

## **Come, Follow Christ in the Footsteps of St Chad: First Steps**

### 1

The first thing I want to say is thank you. A big thank you to all of you for coming here this morning to join in this event. An even bigger thank you to all who have worked very hard over the past weeks to plan, organise and make this happen. But the biggest thank you of all to everybody in this great diocese for all that you have been doing, are doing and will continue to do to share in God's mission.

Wherever I have been across Staffordshire, North Shropshire and the Black Country, I have found people and churches committed to growing disciples, looking for ways to reach new generations, involved with others in transforming communities, practising generosity with their time and their money; and all of this coming out of their desire to discover the heart of the God who loves us so much. These five themes of our mission serve us well; please carry on with them!

So what is this morning about; where are we headed in this new direction of travel. I hope you know the words by now, but let me remind you of them: *Come, follow Christ in the footsteps of St Chad*. Let me say a little bit about those words.

First is *Come*. This is an invitation, which echoes through the scriptures. At the very end of the Bible, in the book of Revelation, *the Spirit and the bride say 'Come! And let everyone who hears say, 'Come'. And let everyone who is thirsty come*. God invites us; and when we respond to his invitation, we in turn invite others: that's how it works. This morning is offered as an invitation to travel, not as a requirement, not as one more burdensome thing to add to the list.

An invitation to do what? An invitation *to follow Christ*. Of course that is what we are all doing already; the invitation is, to focus afresh on what following Christ means in our lives and in the lives of our Christian communities. I want to offer three words to help with that. They are: discipleship; vocation; and evangelism.

To be renewed in our discipleship is the first challenge for us all: to walk more closely with Jesus, to enjoy learning more about him, to shape our lives on his in loving God and neighbour. Whoever you are, as a Christian this is your first task; and wherever you are, as a Christian community this is your core business. It's the same for us all.

Discipleship is the same, but vocation is different for each of us. Vocation is the call of God into my life and yours, and into the life of our church.

Some people have a vocation to ordained ministry; most have a vocation to lay ministry. For some, there is a vocation specifically within the life of the church; for most, it is in everyday life that God's call is worked out, at work, with family, in the community. We all need the gift of discernment to find out just what our vocation is, and that discernment comes from the Spirit.

And then evangelism: as we are renewed as Jesus' disciples, as we respond to God's call into our lives, we will want to tell our story to others, and we will want to invite them to make God part of their story too. This is what evangelism means: sharing with all we meet the great story of a God who loves us so much, who loves them so much, that in Jesus he gives his life for us, for them.

Discipleship, vocation, evangelism: these are pretty much at the heart of our individual lives and our life together. I hope and pray that this morning we can begin to focus in a new way on them as we commit afresh *to follow Christ*.

And here's the focus for me: Follow Christ *in the footsteps of St Chad*. Chad, our first bishop, is a man whose life and witness is woven into the history and the geography of this diocese, and it is absolutely right that we are gathering here in this place, especially blessed with his presence.

Chad was a fervent disciple of Jesus Christ, devoting his life to the study of the scriptures. He worked out his particular vocation as a monk, and then also as a bishop – first in York, which was wrong, then here in Lichfield, which was right. And he was a tireless evangelist, walking all over his enormous diocese, much bigger than it is now, sharing with the Mercian people of his time the timeless Gospel of Jesus Christ. You can hear more about St Chad on this very stage in a few minutes time; he's just putting on his make-up.

I hope that Chad's example will inspire and encourage you to think about discipleship, vocation and evangelism in your own life and in your own place. For myself, I want to tell you that I am going to try to make three priorities in my own response to the invitation *Come, follow Christ in the footsteps of St Chad*. I want to walk around a lot, here and there, and invite all sorts of people to join me on pilgrimages. I want to welcome people to our house, and show a ministry of hospitality. And I want to create opportunities where I can learn with you from the scriptures and from the spiritual riches of the Christian tradition entrusted to us.

Pilgrimage, hospitality, learning and teaching: those are my personal priorities as Bishop of Lichfield. I hope that this morning will help you think and pray about what the priorities of discipleship, evangelism, vocation mean for you

and for your church. We have arranged a cornucopia of things to help you with that – you can see them set out with a map on pages 4–5 of your booklet.

In this very place, St Chad, aka Simon Airey, will be telling his life story. In the transepts over there, you can browse your way through a marketplace of resources for discipleship. Over in College Hall, lots of people will be popping up to talk about their individual experiences of vocation, of what God's call has been into their lives. In the tent outside, you can experience evangelism made real through multi-cultural worship from the Sanctus community in Stoke. In the Lady Chapel, the Community of St Chad will be offering prayer, and inviting you to join them. There is also a wonderful exhibition of paintings of the Cathedral by Turner and others, with our Resident Artist Peter Walker to talk about their meaning; and at the back of the nave, you can meet with people from the four Mission Projects I am commissioning at the end of this morning.

More of that later; for the next hour, please do feel free to meander around some or all of these different zones of opportunity. And please be back here by 12.30, when we will gather together again for the commissioning. But before we set off on our meanderings, we are going to pray, first in song, then asking for grace to follow in the footsteps of St Chad.