

## Presidential Address to Newcastle Diocesan Synod 28<sup>th</sup> November 2025

Over the past couple of months, one question has been something of a guiding light in my daily life and work: *who is my neighbour?* It's a question asked of Jesus in Luke's Gospel. Jesus' answer comes in the form of the parable of the Good Samaritan, but it's the question that led to that parable that I want us to keep in mind today. The question was given to me by my new advisor on climate justice and the environment, Duncan Cox and it has proved invaluable in a number of contexts since, not least the hours spent in the select committee work in the House of Lords further scrutinising the Terminally Ill Adults (End of Life) Bill. The Government has just announced that further committee days for the whole House of Lords will be set aside up to late April next year to work through the 1000 or so amendments that have been laid down. I will continue to be engaged in this work and am grateful for your patience and understanding as this will continue to occupy Fridays in my diary.

Given the climate crisis context in which the question *Who is my neighbour?* was given to me, it was then appropriate that a few weeks ago, I recorded a zoom interview on this theme with a couple of friends and colleagues in New Zealand. Emily, who lives in Auckland is soon to become Principal of Trinity Methodist College, and Elisapesi is a Tongan woman living in Hamilton, lecturing at Waikato Institute of Technology.

As we chatted, I noticed the light behind us shifting, as daylight in the northern hemisphere gave way to nightfall in the southern hemisphere. Words from the Night Prayer liturgy in the New Zealand prayer book came to mind which are charged with added meaning when read aloud today on the eve of Advent:

*The night heralds the dawn.*

*Let us look expectantly to a new day,*

*new joys,*

*new possibilities.*

You may be familiar with these words, particularly if you have attended an evening function in Bishop's House. We always end with Night Prayer in my chapel, and these words are part of a prayer towards the end of the service: '...what has been done has been done; what has not been done has not been done; let it be.'

As my conversation about the impact of the climate crisis on the people and communities of Aotearoa New Zealand and the Pacific Islands unfolded, I was struck by an insight that Elisapesi shared. She said that the effects of climate change were well-documented and understood: that Pacific Island peoples (including her own wider family) were struggling with the effects of rising sea levels and more extreme weather events. That certainly struck a chord with me given recent images closer to home of flooding. More than this however, the crisis now she said, is a crisis of welcome, as people and communities became displaced,

seeking new homes. This insight relates to the question of who my neighbour is, and it sets the scene for what I want to say today in this Address.

We do not have to look far to see this crisis of welcome on our own shores. Many here have direct experience of supporting refugees and asylum seekers. I want to pay particular tribute to the work of Chris Minchin in Benwell. Chris has spent many hours of tireless work in support of people seeking refuge and settlement in our communities. Chris is dedicated to this work, and I wish to express my gratitude to him for supporting some of the most vulnerable in our midst. I am sure we have seen the rise of flags adorning lampposts and flyovers and an increase in the rhetoric of intolerance towards people considered to be 'other.' Whilst offering the strongest possible pushback of this rhetoric of hate, we cannot dismiss the underlying feelings of fear and disenfranchisement that lie at their root. I get it. It is complex. But we must not rush to easy answers as much as we cannot say it isn't our problem to engage with and I don't think we should 'other' the flag raisers even when we find their views offensive.

I was struck by words of Rabbi Aaron Lipsey of the United Hebrew Congregation in Gosforth, in his sermon following the October attack against a Manchester Jewish community (Myles and I attended the synagogue to offer our support). Rabbi Aaron reminded those present at the Shabbat service in Gosforth of the importance of three words related to the Jewish festival of Booths that was to begin a few days' hence: listen, build, and dwell. These are words which I think offer a challenge to the rhetoric of fear that surrounds the crisis of welcome and offer tools to help answer the question put to Jesus about neighbours. What would it mean if we listened more to one another and so learnt to build stronger communities for all of us to dwell in together?

Rabbi Aaron is moving with his family to a new role in London in the new year. I wish him well and express my great gratitude for his friendship over the past two and a half years since I took up my role here in Newcastle.

As we move from our year of seeking to our year of sharing, I hope that an active attention paid to listening might be at the heart of building our common life here in our diocese in this season, not for the sake of ourselves but with a deep and shared sense of commitment to our communities in all their diversity of people and geography. I am delighted that one of the outward expressions of this can be seen in the pilgrimage plans between Holy Island and Newcastle Cathedral for the Year of Sharing that we will hear about later and I thank the Dean and Canon Sarah Hills for their initiative in this project.

It may not seem immediately obvious but the question about neighbours also shines a light on how we use our resources. In our Synod gathering today we will also be attending to our budget. While our overall financial picture remains challenging, I was pleased that Bishop's Council last week voted to endorse our budget mindful of work being done to secure national funding, as well as here in the diocese with the three bishop's groups which are due

to report to Bishop's Council in early February; particularly the group focused on income generation and innovation, and the Bishop Alec Graham legacy. I very much hope that this Synod will support the Budget and I thank Chris Elder, Simon Harper and Phil Ambrose for all they have done to provide clarity and confidence in this vital area of our resourcing as well as expressing gratitude for all the work that happens across our parishes towards the Parish Share including those who give more than they are asked to. Thank you so much.

I turn now to a second area that relates to the theme of the crisis of welcome, which has led to the motion before us that we will shortly debate: *Progressing Living in Love and Faith*. This is not a controversial motion as it is simply asking the House of Bishops to progress LLF decisions already made to their conclusion. It should be a motion that we can all support regardless of our principled views.

We will I hope be aware of the current status of LLF and recent decisions made by the House of Bishops, which are due to be finalised at the House meeting next month. I am grateful for all those who have written and spoken with me about LLF in recent weeks. I acknowledge that we are a diocese that holds differing views on human sexuality while in the main desires progress and inclusion. It is my role as your bishop to hold this together. I have sought faithfully to do that, and I will continue to do so in a spirit of generosity and gratitude. But I need to make clear now my views which will not come as a surprise, that I in the firmest way possible want to see full inclusion for LGBTQI+ people. This means, as far as the current LLF issues before us concern, I support standalone services of blessing for same-sex couples who are civilly married *and* I long for a Church that enables clergy holding my license who are able to marry their same-sex partner. The Faith and Order Commission's recent document on doctrine is meant to help the Church move forward in the *LLF* process, but I am persuaded by Durham theologian Mike Highton's reflections that in fact it does the opposite, and I lament that this is where we have got to. I want to argue for full LGBTQI+ inclusion *because of* the witness of Scripture, not despite it.

One of the saddest aspects of where we have reached as a Church, is the erosion of the witness of real lives and a disregard for the fear and distress our LGBTQI+ siblings live with. I lament the disproportionate impact of the endless years of debate and discussion on the mental health of the LGBTQI+ community. This was brought home recently at the training morning hosted by our LGBTQI+ chaplaincy with input from Emily Watson, GP, and priest. I want to thank Emily, and Emma Duff our LGBTQI+ chaplaincy lead for provision of this event and particularly Emma for her vital work in this chaplaincy area. Listening to the input at that training event really brought home to me that the credibility of the Church is on the line here. We have nothing to fear in implementing inclusion and everything to hope for.

Now I appreciate not everyone here will welcome my views and so I repeat that (however difficult it may seem) it is my role and responsibility to offer support, care and oversight of people who hold differing views. I do need though to place on the record how I will seek to lead and represent this diocese in discussions and debates in the coming weeks and months

as we head towards the February meeting of General Synod. This also profoundly stands for what I want to see and keep seeing in this diocese by way of communities of worship, welcome and inclusion, growing in mission and in confidence, alongside many other expressions of mission and ministry that are already demonstrating growth in numbers and spiritual depth. This is Kingdom stuff, and it is hope-filled and joyful.

All our conversations and engagement in God's mission happens because we as Anglicans are woven into the granularity of our local communities. As we seek to be a diocese of confident Christians enabling more and different people to experience the love of God, we do so with a sense of Advent anticipation and discovery that God can and is doing new things.

*The night heralds the dawn.*

*Let us look expectantly to a new day,*

*new joys,*

*new possibilities.*

*In your name we pray.*

**Amen.**