

Presidential Address, Diocesan Synod March 13th 2021

I have recently been reflecting on Philippians 4.4-9. Let me read it to you.

“4 Rejoice in the Lord always; again I will say, Rejoice. 5 Let your gentleness be known to everyone. The Lord is near. 6 Do not worry about anything, but in everything by prayer and supplication with thanksgiving let your requests be made known to God. 7 And the peace of God, which surpasses all understanding, will guard your hearts and your minds in Christ Jesus. 8 Finally, beloved, whatever is true, whatever is honourable, whatever is just, whatever is pure, whatever is pleasing, whatever is commendable, if there is any excellence and if there is anything worthy of praise, think about these things. 9 Keep on doing the things that you have learned and received and heard and seen in me, and the God of peace will be with you”.

Some of you already know that when I first became a bishop in 2006 my only role description was to wake up every morning and be joyful in the Lord. It is quite something to tell people to rejoice during a pandemic which has caused so much death and despondency. What is there to rejoice over when clergy colleagues are reporting being exhausted? Surely it is only natural to be anxious about the future, especially if you are a natural catastrophist like me? We are focusing today on clergy well-being and the importance of deanery development plans. Well-being has been impaired for many people during lockdown, particularly for extroverts who have been starved of the energy that varied company brings. The very thought of deanery planning conjures fears of swingeing cuts.

Yet again, I say rejoice. Joy is not about human contentment or ease. It is a characteristic of those who are assured that they live within the grace of Jesus Christ. The pandemic is terrible and its legacy will be with us for years to come, not least its lasting impact on mental health and on the choices facing governments in an extended economic crisis.

However, overall the changes and griefs that we are enduring now are not worse than was experienced during the last war in this country.

Humanity faces far worse challenges in the future if we don't address the causes of climate change. The Philippians themselves were facing varying levels of persecution; and yet Paul tells them not to worry about anything because the Lord is near. The peace of God will protect them like a guard standing sentry.

The peace and gentle forbearance called for are communal as well as personal. I want us to bear this in mind as we engage with the Living in Love and Faith materials in the coming months. We had an excellent study day about it on 3rd March which many of you attended. I have never known a study day so well-attended all day. I think 195 people signed up. I made it clear then and repeat here that people are invited to participate but in no way obliged to do so if it does not feel safe or right. We are in the process of identifying an LLF Advocate who will be encouraging conversation in every context and also some LLF chaplains from across the church's traditions to whom people will be able to speak freely and also from whom support can be sought. We are not under undue time pressure and have until the end of the year to learn from one another about our faith and our identity. What we have to say as a diocese will be fed back to the LLF panel chaired by the Bishop of London for their consideration during 2022.

As a natural worrier, I am challenged by the call not to fear. Does this mean that in the scale of things we shouldn't be bothering about ministerial well-being? By no means. I want us to mainstream proper care of the clergy and other ministers which goes beyond patching people up when life hits the buffers. If our strategy proclaims our desire to be fully alive and to be visible and generous, then we need our pastors to be as well as they can be in themselves and to know that the carers are cared for. Bishop Dagmar and I are very conscious of our role as pastor to the pastors and share this responsibility with the archdeacons, with rural deans, the warden of readers and all of you. A commitment to well-being means ensuring decent housing for the clergy we house and in many other practical ways. However, as we all make sacrifices in ministry and meet fresh challenges daily, well-being is not limited to good occupational health. It is lived out in having the structures and policies which enable people to flourish. It is rooted in prayer and vocational response to the promises of Christ. I recall from undertaking an eight-day Ignatian retreat that thinking and decision-making are profoundly affected by the discernment of spirits. The spirit of consolation draws us into praising God and being thankful; and draws us also deeper into communion with God and our neighbour. The spirit of desolation draws us away from God and community and into false human consolations. Living the spirit of consolation does not mean that we wear a cheesy grin, or are at rest because we may be called to face profound challenge. But we do have peace and hope. True happiness hinges on holiness.

We want to be known for our gentleness. This is both in our active demonstration of kindness but also in our gentle forbearance when we are on the receiving end of Covid-fed anger or fear. Our gentleness

needs to be as visible as our generosity. This gentleness is fundamental to well-being as we support the clergy and other ministers being gentle with themselves when some are driven to work too hard and not to pay enough attention to self-care. St Vincent de Paul applied the spiritual writings of St Francois de Sales to the practical and spiritual care of the poor. Many clergy have a punitive inner voice which tells them that nothing is ever good enough; yet de Sales wrote that people are only made whole by charity and not cruelty.

When the credits rolled at the end of a Hollywood blockbuster about the life of Christ, they said not the end but the beginning. I look forward to our adopting the Covenant as only the end of the beginning, building on all the work done by Canon Sue Wyatt and those who have been working with her. We would not be at this point without Sue's determined and sustained leadership. I ask that our thanks be minuted.

The Philippians were also enjoined to live lives of prayer and thanksgiving. My hope is that we will approach our deanery planning in this way. I am really thankful that, while the going is tough, we are not looking at further cuts in stipendiary clergy numbers, although there could be creative opportunities to move some posts around. Our planning locally needs to be prayerful and thankful, thankful for all the good that there is and has been. An attitude of thankfulness will also look out for and praise the gifts of people who might offer themselves for the full gamut of ministries which we want to celebrate and grow locally. This thankful outlook could even make us more ambitious for the sharing of the gospel where we live, and this ambition can find its way into deanery development plans. Paul says that through the prism of what they had learned from him the Philippians were free to draw on any worthy and excellent idea coming from the wider community or culture

which passes the test of the gospel. Our planning will draw on ideas and consultations which we may find challenging. We may need that gentle forbearance with each other. We want to encourage what is worthy of praise in our benefices and networks, identifying support for fresh expressions of church and mission in new settlements as well as for established and flourishing ministry.

Just as we rejoice in God's abundance even though we feel tested and tired, we look not only to the well-being of our clergy and lay ministers but to the future well-being of the church in this diocese. You will know the saying, 'Do not waste a good crisis'. There is truth in the saying, but you may have concerns about embarking on development planning just as we begin to emerge from lockdown. I want us to capture all that we have learned from our digital birth, and what we have learned afresh about pastoral care and mission being joined together. The pandemic has accelerated change across society and the church cannot escape the consequences for ourselves in weaning people away from worship at home to being in-person again and in keeping worship and learning going for those who as yet only know us online and may stay there. Our planning needs to be imaginative, flexible and responsive to the life we do not yet see clearly and may only glimpse so far. This all requires wisdom to inform our choices and to give us the courage to change. I would like you to listen to a hymn to which I have only recently been introduced. With a spring-tide Easter, we face the promise of renewed life and resurrection. It is by Natalie Sleeth:

Hymn of Promise

In the bulb there is a flower; in the seed, an apple tree;

In cocoons, a hidden promise: butterflies will soon be free!

In the cold and snow of winter there's a spring that waits to be,
Unrevealed until its season, something God alone can see.

There's a song in every silence, seeking word and melody;
There's a dawn in every darkness, bringing hope to you and me.
From the past will come the future; what it holds, a mystery,
Unrevealed until its season, something God alone can see.

In our end is our beginning; in our time, infinity;
In our doubt there is believing; in our life, eternity,
In our death, a resurrection; at the last, a victory,
Unrevealed until its season, something God alone can see.

We are drawn again and again into the mystery of God's love and find that we can be surprised by joy. Joy and peace are heavenly graces to receive rather than virtues to adopt. The peace of God is unfathomable except to the eyes of the heart. It is the peace that stands guard over our hearts whatever we face with Christ behind, beside and before us. I pray for a season of refining and growing; but I rest in trusting the God who will show us what he wants us to see in God's time.