

Diocesan Synod – Presidential Address

March 8th, 2025

In preparation for writing today's Address I checked my diary to remind myself when we last met: November 9th, 2024.

Since that date a lot has happened. Newcastle are out of the FA cup...(!)

I have already shared reflections on the events that followed the publication of the Makin Report in an *Ad Clerum* which I sent to clergy at the beginning of February, and I don't want to repeat myself except here in this context to acknowledge a couple of brief points:

Firstly, my deep regret for the ongoing trauma caused to victims and survivors of church-related abuse since the publication of the Makin Report last November. I want to express my gratitude in particular to the work of Maggi Creese who coordinates our diocesan chaplaincy to victims and survivors of abuse. We are the only diocese in the Church of England to have such a provision. I'd like to also take this opportunity to welcome our new Diocesan Director of Safeguarding, Sharon Devlin and say Sharon how delighted I am that you will be shaping a new team for this most important area of work. Thank you, and welcome! The shaping of our new safeguarding team is a direct response to our audit last year and I also need to thank Chris Elder and other colleagues for seeing this process through smoothly. And seeing as I am on a roll with saying thank you and welcome, Chris may I formally welcome you as you take up the mantle of Diocesan Secretary on a more established footing.

Secondly, I would like to express in this context my gratitude for the support and encouragement that I have received from the diocese and the many people who wrote to me, the PCCs who took time to discuss events post-Makin and to communicate to me their support. I pay tribute to the Bishop's staff team, to the administrative support both in Bishop's House and in Church House. Naturally not all feedback was positive. But I want to make a plea not to underestimate the cost. There is as I am sure you will be aware far more about what happened that will not be said. So if you find yourself rushing to judgment or agreeing with some of the rather wild assumptions that have been made about my actions and words, please pause for reflection. If you visit my office there's a large wicker hamper that is filled to overflowing with letters and cards: so many stories of people's lives. I can tell you it is both hard and to open that hamper. Hope and pain are interwoven in its contents.

In the interest of both transparency and accountability (two of the three words I have used with regard to safeguarding in recent months, the other being independence) I acknowledge that relationships with many of my episcopal colleagues have been placed under strain. And while this will take time to work through I can give assurances that Newcastle is and will be in the room for vital conversations going forward: on finance, safeguarding and many other issues. I am certainly not the first bishop nor the last to navigate relationships with colleagues. A supportive email from the convenor of a parish Lent course I contributed to earlier in the week reminded me that the Apostle Paul was similarly disposed to the ups and downs of church politics and the challenges of collegiality. I'm in good company then although even in my more strident moments I will steer clear of the rhetoric of Paul's approach to his opponents in Galatians.

Hope and pain are two words that are woven into the fabric of the season of Lent. One of the Collects for Ash Wednesday reads as follows:

*Holy God,
our lives are laid open before you:
rescue us from the chaos of sin
and through the death of your Son
bring us healing and make us whole
in Jesus Christ our Lord.*

I must admit to not noticing that Collect before and it really stood out to me because the word 'chaos' can be defined as 'a state of disorder and confusion' but please note this isn't always negative. Sometimes what looks like chaos is also rich with the possibility of new growth. I think that's where the Holy Spirit is at work. And certainly that is my prayer in this season. Because when we take a step back from our immediate context, in the much wider geo-political global state a lot has happened too. In a recent opinion piece published in the US, responding to the barrage of executive orders by the Trump administration, Dean Kelly Brown Douglas writes: "At its core, the essence of our humanity is reflected in our capacity to empathise with others, to see ourselves in the other, and the other as we see ourselves. Our humanity is tested when we are faced with the choice to withhold from another that which we would never want withheld from ourselves: respect, safety, livelihood and care." On the 23rd of this month we will be installing Dean Kelly as our first Anglican Communion Canon in the Cathedral. I am delighted that we will have the opportunity to learn from and with her in the years ahead. Her prophetic witness is a powerful reminder that all our lives are bound up together in God's Kingdom.

A couple of weeks ago I attended the City of Newcastle climate change forum, held in the Civic Centre. One of the speakers at the event talked about the management of flood risk and how in attending to this area of concern he had discovered the

importance of place-making. That is, whatever is done to mitigate the risk needs to create community and enhance the wider environmental value of the public realm and its social value. He had been surprised at the need for his work to pivot to enable this to happen. And I thought to myself there's a lesson for us as a diocese in that. I had used our Director of Mission and Ministry Ric's invitation to *notice* in this season of seeking, that what I am discerning is a deeper question about how make places anew and pivot to enable God's Kingdom to be discovered and felt by all people. Faith is about seeing what's not there as well as what's there. Rowan Williams writes in his new book *Discovering Christianity, a guide for the curious*: 'faith is most fully itself and most fully life-giving when it opens your eyes and uncovers for you a world larger than you ever thought – and, of course therefore, a world that can be a bit more alarming than you ever thought. The test of true faith is how much more it lets you see, and how much it stops you from denying, resisting or ignoring aspects of what is real' (p. 3).

Our engagement with the words seeking, sharing and sending are not just a three-year sequential journey but my hope and prayer is that they will be a recurring pattern of encounter, transformation and change all the way up to our 150th anniversary as a diocese in 2032 and then the 1400th anniversary of Aidan's arrival on the island of Lindisfarne that will be celebrated in 2035. That's a hopeful, dare I say, ambitious aim one that will require of us much, and it will see a fair bit of that process of pivoting. That's why I have called together three new Bishop's groups whose work over the next 12 months will get underway soon: looking at income generation and innovation (mindful of our commitment to secure additional external funding as well as the effective use of our own resources; at reimagining ministry; and a small group to look at the Legacy left to us by Bishop Alec Graham. I hope these groups will enliven our thinking, help ensure our strategy is clear and our vision in focus. I look forward to their contributions that will feed into the work of Bishop's Council and the DBF and of course, this Synod helping build confidence in belonging and believing.

Let there be more Lord! I invite us to pray for abundance and growth in this season of Lent.

A couple of Fridays ago, Myles and I were invited to the Rabbi's home in Gosforth where we shared Shabbat dinner with Rabbi Aaron and his family and others who had been invited from the University and the synagogue community. It was a wonderful evening of food, prayer, stories and laughter. This evening I will be joining the RC Bishop of Hexham and Newcastle at a community Iftar that our Cathedral is hosting for the season of Ramadan. There is great significance to community witness in a fractured and anxious world. In May I look forward to visiting our Link dioceses: Botswana and in Norway, particularly to participating in the ordinations of the first women as priests in Botswana. Our turning outwards in mission is always a journey

into God's presence and what it means to inhabit that in its fullness. I give thanks to God for our Communion and ecumenical relationships.

I want to finish with a quote from Dean Kelly Brown Douglas' bishop, the Bishop of Washington, Bishop Mariann Budde. You may remember her powerful sermon delivered in the presence of the new US President in Washington Cathedral. Needless to say, he didn't like it.

She writes: "our lives are full of unforeseen choices, struggles, and callings. Sometimes we can overcome these obstacles, and sometimes we must make peace with them. Sometimes, like Jesus, we are called into the wilderness or to the cross – to physically and spiritually go to those places that challenge us, test us, break us open, and cause something to die within us. Accepting what we did not choose involves a leap of faith that God is present and at work in ways that we cannot comprehend. Sometimes we feel that presence, often-times we don't. This kind of acceptance is not passive or fatalistic, but rather a courageous choice at a decisive moment to embrace the places we are broken as an integral part of a courageous life" (*How we learn to be brave*, p. 203).

So may we journey through Lent courageously together.

Thank you and I commend the work our Synod gathering today.