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## **Will we be in good heart ready for the next Bishop of Liverpool?**

The last time I stood before Synod I was giving thanks for the ministry of Bishop James and urging us all to keep a sense of focus if we are to make sure that the next Diocesan inherits a diocese in good heart. Now I stand before you knowing that like it or not you're stuck with me until we get our next Bishop so we might as well be clear about the direction we are taking over the next year.

This is not going to be a year when we take the foot off the pedal. This is not going to be a year when we shy from the challenging decisions and deliberations. This is not going to be a year when we stand still. For standing still will in effect send us backwards and will throw away our achievements thus far. Our creator God calls us to be creative in all times and at all places and many parishes have shown how an interregnum can be a time of great creativity and growth. So it must be with us.

And you, as members of Synod, will play this part well I am sure. Since I arrived in the Diocese of Liverpool I have been impressed and encouraged with the guidance given by synod in the leadership of our diocese. The robust discussions in this room, the supportive approach and constructive criticism have been an impressive hallmark. It has enabled us to frame better policies and shape creative initiatives. You have held us and the excellent team at St James' House properly to account. And importantly you have done this in the right spirit. A spirit that seeks to enable, empower and equip our parishes in mission – not embroil them in red tape and stifle them with bureaucracy. And long may that continue.

We will discuss today how we intend to continue with the growth agenda. I don't want to go over the detail here but want to make some general observations. Growth should not be confused with success. Success is not an attribute of God – vulnerability is. Growth requires an openness to our own vulnerability because it asks the challenging question: "Where is growth needed?" And, just as Jesus liked to respond by answering questions with yet more questions, we too, quickly discover that the floodgates quickly open to more, searching questions such as: "Is there room for growth?"; "Do I want to grow?" and "what help do I need to grow". It is right that we seriously question whether we have the capacity and the desire for growth. And, of necessity, our starting point must be small and modest.

The metaphors Jesus used for the life of ministry are frequently the images of the single, the small and the quiet which have effects far in excess of their appearance: salt, yeast, seed. We live in a culture that emphasizes the opposite, the big, the noisy and the boastful. We need to clear our minds of noisiness and bustle so that we can discriminate and listen. In Mark's account of the Parable of the Sower he begins and ends with the same word: "Listen!" That is the key to understanding growth. God's word requires careful listening if we are to cultivate a healthy place in which that word of God can grow and flourish for the sake of the world. Growth cannot be taken for granted and the Parable of the Sower is a realistic representation of people's response to Jesus' ministry. There were many who did not respond favourably, those who did - produced remarkable fruit. That has begun to manifest itself in the growth agenda and the successor we will discuss today. So as we stand at this crossroads looking back at what has been and pondering about how our future will shape we should ask where is God to be found today? To paraphrase Pope Francis, God is not found so much in the past, though his footsteps are there, nor in some possible

future although we know He is in the future too. We must remind ourselves that God is truly to be encountered in the world today. The world He created and declared good.

And as we look for God in the world then we must not be blind to the lessons we can learn from other organisations. I was reminded of this when listening to First Church Estates Commissioner: Andreas Whittam Smith speak at the College of Bishops recently. He talked about organisations, and churches, that are innovative, obsessive about learning and with a strong unity of purpose. It affirmed in me that what we are doing here in Liverpool is right. It is purposeful. It is of God. It works. And it heartens me greatly to read that in our latest clergy survey 90% affirm the growth agenda and show an understanding of their role in its delivery.

Our growth agenda is one that works. One that, by the grace of God, has led us to be a growing diocese in numbers, in discipleship and in service. One that has seen us grow on Sundays and in the week. One that has seen us develop fresh expressions of worship whilst strengthening the traditions of our church.

And I am heartened, as I am sure the next Bishop will be, to know that this is being achieved across the breadth of our church traditions. All are playing their part and that despite our differing theologies and perspectives we do work together; at this Synod, in our Deaneries, our teams, our groups and our clusters; for the glory of God and to follow his great commission.

Jesus' parable of the Shrewd Manager, recounted in Luke, is a sharp reminder of the need to act speedily when the situation demands. Sometimes in the life of the church we lull ourselves into the false security of believing that we don't have to act or change because we play a "long game". The temptation to think that parish ministry is a steady sort of trade to ply is the lie we must talk ourselves out of. Complacency is a great enemy and these are challenging times. Times that require critical actions. Jesus constantly reminds us of the urgency of the coming of God's Kingdom into our world. This requires us to take bold steps if we are to learn how to welcome God.

The proper response to our gospel is to get on with it and to take risks. Playing safe is not what I seek and I hope you will not try to trap yourselves into some past pattern of ministry or some pre-conceived notion of how church should be based on what it was. Nostalgia is a very disabling affliction!

So I would like to emphasise the urgency and scale of the challenges we face.

We face a challenge around our buildings. We need mission shaped buildings that enable us to witness and worship in a way that is relevant to today's culture and respectful of our rich inheritance. Yet too many of our buildings are broken, where the leaks and the draughts impede our welcome and distract us from our true calling. We need to make difficult and often painful decisions. Whilst mindful of our duty as custodians to some of the finest buildings in the region, we cannot allow the architecture to dominate our mission. We have to be realistic. We have to get off the treadmill where building matters dominate every PCC meeting, swallow our resources and impede our mission.

We need to face the fact that none of us is getting any younger, and while it may be a small consolation for some of us to know those around us are getting older we cannot smugly sit back and make our churches the comfortable places for us and our friends. That would be neglect. The quickest and easiest way to close our churches is to do nothing and wait to grow old gracefully, leaving the last one out to switch off the lights.

We already see the signs, most noticeably in the ageing money, which props up much of parish finance. The research we have before us is our largest giving base comes from the older members of our congregation. For whatever reason the younger end doesn't get it. Or we don't get them. But we must find ways to grow our giving base. We must maintain our good levels of parish share. We must continue to resource the mission and ministry of all our parishes. We cannot allow ourselves to abandon the tough areas because they don't

have the ability to be self-sustaining. We are all part of the kingdom and we must be working to bring the kingdom to all.

So we need to think seriously about how we promote that sense of faithful, sacrificial Christian giving that is so lovingly modelled by the older generation. In a world where our message competes with the highly sophisticated, polished charity campaigns we need to regain the notion that giving to and through church is a vital part of our witness. Happily, that is understood by many. Indeed the church nationally has a higher level of committed givers than any other body. But it needs to be understood by more. And we are not after an unachievable target. A small increase in the giving of say a £2.50 to £3 per week - that's the price of a cup of coffee (some may prefer comparisons to be pints of beer) - but that increase by every individual church member in every parish would raise over £2.5m extra a year. Easily enough to support the ministry of fifty full time church leaders.

It is leaders we need. It is my desire to see every worshipping community being led by a named leader. We need to cast the net wide and we need to be creative in the way we make appointments. We cannot rely solely on the clergy - not least as we know 40% of our clergy will retire in the next ten years. We must be creative in the way we identify, train, support and deploy leaders. We need leaders who are missional. We need those who can relate well and authentically to their local communities with hearts to love and serve. We need the risk takers, the doers, the entrepreneurs. But we also need the pastors, carers and the theologians.

I applaud, commend and give thanks to God for all those hearing God's LifeCall and responding by offering themselves in service. It is every single Christian's responsibility to encourage those with a sense of vocation to do something about it.

The whole idea of vocation implies a response to a call. If we are to live up to our vocation then we must go on listening to the voice of God. It is not a goal to pursue, it is a calling which we hear. There are many ways in which that can work and we must not limit ourselves to the narrowest preconception of vocation that says it's ordination or nothing. If we are to live out the Gospel in a meaningful way for our communities then we must continue to redefine what it means to be a leader.

And that is what the local missional leader idea is about. The notion, as Archdeacon Ricky puts it, that we can take the stable, able, available and trainable giving them the skills and support to lead a community in mission, has got to be one worth pursuing. Because we cannot keep piling the pressure on the existing workers and expect them to be able to harvest more and more. I have concerns about the spiritual, work life balance of a number of our committed Christians. We need people to feel they don't have to subscribe to a 24/7 culture of working in order to achieve our objectives. We need to set out appropriate boundaries so that everyone can benefit from the God given Sabbath. We will not achieve our objectives and at the expense of a host of stressed, worn out Christians.

But we will only have successful leaders if we can help them become full mature, confident disciples able to explode with the joy of loving and serving Christ and infecting those around us with that enthusiastic spirit. It strikes me that we can only do this if we bring the bible alive in our hearts, our lives and our communities. This why I will be issuing a challenge to every church; parish; school; community; and individual on Bible Sunday. A challenge to bring the bible alive. To engage with scripture afresh. To delve into the parts you haven't been before. To wrestle with it. Have fun with it. Retell it. It is not a course of a programme and I really don't mind how you do it or what you do. Just read your Bible. I have a desire to see every church, school, community in our diocese proclaiming that they are bringing the Bible Alive.

It is scripture that calls us to serve and love one another. It is the consistent message of God's love and concern for all His creation that drives us to call for social justice. That shows us outpouring our love through the support we give to Foodbanks, to Credit Unions,

to debt advice and to the myriad of good works that happen day in day out in every parish across our diocese. And long may that continue.

These are challenging times. We live in a post-Christian age and the gentle attrition of decline has afflicted all our churches for the best part of a century. But we must remember that the veneer of Christianity was often very thin. So we must never despair of ourselves or of our Church.

We have shown in our diocese that we have a creative vein and beating heart. We have a unity of purpose and a desire to love and serve. We are a learning diocese. I was asked to share the Liverpool story with the college of Bishops and the story I told was one in which I not only highlighted what we had done, but also what we would have done if we had our time again. I believe this is important. To learn from reflection, to learn from each other, to learn from the past as we reach for the future, and above all - to live joyously, hopefully and faithfully in our present.

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