them and to listen to them. I've begun a schedule of visits to our parish churches, church plants and fresh expressions, schools and chaplaincies and I intend to be with you all over time.

I say this to emphasise that it's very good to be here and to be visible. I take very seriously the theological and pastoral fact that I share the cure of souls with every parish priest in the Diocese and through them with every church council and every licensed minister. And I pray for you all daily, believing as I do that this is the most important single thing I can do for you as your bishop.

I come to a Diocese with a seasoned and owned direction and vision; a direction which I have considered and admired for many years and which, in my time as a national policy adviser, I regularly commended to others in the Church nationally and internationally. As I have said on many occasions, I was not the Bishop who developed the Bishop's Growth Agenda, but it is my agenda now and I am wholly committed to inhabiting it and, together with you, to developing it further. Later in this Synod meeting we'll look at some of the emerging ideas for making our journey lighter and swifter and for clearing away some of the things that can tire and discourage the churches. But the direction is clear.

And as I begin here I want to pay tribute to my colleagues whose wisdom and friendship have surrounded me for the past few months. Members of Synod will know that Bishop Richard and Archdeacon Ricky have been unwell over the last few weeks and I ask you to pray for them as they recover their strength and prepare to return to work. You will have heard the recent news of Archdeacon Peter's plans for retirement, and though there will be plenty of opportunity in the coming months to thank him for all he has contributed to the life of the Diocese, I want on this occasion to pay tribute to the friendship and guidance he's given me, together with that of all the Core Group, Bishop's Council and Team Meeting.

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In short, as a Diocese and as a Synod we are on the way together, and although I'm sure God will have many surprises in store for us as the journey unfolds, we know the direction in which we are heading.

As the Church of England we have two compass points: firstly the living God as seen in Jesus Christ and known by his Spirit, the living God who never changes; and secondly the people of England whom we are called to serve and whose life and beliefs and culture is changing very quickly. It is by orienting ourselves to the unchanging God, and by shaping ourselves to serve and love this fast-changing England, that we set the compass for our common life in these days.

Many of you will know, and have seen on many occasions, the two gestures I use to sketch out our direction and our purpose. Firstly, we are called at this time to be on the edge and underneath. On the edge and underneath. No longer - if we ever were - to be in the middle and at the top. We are called to stand where our Lord stood and where the first disciples stood, on the edge of our society and underneath, oriented to the unchanging love of God for the poor, extending the table of the poor Christ into every street, every workplace and every home. Only there - only if we stoop low enough - can we see the face of God.

Secondly, we are called to hold together the growth of the Church in faith, in numbers and in discipleship, with the absolute demand to be there for the poor, the needy, the despised and the victims of injustice.

So often in the past these things have been seen as alternatives or as opponents. But I don't want to see a piece of paper slipped between them. We grow a bigger church to make a bigger difference - a difference in the lives of every person who comes to know Jesus Christ, and a difference in the life of a society which daily draws closer to the values, virtues and grace of the Kingdom of God.

With this in mind I've sought to speak out for those in food poverty and for those seeking asylum. With this in mind I've called the Bishop's Growth Conference for later this year so that we can learn together how to make new disciples. With this in mind I wholeheartedly support the LifeCall programme, bringing the challenge and the joy of vocation to so many people; please check the details on the website and do what you can to encourage people to come to one or other of its events.

We are together on the road, which as you will remember is the root meaning of the word "Synod". The road for the Church of England over the past few years has brought us face to face with our own diversity and our own disagreements, and it looks as if that road will wind on for a while yet. It seems to me that the call on our life is not simply to disagree well, to disagree without being disagreeable. That is necessary, but it is not sufficient. The call on our life is to be open to conversion, to make room for the other in our deepest heart, to be prepared to ask God to change us. This is true whether we classify ourselves as conservative, or progressive, or by any other label. Readiness to engage with

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other people and readiness to be changed by the encounter - that's the gift we may have to give the world in this season of our common life. To approach questions and decisions in this spirit is to be genuinely distinctive in a shrill world.

I spent time this week with Jenny Sinclair, daughter of Bishop David and Grace Sheppard, talking about the project "Together for the Common Good" which she leads together with Hilary Russell and others. Jenny said that this project comes to conversations with no strength of its own, with no clutch of right answers, but with readiness to make a space for conversation between people who may not normally be in the same room together. I felt, and said, that this was a profoundly Christian and evangelistic contribution to our politics and our common life.

In this Diocese we will enter the public square confidently but our tone of voice will be gentle and humble, even when we see rank injustice and seek to oppose it. We will do so as a family of growing and confident congregations, freely living on the edge and underneath, unashamedly holding together the making of new disciples and the recognising and ushering-in of the Kingdom. As I see it, this is our call.

This is no new call, though we hear it in a new era. The words of the prayer with which I began were the final words of Bishop James in his final Presidential Address. I am deeply proud to follow him, and Bishop David before him, in speaking to our Synod as its President. And the final words of this Address are the words with which he ended, and with which we will all begin:

So I pray that our hearts will never grow cold to the love of God and that the Holy Spirit would forever pour His love into our hearts that we might be instruments of peace and justice."