



AD CLERUM

Advent 2022

Dear Colleagues,

Cyril of Alexandria is not one of the most attractive of God's saints, but he could write with extraordinary lucidity. He described prayer as 'keeping company with God'. He saw it as a relationship, a dialogue between Creator and created which matures into a conversation between friends. He said that our relationship with God can falter because 'people easily become enclosed in their mortal bodies like a snail in its shell, curled up in their obsessions after the manner of hedgehogs. They form their notion of God's blessedness by taking themselves for a model.' According to St Cyril, God is encountered not as an object to be understood, but as a mystery to be loved.

Advent will be at its longest this year: a full four weeks with Christmas Day falling on a Sunday. It is a season of expectancy, a time of watching and waiting on God, a time for letting go of our obsessions and uncurling ourselves. Frustratingly, when it comes to prayer, God is adept at playing hide and seek. One minute it feels as if God is there, the next minute it feels he is not. The poet Ann Lewin likens prayer to sitting on a riverbank, watching for a glimpse of a kingfisher:

Prayer is like waiting for the
Kingfisher. All you can do is
Be where he is likely to appear, and
Wait.

It is hard to stop Advent drifting into an anticipated Christmas. It certainly finds its resolution in the birth of Jesus, but this year we have the chance to honour it as a season in its own right. Which leads me to reflect on the wisdom of another saint whose feast day falls on 14th December in the dark time of the year: St John of the Cross.

John talks a lot about 'darkness' and 'night' though not in a negative way. He uses night as a metaphor for the space God carves out in each of us for the gift of himself. Night signals the emptiness God needs to pour himself into us. Believe, trust, love, says John, and you are receiving the gift of God.

If Christianity is merely a human enterprise, then the darkness and sadness we each encounter in our journey through life will be just that – darkness. But saints like John of the Cross encourage us to re-label these bewildering episodes as places of transformation.

When a caterpillar pupates, nothing seems to be happening, but inside a butterfly is being constructed. Spiritual metamorphosis may be too strong an image to describe what can be a succession of profoundly disorienting and painful experiences. But at least it reminds us that discipleship is a process of growth, and that prayer is a

journey into God. And as John of the Cross reminds us, there are good things to be discovered in the darkness.

Clergy Quiet Days

Next year I will once again be hosting a series of Quiet Days for licensed clergy in the Cathedral and Palace to 'keep company with God'. In a large diocese such as ours, these days offer a chance to renew contact with colleagues whom we seldom see as well as providing an opportunity for prayer and reflection. Lunch is provided. I will be revisiting the prophet Jonah and speaking on the spirituality of bewilderment, a theme that I first explored three years ago but was thwarted by Covid and the first lockdown. Work on the rebuilding of the Cathedral cloister begins next Spring; so this Lent there will be only **four** days: Wednesday 1st March, Thursday 2nd March, Monday 6th March, Monday 13th March. Please email Sarah Gorman to book your place.

sarah.gorman@exeter.anglican.org.

Living in Love and Faith

In February 2023 proposals about the *Living in Love and Faith* project, which explores questions of identity, sexuality, relationships and marriage, will be presented to the Church of England's General Synod. Conversations have taken place in every diocese, including our own, through the medium of the Living in Love and Faith Course. The College of Bishops has been meeting on a regular basis to reflect on the responses to the Living in Love and Faith Survey, as well as inputs from key groups. At this stage no decisions have been made. Various options are being evaluated in the search for a way forward that acknowledges the diversity of opinion in the Church of England, respects conscience, is generous in its pastoral reach and loyal to our Christian faith. Along with our episcopal colleagues in other dioceses, Bishop Jackie, Bishop James and I would value your prayers. We are in the middle of an intense period of discernment, as together we seek the guidance of the Holy Spirit. We also realise that for some of you, the matters on which we are now focussed are deeply personal, affecting your own relationships, family, friends or ministry. Please know that you are in our prayers. Should you wish to speak to someone in confidence, please know that pastoral support is available. We would encourage you to email: llf@exeter.anglican.org to access it.

Warm Hubs: Warm Welcome

We are all conscious of the pressure on family budgets this Christmas. I know that many of you are already regularly offering warm spaces in your churches and halls, sometimes adapting existing lunch clubs and coffee mornings. Thank you for all you are doing to help people in your community. It's a great opportunity to engage with local people with whom we may not have had much contact. If you have not already done so, you may like to register what you are doing at the [Warm Welcome](#) website, where people can search to find a warm hub in their neighbourhood.

To date, the Diocesan Support Fund has provided over 220 hardship grants to those involved in frontline ministry across the Diocese. Nearly £80,000 has been distributed to help with spiralling costs during the current cost of living crisis. Whilst so many of our churches, schools and mission communities are engaged with providing facilities such as foodbanks, clothes swap-shops and warm hubs, we are absolutely committed to caring for the carers too. If you are still facing difficulty or struggling, please do reach out confidentially to your Archdeacon, who may be able to signpost you to further help and support. There is also information available on the Diocese website [Energy Advice and Support Hub](#).

Finally, if prayer is a journey into God, Christmas is the unceasing journey of God into the centre of our world and the centre of the human heart. The coming of God into our midst brings hope in uncertain times: Emmanuel: God with us. This is the good news that we proclaim this Christmas and it is worth celebrating.

My colleagues on the senior staff join me in wishing you, your friends and families a very happy Christmas.

With my thanks for our partnership in the Gospel,

+ Robert Exon