

Bishop Martin's address to Diocesan Synod – November 2021

I wanted to begin by saying Thank you. Thank you for offering to serve on Diocesan Synod for the next three years. These will be crucial years in the life of the Diocese as we seek to Grow as Kingdom People: worshipping God, making disciples, sharing hope and helping to transform our communities as well as our churches into places where all can flourish and thrive. Archdeacon Nikki is leading our Transformation agenda and tonight we will hear of two significant ways for parishes to access money, help and support for parish-based mission and ministry. We will also be able to debate the budget for next year, a budget that sees both a steadily falling deficit, and a zero percent rise in overall ministry share. That is no mean feat, and I would like to thank Andy Todd as Chair of the Board of Finance, John Preston as Diocesan Secretary and Helen Archer-Smith and her colleagues in finance support for all their hard work this year.

Every Deanery is taking its share in clergy post reductions as we come closer to break even and I'm grateful to all who have borne some of the pain in this respect. These are hard times as we all know. We hope the worst of the pandemic is over, but much is still uncertain and there will no doubt continue to be hard choices during the coming years. In Synod we make these decisions together, with and for the parishes we serve.

In Synod meetings we also like to look beyond churchy issues too. For example, tonight we hear about the Good Childhood Report from the Children's Society, introduced by Shari their new Ambassador for this diocese. We can also congratulate Archdeacon Nikki who ran the London Marathon raising money for this cause. Well done Nikki!

This week we are nearing the end of COP26 and are all too well aware of the climate crisis that we are in.

Many of the poorest nations today are facing drought, flood and famine on a scale not seen before. This is with 1.1 degree warming and we are set for much worse. In turn these disasters will lead to greater forced migration as people seek safety for themselves and their families. The Chair of Cop26, Alok Sharma said that in that the climate crisis is also the greatest security crisis of our age and yet we go on spending more on weapons of war than on the mitigation and adaptation required to fight climate change. The General Synod, and this Diocesan Synod has made a pledge to be net zero by 2030. A huge challenge that will need to feature large on our agenda.

I hope too that we'll have some fun along the way and encourage one another with good news and good stories from around our churches. Love, Compassion, Justice and Freedom should make us smile as well as be serious and thank God for that!

Above all I'd like to thank all of you for keeping Prayer and Hope alive during these last dry Covid years. When I was first welcomed as Bishop of Dudley in February 2020, I could not have imagined that within a month every church would be shut and barred by order of the government. Public worship of any kind had to stop: no singing, no communion, baptism, wedding or even gathering for funerals. All the things we naturally do in a crisis, like coming together and finding God's strength together were stymied. For many just surviving took all their strength as all our plans dissolved into dust. Stay at Home. Save Lives was something we just had to do.

This is the first time we have met in person as a Synod since then!

In other ways all of you found ways to carry on.

Prayers were said at home instead of in church; many people discovered Zoom and before long people were gathering for daily prayer online, clergy were beaming services into houses near and far, people were exploring faith who had never darkened the doors of church before.

I'm in the middle of a Pilgrimage of Prayer and Hope, spending two days in each of our six deaneries. It's so good to be out and about with you all! Today I've led a short service in ten different churches across Pershore and Evesham Deanery and had lunch with their Deanery Leadership Team. In each place we've blessed churches that are open once again. In each place we have blessed fonts, fonts that had been dry for a year or more but are now increasingly brimming over with people coming again to be baptised and confirmed into the Way of Christ.

In every place it has been good to hear stories of grief and challenge, and also of resilience and courage. To listen and to pray together. I'm so thankful for all those in our parish churches, from Berrow to Coseley, From Far Forest to Redditch who have kept Prayer and Hope alive.

Sisters and Brothers, as the Church of England we are called to be a Church for England. Christ centred and Jesus shaped, a church of disciples in mission and pilgrimage together, with generous worshipping communities big and small, taking steps to grow younger and more diverse. Communities that want to build a church and a world that is healthy and sustainable for the good of all. This is our vision as we move forward together.

To be a church that is not afraid to own the name of Jesus, as we become simpler, humbler and bolder in all we do.

I'll close with our Pilgrimage Prayer:

*God of our pilgrimage, we are a thirsty people in a dry and weary land.
Strike our stony hearts afresh, restore fresh springs of life within us.
Renew us by your Holy Spirit.
Let streams of living water flow through all your Church
For the healing of the nations, for the blessing of the earth,
And to the glory of your Son, Jesus Christ our Lord.
Amen.*