

# Exeter Diocesan Synod Presidential Address

by the Right Reverend Robert Atwell, *Bishop of Exeter*



9<sup>th</sup> October 2021

In the days before cut price airlines and cheap flights made exotic destinations within reach of the masses, the only way to cross the Atlantic was by ship. To the anxious and those sailing on a liner for the first time, the advice was simple: don't venture into the engine room. Being a member of Diocesan Synod is a bit like visiting the engine room of the Church of England, or at least of the Diocese of Exeter. You are no longer passengers: you are crew. And the safety of the ship depends on the members of the crew understanding how the engine of the Diocese works so that our parishes flourish because that's what it's all about. Changing the course of a great liner isn't easy, but it can be done if crew and engineers work together and if everyone takes responsibility for their part. So today, as a new triennium begins, let us pray for the guidance of the Holy Spirit so that we navigate the ark of God with confidence particularly when, as at present, we find ourselves sailing through choppy waters. Welcome on-board sisters and brothers.

The pandemic has changed just about every aspect of life over the last 18 months. On Wednesday I was preaching at a service of Welcome and Reflection for the University of Exeter, as staff and students recover from what has been the most challenging time in the history of the university. On Sunday week, I will be preaching in the Cathedral again, this time at a service for the NHS, as we give thanks for the extraordinary dedication of NHS staff during the pandemic. The majority of us may now be double-vaccinated, but the virus hasn't gone away. We are not out of the woods and we do not know what the winter will bring. We are discovering what living with this virus means for us as individuals, for the Church of God and for our world.

Coming out of this pandemic is proving harder than going into it. Reservoirs of anxiety bubble up to the surface from time to time and erupt in outbursts of fear and anger. Our High Streets have seen the closure of Debenhams, Laura Ashley and a host of retailers. We grieve their demise, but we continue to shop online not only because it's more convenient but because many feel it's safer that way. One Exeter retailer compared the situation to a fire alarm going off. He said, 'When the fire alarm goes off, everyone gets out immediately. That's the easy part. The hard part is to get everyone back in.' The same is true of Church. Our churches are open and functioning, but will people come back? Will they prefer to

worship online because it's more convenient and safer? And what will the financial knock-on effect be if people don't come back?

It won't surprise you to know that uncertainty will feature prominently in our discussion of diocesan finances this morning. For the last two years we have operated with a million-pound deficit and next year we are looking at a deficit of £1.2 million. So far, we've managed to keep afloat with financial support from the National Church and from the Government's furloughing scheme. We've sold assets, borrowed money and cut costs. Thanks to the prudent management of diocesan reserves over many years, we are coping, but the situation is unsustainable long-term. As the parish treasurers among you know, the same issues and the same uncertainty is affecting just about every parish in Devon. It is why, as we try to look years ahead, it is impossible to make firm predictions about the numbers of stipendiary clergy we can afford. There are worst case scenarios and there are best case scenarios, and where we end up will depend on the level of our recovery from the pandemic. There are plenty of doom and gloom merchants around, not least on social media. Whatever our feelings, can I make a plea that we try to keep things in perspective. God is not bankrupt, and the Almighty is not going into liquidation.

### **Devon Pilgrim**

As I reflect on the last few months, I continue to give thanks for the vitality of our churches. You will see this for yourselves in the short films we will be watching, notably the visit of the Archbishop of Canterbury four weeks ago to Feniton and Alfington in thanksgiving for the life and witness of Bishop John Coleridge Patteson. Bishop Patteson took the Gospel to Melanesia and last month marked the 150<sup>th</sup> anniversary of his martyrdom. I'm sure you know that the pulpit in the Cathedral is carved with images of his martyrdom.

The Archbishop inaugurated 'Patteson's Way', one of several pilgrimage routes we have launched this year in the Diocese to encourage committed Christian and intrigued tourist alike to explore the potential of their spirituality. This afternoon we will watch the film *Devon Pilgrim* which the *Growing the Rural Church* team has made to promote this initiative and hopefully bring a raft of new people to visit our network of rural churches and grow in their understanding of what it means to be a disciple of Jesus Christ. The challenge, as always, is how to turn visitors into pilgrims, and pilgrims into disciples. Words of the prophet Jeremiah come to mind: 'Stand at the crossroads and look, and ask for the ancient paths, where the good way lies; and walk in it, and you will find rest for your souls' (Jeremiah 6.16).

### **Next Steps**

Those who go on pilgrimage invariably find themselves treading ancient paths. People have gone before us and we can see their tracks. In a desert, however, there are no paths except the ones we make by walking on them. And that experience is closer to the reality of our current situation as we emerge from this pandemic. We are feeling our way forward, one step at a time and there is no obvious map to guide us. With St Paul, we are walking by faith, not by sight.

Over the last 18 months, most of our parishes and mission communities have revealed their extraordinary resilience, but in truth even our largest churches feel fragile and apprehensive about the future. It is why, as a Diocese, it is time for us to take stock so that we emerge from the shadow of this pandemic with a clear sense of direction and a realistic plan for how to get there. We need God's guidance more than ever so that we move forward in a way that is both creative and sustainable.

The *Next Steps* document that you have all received and read, and its accompanying film 'God's Vineyard', represents the crystallisation of our collective learning to date. The document is not a narrative of panic or some new vision I dreamed up in my spare time. It is a reaffirmation of the journey we have been on as a Diocese for the last twenty years in our attempt to create strong and sustainable mission communities. The document is what it says: simply the next steps on the journey and our discussion today represents an important cairn along the way.

The document draws on the Listening in Deaneries consultation, 'For Such A Time As This', carried out last year and the work of the Theological Reflections Group, a group of clergy and laity from across the Diocese who met during lockdown. It incorporates feedback from last May's Diocesan Synod on the Church of England's Emerging Vision for this decade and what I personally learnt at first-hand during my online visits to every deanery chapter earlier this year.

With so many rural parishes, we have also drawn on the wisdom garnered in the excellent 'Lightening the Load' toolkit and have consulted our *Growing the Rural Church* team. All these tributaries are feeding into our collective thinking. So far, no less than 427 people from across our four archdeaconries have participated in a series of consultations with more to come. What is emerging is a Big Conversation about what God is calling us to be and to do here in Devon. As you might guess, we are hearing a mixture of enthusiasm and exhaustion, of hope and anxiety, of realism and, in some quarters, cynicism. It was ever thus. But let's be clear: there are real choices about the direction of travel before us.

## **To live is to change**

It's a long time since I did my biology 'A' level, but I remember being taught about 'irritability'. In biology, the term refers to an organism's capacity to respond to external stimuli. Put simply, an organism which exhibits no response to stimuli is deemed dead. Change irritates, and how we respond to change is a mark of liveliness. In the words of Cardinal Newman, 'To live is to change, and to be perfect is to have changed often.'

Sadly, when it comes to Church, not changing is often the preferred option because it makes so few demands. Inertia is always attractive, even if death-dealing. By contrast, change irritates. It is painful, if ultimately life-giving. And this is the crossroads where we find ourselves, along with just about every other organisation, institution and shop on the High Streets of England. We're going through a period of profound change and adjustment. Not everyone likes it and there are some who actively resist it. But for good or ill, it's where we're at. I am reminded of the words of Moses to the people of Israel, as they emerged from the wilderness and faced the scary prospect of crossing the Jordan and entering the Promised Land: 'See, I set before you life and death, blessing and curses. Choose life so that you and your descendants may live' (Deut. 30.19). We have choices. I hope we will choose life.

## **Save the parish**

Those of you who read the *Church Times* or follow things on social media will be familiar with the 'Save the Parish' campaign. One of its perennial targets is the dreaded 'diocesan centre'. Let's slash the diocesan staff and save money, goes the cry. I cannot speak for other dioceses, but I can assure you that this Diocese runs a very tight ship under Stephen Hancock, our outstanding Diocesan Secretary. As I said in my presidential address in March but repeat now for the benefit of those of you who are newly elected, in the last twelve months we have taken out no less than nine posts from our Diocesan Team to save money. To put it bluntly, capacity at the centre is now very limited indeed.

Here are some of the choices behind the on-going rhetoric. Do we want no one to pay the stipends of our clergy? Do we want no one to field safeguarding concerns when an issue arises in your parish or chaplaincy? Do we want to stop support for our 134 church schools? Do we want no one to train our ordinands, readers and lay ministers? Do we want untrained and untaught clergy and lay leaders? Do we want no one to answer the phone or field your email when you contact the Archdeacon or the Bishop's office in a panic? Because when it comes to the Diocesan budget, these are the choices before us. As far as I am concerned, I

want to pay tribute to our hard-working diocesan staff who not only do loads of unpaid overtime but see their work as their Christian vocation. They are just as important as anyone in authorized ministry, and they deserve our support and encouragement for their own ministry.

In one of the archdeaconry consultations, someone said (and I don't know whether this was a clergy person or lay representative) that they had read the *Next Steps* document and watched the *God's Vineyard* film twice, but they still didn't know what it was all about. So, for the avoidance of doubt, let me spell it out in one sentence. *Next Steps* is about saving the parish. And the best way of saving our parishes is to grow the Church. And we grow the Church by going deeper into God in prayer, by being committed to evangelism and making new disciples. The best way of proclaiming the Gospel is for each of us to live it, so that people see Jesus Christ living in us, in all his majesty and beauty. This is how we make a difference in the world. It is how we serve the people of Devon with joy.

And please don't plead poverty of resources or say that your parish is too small and weak to make a difference. As Verena, the new Archdeacon of Barnstaple, said in her inaugural sermon in Bideford three weeks ago, 'Amazing things can happen in small parishes'.

### **Mission Communities**

The *Next Steps* document sets out the way ahead for the next three years. As I said, its focus is the strengthening and reinvigorating of our network of mission communities. The document sets out a vision for this, but the strategy and the detail has to be worked out on the ground locally because our mission communities are so diverse. For twenty years now, we have talked about mission communities as a way of bringing churches, chaplaincies, church schools, church plants and fresh expressions together into a cohesive team. The rationale of this drive for collaboration is to maintain, support and grow a Christian presence in as many places as possible across the county.

A mission community is about providing support for struggling churches and congregations. It's about fostering teamwork with clergy and laity working together in partnership, rather than asking exhausted clergy to do yet more. It's about developing a range of ministry, recognising that different ministries suit different people and different situations, and because lay volunteers get exhausted too. As I say with boring regularity at the induction of every new parish priest in this Diocese: lone rangers are heroic, but they are not effective in generating the change that leads to long-term growth. That requires teamwork.

When I was talking to the owner of the vineyard in Winkleigh where we shot the film, he explained the impact of the different seasons on the vines and how pruning always takes place in winter when the sap of the vine is at its lowest. Are there things you are doing in your mission community which are beyond their sell-by-date that need to stop, so that you can give energy to other things? Now may be a time for doing fewer things better rather than doing more things and getting exhausted in the process.

I was also struck by the notion of *terroir*, and the way that the same variety of grape will yield differently according to the *terroir* of a vineyard. Applied to our Diocese, it's an image of fruitfulness and diversity, a recognition that one size does not fit all, that solutions have to be worked out locally according to the *terroir* and bedded into the local context. In terms of mission and ministry, and the number and maintenance of your church buildings, only you can decide what is sustainable for you locally, and what you advise will inform the shape and pace of pastoral reorganisation over the next three years.

And so, to the business in hand.

This morning we are going to focus on three aspects of the *Next Steps* document and then go into breakout groups to discuss them. We start with Bishop Jackie looking at our **Growth Values**. It is often said that 'culture eats strategy for breakfast'. It is a cliché, but that does not mean it isn't true. We all want the Church to grow. We want to save our parish. But sometimes our very behaviour as Christians militates against it.

The *Church Times* reported about one church where, following morning service, coffee was only served *after* all the visitors had left. So much for welcome. What are the values that underpin the life of your mission community? Because at the end of the day, it will be the values you embody, not church structures, that will forge the identity and reputation of your church and promote the good news of Jesus Christ.

Second into bat will be Archdeacon Andrew who is going to lead us in thinking about **Mixed Ecology** in its various dimensions and how to build up the parish. And finally, Philip Sourbut, our Director of Mission and Ministry, is going to look at how you might undertake a **Mission Community Health Check**. What are the indicators of sustainability? What makes for fruitfulness? In the months ahead, we will be holding webinars and sharing examples of good practice in our mission communities so that we can build a culture of learning from one another.

‘See, I set before you, life and death, blessing and curses. Choose life so that you and your descendants may live.’ It is my strong conviction that now is the time not only to deal with the challenges that this pandemic has thrown up, but also to grasp the unexpected opportunities it has created. To sit on our hands and do nothing will be disastrous. The Church is a voluntary organisation. I cannot force you to do anything you don’t want to do. But, as members of the Diocesan Synod, what I can do is to encourage you to be advocates in your own mission community for revitalising it.

If we are to get anywhere today, then it is vital that we are honest with one another. And honesty includes unearthing our fears, as well our sharing our hopes and ideas. And that demands gentleness. Let’s be mindful of the words of the Irish poet W. B. Yeats:

*I, being poor, have only my dreams;  
I have spread my dreams under your feet;  
Tread softly because you tread on my dreams*

The picture on the front cover of the *Next Steps* document is of stepping-stones across a river. I chose the picture for a reason. Crossing the river does not require a pole vault or some heroic leap of faith. It is about taking one step at a time. So, let’s tread softly today. And as we journey on in faith and love, let us entrust the past to God’s mercy, the present to his grace, and the future to his guidance.

+ Robert Exon