

Presidential Address to Diocesan Synod

09 November 2019

Acting Diocesan Bishop, Keith Sinclair, Bishop of Birkenhead

"We always give thanks to God for all of you and mention you in our prayers constantly remembering before our God and Father your work of faith and labour of love and steadfastness of hope in our Lord Jesus Christ". (1 Thess.1:2,3)

So, a huge thank you to God for the faith, hope and love in this diocese. The prayers and good wishes expressed to me and others of the Bishops Staff Team during this time of vacancy have been an immense encouragement. Whatever the challenges the next 9-12 months will bring before the appointment of the next Bishop of Chester, I believe the Lord will sustain and empower us by his grace as we keep our eyes on Him. At a residential with the Rural Deans in October at Foxhill I think we all experienced a renewing in that faith, hope and love for such a time as this.

So, asked to take this opportunity to speak, what to say?

Well, something about the next 12 months in the diocese and wider church, and then if I dare about the country and general election.

The diocese

God continues to send us godly and gifted ministers and it has been a privilege to be part of their welcome and induction. I am especially looking forward to the Licensing of Sarah Fenby as Diocesan Director of Vocations and her installation as residentiary Canon of the Cathedral, please pray for her and her family, and if you are around on November 17th at 3.30 in Cathedral and could come to Licensing and Installation as Canon, please do.

I hope if you have not yet seen the Statement of Need produced by the Vacancy in See Committee, please look at the Diocesan website and use it for prayer. I hope you recognise the diocese you find described! Please use the prayers for the new bishop on the diocesan website and note the particular prayer meetings planned to coincide with the meetings of the Crown Nominations Committee meeting in the new year.

Could I also ask for particular prayer as we seek to discern the right way forward following Lyn Weston's move to work for the London Institute of Contemporary Christianity in September. We have spent a good amount of time in the Diocesan Synod and across the deaneries wrestling with this over the last few years, and

certainly the staff team believe with me that we shouldn't stand still just awaiting a new bishop. I'm praying the Lord will give us wisdom not only in the right structure and appointments, but in the synergy that will come when we celebrate the gift of God in the missional communities which are the existing parishes AND face squarely the missional challenge around younger generations. At the excellent licensing service for Lay Readers and Pastoral Workers in the Cathedral in October, where we had people from all over the diocese offering their gifts in ministry, I had this picture in my mind of what it would be like to have a Cathedral full of those between the ages of say 15 and 35 and perhaps be recognising and praying for evangelists and youth and children disciple-ers.

One of the themes for next year, based on an initiative in the Cathedrals around the country, is that of Pilgrimage. I recently went to the cinema to see the new animation of the Pilgrim's Progress (in Liverpool Showcase Cinema in Norris Green). Pray we can make the great tradition of pilgrimage in scripture and the Church's tradition help others make that pilgrimage for themselves. Again, watch this space as suggestions come around to how we can all help people make that connection. It's not too early to sign up for the Diocesan Lay Conference which will be in May next year and based on the experience of the last conference will be a great time of spurring one another on.

I'm proposing some special evenings which you may want to use in your parish and schools entitled Progressing Pilgrims based on the story of Jacob and his dream at Bethel.

The resourcing of faith, hope and love in Thessalonica came because they knew that they were beloved by God in our Lord Jesus Christ, that he had chosen them, and that they had received the message of the gospel "not in word only, but also in power and in the Holy Spirit and with full conviction" (!Th.1:4-6). It is not so much what we do as who, or whose we are, and it is in that communion, that faith, hope and love will flourish and thrive.

Wider Church

In September I was part of the Southwell Mission with other northern bishops led by the Archbishop of York. A good window into another diocese and another moment to know the grace of God when you are at your wits end and good for parishes and diocese to be stepping out of the boat in evangelism and witness. The news from the diocese of Southwell is that there have been good sign ups to nurture courses across the diocese and they are thanking God.

From the Mission to the College of Bishops and the consideration of the first draft of "Living in Love and Faith" which is the document (sometime "teaching" but now "learning" resource) which is being produced it is hoped sometime in the summer of next year. Please pray for all the group working under the oversight of the Bishop of Coventry. I was challenged during the College by the Pastoral Principles issued by the Pastoral Advisory Group and want to see how we might look at them in this diocese, challenging prejudice, ignorance, fear, silence, hypocrisy and power both in us as individuals and as christian communities. As I think we all know, nothing threatens to divide the Church as differences over human sexuality, marriage and gender identity. Please pray for the Church of England over this next 9-12 months; and pray for me as next summer two conferences of bishops are planned, one in Kigali, and the other at Lambeth. We will be welcoming bishops from our link dioceses in Melanesia and Congo who will be coming to Lambeth and some may also be going to Kigali.

The General Election

Well if it is challenging to speak of the wider church, fools rush in where angels fear to tread in the realm of national politics! But I think some attempt must be made to know how on earth we pray for our country and the national politics at this time; not just about how any of us might vote, or for the christian men and women (and others offering themselves) for election, or for how one might consider any of the most pressing issues from Brexit to poverty and national cohesion.

The one thought I would offer now is just for us to pray that somehow in the melee of political opinion, there would be an increasing sense of where we need to turn in order for us as a country to recover our centre of gravity. It has seemed to me as the last months(years) in Parliament have unfolded, there has been an increasing inability for those on different sides of the debates to hear or speak in a way that others can hear; I wonder if that is because in our country there is the most profound spiritual vacuum, a distance from God, which has meant that peoples hopes have been placed in either ideology (pro Brexit or anti Brexit), or in the politicians who most espouse that ideology, but that neither the ideology or the politicians can bear the weight we place on them. And the more the ideology or the politicians seek to live in the expectation placed upon them, the more frustrated they and we become, because they cannot bear it and we are unable to see they cannot bear it.

The letters to the Thessalonians not only speak about the faith, hope and love of the church, but the righteous judgement of God, the kingdom of God and the

presence of lawlessness (see 2 Thessalonians 1 and 2). The church then was faced with a very different political reality from ourselves but those realities in the character of God and our rebellion have not disappeared. And God's gracious presence has not disappeared either.

So, can we pray for our politics and election. I don't know what more to say which could be of help. We are already bombarded with words and images on TV and social media. Do we need very consciously as individuals and churches set aside time for silent prayer, for a listening to the God who speaks, for an intercession in the Spirit's power, even with sighs too deep for words. For myself, I am wanting to pray that in our voting and in those for whom we vote, there can be a growing knowledge of the Lord, as Daniel saw in the court of Belshazzar, that there is one "To whom has been given dominion, and glory, and kingship, that all peoples, nations and languages should serve him. His dominion is an everlasting dominion that shall not pass away, and his kingship is one that shall never be destroyed" (Daniel 7:14), and that the purpose of our politics as much as the purpose of our personal lives is to know the glory and fullness of that kingdom life in us and between us. Politics is not ultimately to be about our own personal preference lists, but a recognition of that kingship from God given in our Lord Jesus Christ which finds expression in our response of faith, hope and love.

I wonder if we could all set aside some time, especially in the first week of Advent before the Election to pray on our own and together (with other churches), for our country, for the election, and as Christmas approaches for the worship of the world's true king, and the coming of his kingdom.

Finally, a testimony to encourage us in our prayer.

A beautiful old lady sat down beside Rosie and me at Scargill Retreat House in Yorkshire on a recent retreat; to my shame I hardly noticed her and wondered when sitting together as a group if she would even speak. We were invited to speak from Psalm 42 about the Lord lifting us out of the pit of despair. She did speak; she spoke of a disastrous marriage and her being a single mum with 2 boys; she spoke of her anger with God and her indifference even hostility to Church. She then spoke of her father who "never stopped praying for me". He invited her to a carol service. She said she didn't know God turned up at Carol Services. She thought it would be a few songs some mince pies and soon over. She went to the service and she doesn't know if the curate actually said these words, but she heard God say to her "Why are you in the darkness when you could be in the light?" She spoke other words of testimony as she had a bit of a

conversation with God. She wondered if other people noticed she was about six feet off the pew in a state of the most profound exhilaration.

The rest of the weekend was full of blessing but this encounter just a few weeks ago, after the vacancy had begun, and after the Mission and the College, and before the General Election was called, blessed me more than I can possibly say.

As we go into this year “why are you in the darkness when you could be in the light?”. Praise God for those who speak to us of faith, hope and love in 21st Century Britain, and may through us that faith hope, and love come through his good grace to many more.

+Keith