

Bishop Stephen's Presidential Address to Synod February 24

Thank you for being here today and for the travel involved. I am well aware the distances for some and the time commitment you make today. I seem to be doing a thousand miles a month across the diocese. It is Lent of course, so I shall be coming round at lunchtime to check your sandwich boxes in order to make sure that you are not over-indulging. That said, I've forgotten my lunch so as I haven't given anything up for Lent yet, all contributions will be gratefully received. Our middle son Sam religiously gives up turkey during Lent as he knows he only gets it once a year. Blessed are those who hunger and thirst for righteousness, for they will be filled. One of the better things about being a bishop is licensing new clergy into a parish. It makes the travelling round really worthwhile. Last Sunday I was in Wareham for one such wonderful occasion. As always, in the Licensing Service, I get to read the Preface of the Declaration of Assent. We don't hear it enough.

The Church of England is part of the One, Holy, Catholic, and Apostolic Church, worshipping the one true God, Father, Son, and Holy Spirit. It professes the faith uniquely revealed in the Holy Scriptures and set forth in the catholic creeds, which faith the Church is called upon to proclaim afresh in each generation. Led by the Holy Spirit, it has borne witness to Christian truth in its historic formularies, the Thirty-nine Articles of Religion, The Book of Common Prayer and the Ordering of Bishops, Priests and Deacons. In the declaration you are about to make, will you affirm your loyalty to this inheritance of faith as your inspiration and guidance under God in bringing the grace and truth of Christ to this generation and making Him known to those in your care?

I'm so glad that the Church of England has come into line with the Diocese of Salisbury in the last line, making him known to those in your care. With New Testament in hand, our clergy commit themselves to the church in this land, to their bishop, and to the monarch as a sign of our calling to receive the cure of souls of everyone in each parish, not just who come to church. It is a calling equally of service and evangelism.

Diocesan Synods exist to bring us together in fulfilling this vocation. Today we consider many things to do with the life of the church, but they are all servant to our calling – internal matters which are about bringing the grace and truth of Christ to this generation.

Our new vision and strategy is gaining momentum. In the Wareham Team Ministry they say about themselves, "Our Vision for the parish of Wareham is to show God's love and to make Jesus known." We are beginning to see what this looks like. The branding exercise, which was paid for by the national church, is not about corporate modelling but about identity, it's about seeing Jesus, about the freshness of the good news and after huge consultation, it's about the outside not the inside. Our visual identity is a key part of delivering Christ's mission.

The new share scheme, a subject we all love, is seeking to respond to our post-pandemic challenges and to be fair. No one is under any illusion of the serious challenges we face, especially financially, but if we cannot remove the deficit that besets us, our mission will end.

We will consider the vocation and responsibilities of Churchwardens – across the diocese we are over 90 churchwardens short. We need to re-invigorate this historic role and make it fun again.

We will excite ourselves with forthcoming elections – contain yourselves – but this too is missional because we need to represent here and elsewhere the breadth and diversity of the communities we serve. Recently, in a nearby diocese, the question was asked in a synod why we need to bother with such woke items when 98% of the population is white anglo-saxon. The

response pointed out that meant 2% are not, which is double the number of people in our churches. Put this together with our national aspirations for a younger and more diverse church, and we have a post-pandemic challenge of generational proportions. We need our structures to reflect the society we are called to serve with the skill sets and gifting to work together for what God tells us is both yours and mine.

We'll cheer ourselves up with news from our amazing schools, very much the hope fulfilled of our times. My favourite thing is school visits – its where I find the greatest faithfulness and witness, where I find the greatest unity and professionalism. If it wasn't Lent, I'd say Alleluia.

And then today, we will reflect upon our recent safeguarding audit, the very first of any diocese under the new process. We can never be pleased or content when it comes to safeguarding but we can be pastoral and professional and, in our team, and in the audit report, we have much to be thankful for.

These things and more are all about enabling mission and ministry in our localities, lay and ordained, as we seek to find a new future, not for the Church of England alone, but for Christ's mission and ministry in this generation.

My friends, the Good News in Jesus Christ is too good and too important not to be made known. Evangelism is not a formula; it is sharing the person. The gospel is not a What, it is a Who. The gospel is a person, the one who stood before us as a living person, the Word made flesh. This means the gospel has to be about encounter, not just proclamation which so easily becomes shouting, but about relationship. Jesus is what he teaches. He is the good news. Everything about Jesus is everything about God. If the gospel is a person, then evangelism is an invitation to meet this person. What we need, above everything else, isn't more things, more stuff, but a relationship, a living connection, with our creator and judge, our beginning, and our end.

This relationship is real because relationship is at the heart of God. The Trinity isn't an 'it', it's a who. Three-in-one, pure love. And if God is personal, mutual, and generous relationship by definition, then so should we be because that is what our society is missing. Here is loving-kindness, mercy, grace, understanding, judgement, patience, faithfulness, commitment, sacrificial love and solidarity, rescue and redemption, salvation, and a thousand new starts.

Chris Russell, the Archbishops Adviser on Evangelism and Witness, writes powerfully about during the Covid-19 pandemic at its most deadly, we faced the fact that we were a mortal danger to one another; it was quite possible we could infect a loved one with a deadly virus. Some must have done. The lasting reality though is that the human race has always been incurably lost and infectious. We can't be vaccinated against it; we cannot cure ourselves. Sin is an infectious disease. I still see the impact of the pandemic upon the life of our church, and the impact of all types of sin is sadly plain to see and hear. The good news is that, in Jesus Christ, God has done what we could not do. A saviour has come for our healing. In him we are not simply diagnosed but healed. Jesus of Nazareth, the only human not infected with the deadly virus of sin immerses himself in this world where everyone else is a carrier and contaminator. He comes without protective gear and doesn't keep his distance. In fact, the very reason he comes is not simply to diagnose, but to save. He can only do this, though, by freely taking all that we cannot help but carry.

As we do our business today, we would do well to remember that the establishment of the Kingdom can only be built as we follow Jesus in his ways of humility, subversion, companionship, hospitality, acceptance, mercy, challenge, rebellion, sacrifice and love, love,

love. Outposts of the Kingdom are most apparent among those whom Jesus has always chosen to spend time with the poor, the marginalised, and those who have no hope apart from God. My hope and prayer for today is that we can be a subset of this Kingdom – to serve it, celebrate it, embody it, enable it, and proclaim it.

The Lord be with you.