

## **Presidential Address at Diocesan Synod 12.10.24 County Hall.**

In this presidential address I want to start by reflecting on the past year, and then will be looking ahead.

When we met as a synod a year ago, I was in the Chair for the first time as Acting Bishop of Exeter, and it was a week after the devastating attacks of the seventh of October 2023. This is what I said:

‘It is just a week ago that news began to break of a huge breach of Israeli defences by Hamas. The violence since then, over this past week, has been brutal and shocking. Our Archbishops have called for prayer, and for restraint on all sides. Archbishop Hosam, who many of us will know, along with other Christian leaders in Jerusalem, said: ‘We extend our hands to all those who suffer and we pray that the Almighty may grant comfort to the afflicted, and wisdom to those in positions of authority ... we implore all to work tirelessly towards an end to violence and the establishment of a just and lasting peace.’ I echo these statements, condemning the violence, and calling for prayer and for restraint. This part of the world, where Jesus lived and walked, is still so terribly troubled. I invite you to join our Archbishops in prayer for all who are suffering in Israel and Gaza, for an end to the violence, and for a just and lasting peace.’

One year on from this, we know that the voices calling for restraint and for a just and lasting peace, have been continually disregarded. And as a result, the world, not just the Middle East, is in a precarious and, for those most affected, perilous situation, including the West Bank and Lebanon.

Other conflicts continue to rage, Ukraine still makes it into our news. Sudan barely does, although the situation there is absolutely appalling. And there are many more areas of great concern – ‘the red lights are all flashing,’ as the former foreign secretary David Cameron said last year. And there is impact at home – witness riots, marches, and the report this week of threats to our home security by the head of MI5.

My main source of news is probably the BBC app. And I notice how the often-bleak headlines, are swiftly followed by the latest news from the Premier League or Strictly Come Dancing. And I understand why. It is hard to bear too much reality, and easy to lose hope.

In that first presidential address, I talked about ‘Leaders as Dealers in Hope’, they are to be a beacon of hope in the most challenging circumstances. This is our core business as a church: to shine with the light and hope of Christ, to shine into the many issues facing the church, society, and the world. As Archbishop Desmond Tutu said: ‘Hope is being able to see there is light, despite all the darkness.’

I was at a licensing service recently, where a new vicar was being installed. Such services are celebrations, giving thanks to God for all that is past and all that lies ahead, praying for this new phase of ministry, commissioning and blessing the people in their love for Jesus and their sharing of his gospel and his love with all those in their neighbourhood. We were well underway, with glorious singing and much rejoicing,

when suddenly during the singing of a hymn, all the lights went out. It was a power cut. We had some candles lit, which was helpful, and then something very wonderful happened. Firstly, everyone kept singing in the dark. They knew the words, and we carried on. Then one by one people got their phones out and lit their torches. For me, looking out from the front, I could hear and see the people of God singing and shining their lights. This is what it is to be people of faith and hope in dark times – we keep singing, we shine with whatever light God gives us.

In that address a year ago I also used the image of a ship to think about the diocese – a large sailing ship, one that needs all hands on deck and where everyone has a role. We have needed to work together over this past year, and I want to thank all of you, and through you to thank your parishes, chaplaincies, schools, and new worshipping communities, for how we have lived this past year together. I have been grateful for your prayers, and for messages of hope and encouragement – thank you. Particular highlights and gathering moments were the Diocesan of Day of Prayer last Advent, the prayer and effort surrounding the appointment process, and the joyful announcement in July that Bishop Mike had been appointed as the next Bishop of Exeter. We gathered at the Cathedral for Maundy Thursday, and for Thy Kingdom Come, and in July we marked, for this diocese, the thirty-year anniversary of women being ordained priests. The celebration at evensong, and the party afterwards in the Palace Garden, I will never forget.

In this Synod we will be hearing more about ways we can all join in and work together as beacons of hope. We will be thinking about safeguarding. I am sure that the chair of the Diocesan Safeguarding Advisory Panel, will say more about the recent audit of the Diocese by INEQE, the safeguarding group, who are conducting reviews of every diocese over the next 4 years to make sure that dioceses and cathedrals are doing all they can to create environments where everyone is safe, valued and respected. I wish to record my thanks to everyone who completed the survey or who has taken part in any way, and especially to the safeguarding team, the bishops office, DSAP, the Bishop's staff team, the Cathedral team and staff, and Old Deanery staff, who have worked so hard over these last months to ensure the audit team have all the information they have requested. Whilst we have not yet received the report, initial feedback tells us that as a diocese we are showing marked progress and improvement in our safeguarding culture, practice, and provision since the last audit (SCIE, 2017-18). It highlights strength of leadership, training, and processes. There will no doubt be recommendations for how we can make what is good even better. We will take these very seriously, and Bishop Mike, as the Diocesan bishop from next month, will lead on this. We expect the report to be published towards the end of November.

It is in just three weeks that we will welcome Bishop Mike and Rachel, with a special service on 2<sup>nd</sup> November. On that morning +Mike will take a pilgrimage that starts in Woolacombe and ends in Exeter for the service, taking in a number of places and people on the way. Bishop Mike comes with much experience of missional leadership, and of encouraging every member of the diocesan family, to use their gifts in serving the

Lord and sharing the gospel with our neighbours in word and action. There are exciting developments in lay discipleship and training starting this Autumn. Under the leadership of Dr Jon Curtis, Lay Discipleship Project Manager, new opportunities for learning and growing in areas of ministry and service are being offered. The Foundations Course is for anyone exploring their gifts and vocation (lay and ordained) and is a mixture of in person and online teaching. There will be several intakes in a year and will run in various locations – to enable as many people to take part as possible. Sixty-nine people have already signed up for this year and there is room for more. We have a great group of volunteer tutors, mostly clergy and licensed lay ministers, and a new online learning site.

A year ago, I highlighted two particular challenges that we were facing. The first was finance. Today, you have before you, the fruits of our joint labours, to bring a more sustainable budget for 2025 for the approval of this synod. I want to pay tribute to the Diocesan Director of Finance, for his faith, he is a beacon of hope, for clarity and for his skill in preparing the budget. Thank you to the the Chair of the Exeter Diocesan Board of Finance, the Diocesan Secretary, the Archdeacons, the finance committee, assets management group, and finally the Bishop's Diocesan Council, all of whom have made significant input to this budget. We held our extra Synod in June when we all worked together on the key aspects of the budget strategy – your input as a diocesan synod has been invaluable in preparing the budget that is before you today. The main achievement has been bringing down the deficit we started with, at about £2.5m, to about £0.9m. This is not without sacrifice – tough decisions have been made – and will need to be made in the years ahead. Some elements of the budget for 2025 are not sustainable in the longer term but allow us the time to work towards this in the next few years. However, there is hope and light – both in the way we have worked together in decision making, and in the small but hopeful increase in the numbers of people who are part of the church family as reported in the annual mission statistics. We are, in hope, working with the national Diocesan Investment Programme aiming to secure investment in our mission and ministry by the end of 2025. There has also been a national review of Diocesan Finances for the whole C of E and out of that recognition of the financial strain on many dioceses. Our diocesan secretary and our director of finance are both involved with the Inter diocesan forum on this – for which we are grateful.

The second challenge I named last year was Living in Love and Faith. The key challenge is how to live together as a church with difference. I notice on X that the announcement by the government of a new debate about assisted dying, has caused considerable comment from C of E people. Interestingly, some of the comments are from people who on LLF would be on radically opposing sides. But on this matter, the lines have shifted: they share the same view. I mention this because making large scale structural changes over a single issue, is not wise. A member of clergy might want to choose a bishop who agrees with their view on whether, or not, a loving, committed, faithful same sex couple can be prayed for, and God's blessing be sought. Will that person also want to choose a bishop who agrees with their view on assisted dying? Later in this synod +James and I will give a brief update on the LLF process. My plea, and I guess this

is something I will keep saying as I leave, is that we keep hold of the Church of England as a broad church; like the tree in Jesus' parable of the Kingdom of God – a place where many can come and find shelter in its branches.

There is a new season ahead. Across the diocese in our schools and churches and local communities, we have been celebrating harvest. All is safely gathered in. In my own personal season, as I approach retirement, I have that sense of fulfilment. I wrote in my letter: 'Ministry in the Church of England has been extremely varied, fulfilling, joyful, challenging and more than I could have ever imagined. It is though time now for a different rhythm of life with David and our family, recognising that everything has a time and a season.' In terms of my time here in Exeter Diocese, I felt so strongly called by God from the start, and have loved being here, it is a wonderful diocese, and being the Bishop of Crediton has been the privilege of my life, as has serving for this last year as Acting Bishop of Exeter. As I hand over to Bishop Mike, I give thanks to God for all the fruitfulness that I see of the people of God in this county – it is a beautiful thing. The season ahead for the diocese will be an exciting one. The seasons of the agricultural year: Harvesting, resting, preparing the soil, ploughing, cultivating, planting, growing ... are resonant with seasons of life and of church life. And there will be a new season of planting and growing. As the Diocesan Synod you are crucial to the fruitfulness and flourishing of the diocese and of the Church of England in Devon. Please take your commitment to this synod and to this diocese very seriously, participate in this body fully, pray earnestly for one another and for the diocese; set a tone that is hopeful; resist cynicism; be honest and truthful; may these meetings, where there will at times be disagreement, be conducted with love and respect. Commit yourselves to this new season; support and pray for Bishop Mike, welcome him with open hearts and minds.

Our vision statement has John 15:5 as its key verse: 'I am the vine, you are the branches. Those who abide in me and I in them bear much fruit.'

May we be a diocese rooted and grounded in Jesus Christ, abiding in him, and with Christ abiding in us. For this is our hope.