

Presidential Address Diocesan Synod 15.6.2024

My theme for today's presidential address is encouragement. Encouragement is anything that builds us up, spurs us on, literally gives us courage in our lives and ministry. On Tuesday it was the commemoration of St Barnabas – the son of encouragement. He was my Father in Law's favourite saint, and so I thought of him on Tuesday and how he, as my Father-in-law, had, from the moment I met him, encouraged my ministry. He was a priest and had retired from full time ministry by that point, having been ordained many years and served as a missionary, an incumbent in different parishes, warden of Readers and an author. Early in my ministry he gave me his clerical cloak. The symbolism is not lost --- the passing on of the mantle. I still have it, and wear it from time to time, such as on a cold November morning for a service of Remembrance. And when I wear it, I think of my heritage of faith, and my father in law who encouraged, and spurred me on. And it reminds that encouragement is a habit, something we put on, an attitude. And because it is something we give away; we can clothe others with it.

St Paul writes: 'Encourage one another and build each other up, as indeed you are doing' (1 Thess 5:11).

Please take a moment to do that: in pairs, share one thing that God has done/has happened in the last week that will encourage your neighbour.

2 minutes.

Here are some further encouragements:

- We have a new Diocesan Bishop, The Rt Revd Dr Mike Harrison. The announcement day was joyful, and + Mike is greatly looking forward to joining the diocese in the Autumn. He does have another job to be getting on with at the moment, and he has asked me to continue as Acting Diocesan until his installation. We will share news of a date just as soon as it is confirmed. Here is a video from the announcement day: <https://vimeo.com/956599019>
- National Mission data from 2023 marks a third year of consecutive numerical growth – mirrored in our diocesan stats. Although the numbers attending church, both on a Sunday and through the week, are still below pre pandemic, the growth is significant, and it is really welcome news. The data challenges the oft repeated 'narrative of decline.' Dare we move to a narrative of fruitfulness? I love Roots and Shoots for many reasons, it is a truly encouraging publication week by week, and I love its name – we celebrate the deep roots of our faith, evidenced in the churches, mission communities, schools, chaplaincies, fresh expressions of church: every demonstration of the love of Jesus Christ in and to the world around us - *and* the green shoots of new life. I am going to repeat from my Ad

Clerum the words of the Archbishop, because they are deeply encouraging: ‘This is very welcome news and I hope it encourages churches across the country. I want to thank our clergy and congregations who have shown such faith, hope and confidence over recent years to share the gospel with their communities.’ We will be hearing later about exciting developments in lay training and opportunities for service. I want to encourage the Mission and Ministry team, under the leadership of Preb Ian Bussell – it is good to see Mission Shed getting started again, to see the Mission Community health check being used and making a difference, and now to hear about furthering the reach of lay training and opportunity. We look forward to hearing more in this synod.

- Finance: This will take up a significant part of our meeting today. Our financial situation is challenging, so encouragements are all the more welcome. One mission community in the last fortnight, has contributed an extra £5000 above their common fund request in response to my letter of last Autumn. I can’t tell you how much this generosity and kindness means. Thank you, that really does spur us on.
- The St Boniface awards on Sunday: wonderful testimony of people inspired by God to step out and do amazing things – a pop up church for people who wouldn’t come anywhere near a church service normally and where many needs are met, and people encounter the love and good news of Christ; a hub for young people after school, providing a safe space for them and enabling much needed social connection; a superb safeguarding lead encouraging and enabling a welcoming and safe church environment; a dedicated school governor who knows the difference education can make for a child, ensuring the school’s Christian values permeate every aspect of school life; we heard testimonies to God’s steadfast love and faithfulness in service over many years – sharing and showing the light of Christ, and encouraging others to get involved.
- Ordinations are coming up: Over the past couple of months Bishop James and I have been meeting with those who will be ordained priest next weekend, and I have been meeting with those who will be ordained as deacon on sat 29th. One person told me how her ordination journey started because her vicar simply encouraged her to have a go and don’t worry! Their individual stories of faith and discipleship, of courage in adversity, and of their journey to ordination are deeply inspiring and encouraging.

- Bishop James and I gave you the confirmation challenge last Autumn, which was to book us up, whether you have people or not, and then run a nurture course or a confirmation course ... it has been a delight to see the fruits of your prayers and labours! In fact we have had to bring our partners from the other boat – assistant Bishops Nick, Martin and Mark, to help. Do please continue to do this – and do make it a mission community service so we can all celebrate together.
- Jesus calls us to be salt light, and I wonder if we can see ourselves and the whole church of God across the UK, as an encouragement to the nation during this time of General Election? I hope you received a ‘Pray your part’ booklet, the 21 days of prayer started yesterday and include prayers for all the major themes of our life together such as housing, education, the NHS, family life. Encourage your communities to pray, *and* to take part. I will be chairing a hustings in Exeter on Thursday 27th June hosted by St Petrock’s with a focus on homelessness. I hope the things we discussed round tables last time, gave you ideas – I’m glad we did that then!
- On safeguarding I had an encouraging email this week from, the Anglican Survivors Group. It said this: ‘Each year for the past 7 years we have surveyed over 16000 parishes to check their websites for compliance of "Clearly displaying on the FRONT page of their websites their safeguarding arrangements". Last year your Diocese was 30th out of 40 dioceses we survey with 62% compliance. This year we have noticed a **remarkable improvement** in both the quality of what is displayed and in compliance levels. This year showed 94% compliance and put you equal 3rd. This is the single largest improvement in compliance levels we as a Group have seen. It is clear that much effort must have been made. We spend most of our lives shouting and screaming about bad safeguarding in the Church so this truly makes a pleasant change for us. Please pass on the thanks of survivors to all those who have done this work. As survivors we remember how difficult it was for us to report our abuse, and so it is an important foundation of good safeguarding to us.’ Thank you, everybody.

1 Corinthians 3:6ff ‘I planted, Apollos watered, but God gave the growth ... For we are God’s servants working together.’ In finishing I want to recognise the different seasons of ministry and life – some of you will be sowing seeds, others watering, others seeing fruit and gathering. Each of you here, lay and ordained, elected, appointed, employed, are a sign of encouragement...each of us God’s servants working together in his Kingdom and for his glory, as we Pray, Grow and Serve the people of Devon with Joy.

We take all these encouragements into our meeting today and I finish this address with the Collect of St Barnabas:

Bountiful God, giver of all gifts, who poured out your Spirit upon your servant Barnabas and gave him grace to encourage others; Help us, by his example, to be generous in our judgements and unselfish in our service; through Jesus Christ your Son our Lord, who is alive and reigns with you, in the unity of the Holy Spirit, One God, now and forever. Amen