

Growing Church Bringing Hope – Next Steps

Some theological reflections to support our conversations

Our diocesan vision for **growing church bringing hope** expresses a deep longing to see our worshipping communities growing in number, in prayer and discipleship, in serving our communities, and above all in making a difference - sharing the hope we have, which is the power of God to transform us and our world.

'And all of us, with unveiled faces, seeing the glory of the Lord as though reflected in a mirror, are being transformed into the same image from one degree of glory to another; for this comes from the Lord, the Spirit.'

(2 Corinthians 3:18)

The work of transformation is nothing new in the Christian life. We are all subject to the transforming power of God's love and the reshaping and remoulding of the Holy Spirit through Word and sacrament. This is true both for our personal lives and also our corporate life as God's Church.

This current season has been challenging and disruptive and has seen various aspects of church life undergo a transformation, and for some this has been a positive experience, leading to new opportunities for worship, service in the community and engagement with those beyond our walls. However, transformation is rarely painless, and in the Christian tradition new life often comes by the way of suffering, by 'death and resurrection', and many of us have known profound grief and loss in these last months, and many more in our communities have known great need, with few families left unaffected by illness or death.

Even before the COVID 19 Pandemic we were aware that our transforming God was calling us to new things in this diocese. Bishop Christine's Presidential Address a year ago at Diocesan Synod in May 2019 focussed on these verses from Isaiah:

*'Do not remember the former things, or consider the things of old.
I am about to do a new thing; now it springs forth, do you not perceive it?'*

(Isaiah 43.18-19)

The Bishop spoke of our need to reshape and reimagine ministry, not to do more with less, but to do differently. God is calling his Church to new ways of being in order to live out our calling to serve the people and communities of this diocese as we continue **growing church bringing hope**. This is nothing less than transformation and so will bring joy and some grief, but above all will bring hope as we respond to God's call to be his Church, his renewed and hopeful people in and for the world.

'Do not be conformed to this world, but be transformed by the renewing of your minds, so that you may discern what is the will of God—what is good and acceptable and perfect.'
(Romans 12:2)

As we think about 'Transformation', we think primarily of our God's transforming work in and through us, his Church, by his Holy Spirit. As we think about 'Transformation', we think primarily of our God's transforming work in and through us, his Church, by his Holy Spirit. The Spirit makes real for us the work of the cross, the transforming forgiveness and salvation we are offered through Jesus Christ. We are a people loved even to death and loved into new life in Christ, nothing less than a new creation.

What follows is not a theological narrative, but rather some short reflections around various themes and images. Our conviction is that the answers to this transformation we seek are to be found in what we believe about God and about the character and purpose of his Church. It is our belief that starting here will inspire our thinking, breed hope in place of anxiety and help us to grow as a healthy church.

We recognise that much has been achieved over many years as we have grappled with these issues as a diocese, but also that some of the important work has not been fully followed through. This makes what we do now all the more urgent as we build on the work of others. We also recognise that this wrestling is nothing new. If we were to go back forty, a hundred, a thousand years, we would probably find essentially similar issues being discussed but in different contexts. This should not make us complacent, but rather should reassure us that change is part of a living Church, and also that it is God who sustains and directs his Church.

This paper is also not a static document, but one which is being refined and enhanced as we reflect further, learn from one another and seek to hear together God's call at this moment. We are grateful to all those who have already helped develop this work over recent conversations.

The Church

We believe that God is seeking to renew all things, and we also believe that God has a Church to work for this purpose. Whilst God is always active outside the Church, the Church exists to be a conduit through whom God seeks the renewal of all things.

This follows a pattern throughout the story of God's salvation work. God calls part of creation to bear his image and mediate between him and this creation. In the beginning, he chooses human beings to reflect his nature, to care for creation and steward its flourishing. Later, God calls a people from amongst the nations to speak of him in the world. He chooses Abraham and his descendants. Again, whilst this people fail to live up to their calling, God remains true to his promise to bless all through them. From within this people, God comes in Jesus Christ and calls together the Church, no longer limited to the covenant people but open to all. The Church inherits the role of proclaiming the good news of God, of salvation in Jesus Christ, of being a vehicle through whom God seeks to bless and renew all things. As

God walked in the garden with Adam, met with Moses in the burning bush, pitched his tent with Israel in the desert and the temple and walked amongst us in Jesus Christ, so God now dwells in the Church through the Holy Spirit – directing and energising the people of God, enabling us in all our brokenness to be his hands and feet in the world. This is a simplified version of some profound theology, but to sum it up: the Church is caught up in the ongoing work of God to restore all creation to the wholeness and peace for which it was designed. This is the work which we believe God is about and we are partners in it.

We stand, therefore, on the understanding that God will never leave himself without a Church. The Church, in the catholic sense, will continue whatever our response and decision making here. We do not need to be anxious, because we trust in a God who is never frustrated, who provides all that is necessary and from whose love nothing can separate us. We also believe that God is at work in us, challenging us and beckoning us on to grow and mature as followers of Jesus Christ. As we face financial and organisational strain, and fear of the unknown, it is important that we face these challenges in the light of both the goodness and faithfulness of God.

Too often, as an organisation, we have simply faced our challenges with anxiety and self-protection (even self-justification). The response can be to shore up what we have against the storms and chill of culture and change. Yet Jesus says that nothing can give life unless it dies. There is no resurrection without first the pain of death and the silence of the tomb. Resurrection and hope follow darkness and despair. Too often, we want reassurance about what lies on the other side of pain, or we simply wish to protect our position and status. This is sometimes called ‘being realistic’, or ‘good sense’. Yet again we are reminded that the wisdom of God seems like foolishness. What might this mean for us? Where might we be being called to die to ourselves, to give ourselves away with little certainty about what might lie on the other side of it, or even if we will continue to exist as an organisation? Yet we can do this because we still believe in the same God and Father of our Lord Jesus Christ, the God who raised Jesus from the dead and whose purposes we seek. He calls us to follow even when we do not know the destination, but we can trust that in his faithfulness all will be well. Our security lies not in success, but because of Christ, in our adoption into God’s family. How can we be courageous and self-giving? What vision of God’s work are we willing to give our all for?

Finally, many over the years have seen in the difficulties facing the Church of England a lesson and challenge from God to reform and renew our life. This may be true, but throughout history the Church has always had to reform and renew its life. The church is both a means through which God seeks to bless and renew, but is also the place in which broken human beings are to grow in community. We are both a human and a divine institution and, like all our predecessors in history, have managed great things for God and also to completely mess it up. We are in a continual process of confessing and repenting, and through this recommitting ourselves to proclaiming the good news in this generation. What we do today in this process will not answer the questions and issues for all time. The limit of our hope can only be that we will shape ourselves better today for the mission we

have to do today. We can leave tomorrow to God, but we keep responsibility for how we deal with today.

Role of the Church

As previously noted, the Church is that group called by God to partake in his work and life. It is, indeed, Christ's own flock and purchased by his blood on the cross. It is a holy people, empowered by the Spirit, and we exist to give glory to God through our praises and in our lives, and to bring his healing to the world. We do this through our worship together, our life together and our witness and ministry to the world around us. This encompasses a myriad of expressions.

In his book, 'The Widening Circle', Bishop Graham Tomlin notes how God discriminates. Such an idea causes us problems as we like to think that God does not discriminate. Yet throughout history God chooses particular people. They may not deserve or have earned that grace, yet chosen they are. However, they are never chosen for their own good but always for the good of others. They are chosen, despite their fears, failures and lack of qualification, for the blessing of others. From Jacob and Judah, to Rahab, Mary, Martha, Peter and Paul, flawed, awkward and unworthy people are chosen to know God personally and partake in his work. God, it seems, chooses the most unlikely candidates as his helpers. Likewise, the Church is full of the most unlikely candidates. Together, they form a royal priesthood – in the sense that as a body they bring God to the world and the world to God. (Within this collective priesthood are those who are called out to do this within the Church. They are called not for their own benefit but to be a conduit for God's blessing to all).

So the Church has this primary task as a royal priesthood. It is also a holy nation – a people who are consecrated to God. From its earliest days, the Church is called the 'ekklesia' – 'the called out ones'. We are called out not for ourselves, but for others to the glory of God.

The Church therefore has different aspects and roles:

We worship God together. We worship through our songs and words, giving him the glory that our hearts yearn to give, and we worship through lives that are also consecrated to him. Human beings, like all creation, are made to worship. Unlike the rest of creation, we can choose what or whom we worship. What we cannot choose is whether we worship, for all of us worship something. The prophets explain this when they speak of human beings creating idols of gold and ivory, the work of their own hands which they then bow down and worship. We are always in danger of worshipping what we ourselves have created and giving our allegiance and our freedom to it. This takes myriad forms, from worshipping sex, money, power, success, respectability, even things like safety. Good things, when worshipped, can take over our lives. The Church, for whom this is equally a problem, must continually strive to worship God alone, and to enable others to do the same – to free them from their worship of other gods. If one of the claims of the gospel is that Christ is King, and Caesar isn't, then we do not need to look too far to find that whilst the Roman emperors are long gone, there are some ways of the world which not only hold the same power over culture, economics and people's lives, but which can also give the illusion of being

permanent. The Church must continually worship, and in this point towards, the one who is worthy of worship and who sets us free.

In the meal which Jesus gave us, we celebrate again this renewal of all things made possible through the cross - through Christ's death and resurrection. We celebrate this sacrament of God's grace and forgiveness, his ongoing work in us by the Spirit, his calling together of a family from all walks of life. We enter into the holy mystery of God's love and sacrifice, nourished and enriched by the Bread of Heaven and Cup of Salvation, participating in the very life of Christ. Wonderfully, in our remembrance and thanksgiving, we glimpse the heavenly banquet and are fed, nourished and sent out, in the power of the Holy Spirit, to live and work in the world until the day when Christ returns and all is completed in him.

In worship, we not only show God to the world, we also bring the world to God through our intercessions and concerns. Our worship, as we know, is not confined to the praise and prayers of the gathered Christian community, it is also through our witness to the world in which we spend most of the week. Fed by word and sacrament, we are sent out into the world to live and work to God's praise and glory. The gathering, the calling out, is not then just for our sake but for the sake of the world. So, in our decisions about church life we need to ask again and again what enables people to live out their Christian lives most effectively in the world. Our training and organisation are not there to help church run better, but rather to help people reflect God in the world they actually inhabit and to help the healing of that world. (In order to win gold at the Sydney Olympics, the GB men's rowing team asked itself one question about each suggestion, "Will this make the boat go faster?" What might the equivalent question be for us?)

We are a family who learn and grow together. One of the key elements of the Church is that we are made up of people from all backgrounds. Paul says that there is now neither Jew nor Greek, slave nor free, male nor female. This is not that we become one homogenised mass, distinguished not by glorious variety but by dull homogeneity, but rather that we are made one despite all our differences. In a world which seeks again and again to divide and tribalise, where we can choose what we do and who we do it with based almost entirely on our own preferences, the Church remains one of very few places where we are thrown together with people with whom we have little in common. This is why the image of family is so important in church life. We are called together by God, made one in some miraculous way, despite the fact that we may have little in common and may be intensely annoying to one another.

We cannot choose who we are in church with. Part of our growth as disciples is that we learn to live with, and love, those with whom we quarrel and fight for resources and attention, just like in a real family. And just as in a good family, though we argue sometimes, there is also shared laughter, stories, teasing and support, love and care, shared meals and time together. Just as God places us in a family to learn how to live, so too God puts us in a church family to teach us how to be human – *and there is a place in this family especially for those who have no other family of their own*. The fact that many have tragically experienced terrible family situations, or faced shameful abuse in a church family, does not mean that we should reject 'family' as an image for the church. Rather, we should strive harder to

inhabit well this miraculous and beautiful call as one given by God for the blessing and transformation of those whom he loves.

We have a common work together. This is mentioned again and again here, but simply to emphasise that we are a people commissioned both to seek first the Kingdom of God (where the wholeness of peace that is the Shalom of God is present) and within that to make disciples of all nations – not only inviting people into a living relationship with God but to help them grow in that relationship. So the Church is to be evangelistic, to be seeking the healing of the world, and to be helping people grow in their understanding and outworking of faith. We are to go out to the margins, to have courage to be where we feel uncomfortable but where God is at work – to be pioneers. Evangelism and mission are important together. We care about ‘bums on seats’ because each seat taken represents someone beloved of God. The change of emphasis will be that the ‘seat’ may be in a community centre, school, pub or farmhouse. We are seeking to recruit fellow pilgrims for the journey and workers for the vineyard. We recruit, we train and we send out to work.

We have a bias for the poor. Our work should most often be found amongst the poorest and most marginalised in our society. From food banks and advocacy, to campaigns for trade justice and medical work, the Church continues this practical ministry of seeking the wholeness of God for all, especially those who have least and are heard least. It is one of the strongest threads of Scripture that God’s heart is for these. The prophets railed against the exploitation of the poorest. They said that worship offerings were worth nothing when the widow and orphan were not taken care of. *“What does the Lord require of you?”* asked Micah, *“but to act justly, love mercy and walk humbly.”* (Micah 6.8) Later, God chooses to be born to a young woman from an insignificant family, in an unremarkable town. Mary sings that God has lifted up the lowly, and has scattered the proud in the imagination of their hearts. More recently, Catholic Social Teaching explores our belief that God has created things for us all to enjoy, and that our very humanity is eroded by the unjust stewardship and distribution of what is meant for us all. Some are harmed by having too little, others are harmed by having too much. The Kingdom of God is neither entirely about personal salvation, nor entirely about good economics. Rather it is a right ordering of creation, where people have what they need to flourish as they were made to. This includes both our material and our spiritual wellbeing. We are the stewards of the good things which the God we love loves. This applies as much to our care of the environment as to our work with the marginalised. So, the work of the church, as it always has been, is to seek the renewal of all things, particularly for the poorest and the most neglected. And we do this in such a way that we do not do things *to* people but rather, recognising the image of God in all people, we do things *with* them.

We are a living stream and not a stagnant pond. The Church can never be static. Images of the Spirit are about a rushing wind and fire. There is life and dynamism. In Ezekiel 47, the prophet has a vision of a river flowing from the temple. The river brings life and healing. Within it there is food to eat and it refreshes wherever it goes.

Too often, we can become a stagnant pond. We no longer receive fresh water and do not flow out to bring God’s blessing to the world beyond. What then are we to do to enable churches to become flowing rivers and resist the inertia that makes us stagnant ponds?

Church as the 'Body of Christ'

Paul often refers to the Church as the body of Christ. In his first letter to the Corinthian Church he speaks of the different spiritual gifts which, gathered together, enable the work of the Church to be Christ's body in the world. Just as Christ was present with people - healing, teaching, calling to repentance and announcing the Kingdom of God - the Church, filled with the Holy Spirit, now continues this ministry. Two things are particularly important in this letter to Corinth. Firstly, that each part is of equal value. Secondly, that each part works together in love. The gifts given are worth nothing if they are exercised without love. This is the true meaning of the thirteenth chapter of the letter.

The Church must, therefore, properly value all gifts. There are not some special ones which are more important. Indeed, as Paul indicates, one part cannot say to the other that it has no need of them. The head without the foot is lessened, the heart without the liver is dead.

Although we would all agree that the Church is a body made of different parts, with each offering their gifts, this is not really how we often organise ourselves. The healthiest churches have a healthy body, enabling, releasing and valuing the gifts of all members. Churches of all traditions and descriptions have tended, however, to value leadership gifts above all others and have allotted tasks largely to those people who have them. A divide has also grown up between the spiritual and the practical, a dualism that is as unhelpful as it is unbiblical.

We therefore have to seriously engage with valuing and equipping people with different gifts, to recognise the complementarity of different gifts for effective mission and ministry. To fulfil our call, God has made us to be a body together. Valuing and working together is part of our 'growing up' as disciples, not simply a good way of getting the work done. In the first chapter of his letter to the Philippians, Paul gives thanks for them and their partnership in the gospel, and that God will complete the work he has begun in them. This letter would have been read aloud to the whole church gathered together in someone's house. They would all be described as partners in the gospel with Paul and with each other, and this was part of the work that God was doing in them. They are called 'partners', and so there is an investment from them in the work and also a sense that they are co-workers, not employees. Partners have a personal investment in a business, unlike employees. There is not the master/servant relationship of a typical contract. There is, therefore, a striking equality here. In a world of hierarchy, patronage and strict class division, the Church of Corinth models something different. The Church, where rich and poor, respectable and shameful, old and young gather together united in Christ, does its work with everyone called partners in the family business.

As in the body, each part plays its role and each part relies on the other. Some are prophets, others evangelists. Some teach, others care. Some organise, some lead. All serve. The ministry and, therefore, mission of the Church is enabled when the body works well together.

What we must continue to strive to enable is a proper understanding and practical outworking of the Church as a body made up of many different yet essential parts.

Pilgrims, but also place

There are also deep theological roots for understanding the Church as a pilgrim people – a people on a spiritual journey - and a people of place. As in so much of our faith, this is a paradox that needs to be kept in tension. We are a pilgrim people with a deep sense of place. Israel understood themselves to be both the descendants of a, ‘wandering Aramean,’ and also people with a land. They were people of exodus, shaped in the wilderness whilst longing for the land they were promised. Likewise, we should be rooted yet never settled.

For the Church of England in particular, place is vital. If the Church of England ended tomorrow, it is perhaps this characteristic that would be lost from the Church in this country. There are other things that would be lost, but principally this is what we bring to the party – a sense of incarnating Christ in every community. We are here for all people in all places, whether they care or not. It is perhaps this reason why the recent closing of church buildings has hurt so much. For all that we know that ‘church is people’ and located wherever they meet and wherever they live, the buildings speak of our - *God’s* - commitment to each place and each person, and to being open and available for them whenever they may seek him. The parish system, for whatever dubious reason it was originally set up, helps to psychologically shape our ministry and mission outwards. That we might have become a significantly congregational church does not negate the fact that, in principle at least, we are not one.

We are also pilgrims. We cannot stagnate in one place. Our faith, and our outworking of faith, should be dynamic. We learn on the journey. We reflect on the journey. There are hard times and desert experiences. There is hilltop joy and moments when we throw our bag down and slump at the side of the road wondering why we ever set off on this path. This is what shapes and deepens our faith. It is where we encounter God most profoundly, and also where our mettle is tested. In the desert, Israel shaped its identity and close relationship with God. In Babylon, they looked back and traced why they had ended up here and understood more deeply the importance of their covenanted relationship. Likewise, we cannot stand still, we are forever pressing on along the road, learning as we go and trusting in God for all that we need. We are sent out by Christ and, like the disciples before us, should take nothing with us save for what we receive from others on the way (in passing, it should also perhaps be noted that the disciples were not sent out alone!)

So we must hold these things in tension – place and pilgrimage. We are called to learn and adapt to changing situations, trusting in God for what we need but always willing to journey with him wherever that may take us. We are also committed to place because there is no division between sacred and secular, God saw what he had made and declared it to be good. So, too, we value what God has made and the place he has called us to. Just as God became incarnate in Jesus Christ, in a real time and real place, so too do we seek to incarnate Christ in the real places he sends us to. We are committed to serving and loving a place even when others have moved on because it is made, seen and loved by God and he has come into the world to make beautiful what has been broken, neglected or forgotten.

Rest

There is a danger that churches create more and more activity. Why do we do this? We recognise that this is an unhealthy aspect of wider society yet mirror it exactly within church. Is this again a symptom of 'functional atheism'? That is, we believe in a God who loves and has a purpose for his Church, yet we run around with great anxiety as if he has left us alone to complete the work.

Instead, perhaps we need to, as American spiritual writer Dallas Willard once said, 'ruthlessly eliminate hurry.' His contemporary Eugene Peterson spoke of the term 'busy pastor' as analogous to 'unfaithful spouse' – something that should be avoided at all costs. He also wrote of learning the 'unhurried rhythms of grace'. Busyness, hurry, are hallmarks of church at all levels. Perhaps there is a challenge for us as we seek transformation to be transformed in our hurriedness, our self-reliance and our lack of faith in what God can do? Sleep, as author Ian Stackhouse has said, is God's way of reminding us that we are not in charge and that the world can, and does, go on without us. Maybe we should build space and time for prayerful reflection, for idling minds which have space for creativity, in to our pattern of mission and ministry? Nor is this point clergy (or stipendiary clergy) centric. Rather, we seek a pattern of ministry which does not overly burden any of those who minister, wherever they are a minister.

One commentator on Psalm 23 points out that God leads us and makes us to stop and rest in green pastures. We do not do it naturally, but rather must be made to enjoy the goodness and abundance of God. Whilst we are never promised an easy life, these images of rest permeate Scripture. We need to build this into the vision for church that we are seeking.

Exile

Some have found the theme of exile helpful. We are in a place we would not choose for ourselves. Large buildings with seating for hundreds, bishops in the Lords and grand occasions of state, speak to us of what once might have been. Whether it actually ever was is debateable, but there is a deep sense of exile at the moment, only exacerbated by the restrictions on churches meeting. Like all exiles, we have been taken against our will away from where we felt comfortable. The Jews were taken away from Jerusalem to Babylon. They could not sing the Lord's song in a strange land, but sat and wept by the rivers. Here they forged the Hebrew Scriptures from their records and stories, seeking to recapture what made them a people and to understand why they had ended up in Babylon. It was a question of identity and explanation. In exile, they sought to live a life once again consecrated to God and fulfilling his call. In this, they witnessed to the world that there was one true God in heaven and they sought the peace of the city where they were exiled. When the exiles returned to Jerusalem, however, something was missing. The sense of God dwelling with them in the temple had gone. Though they returned to the land, it was not as they hoped.

What might we learn from this for own exile?

Firstly, we do not have a choice. Exile is being taken away without our consent. We can recognise this, and there is a place for lament. Too often, we try to resist or deny exile. We also fail to lament what we have lost and try to put on a brave face. So, being realistic is important and allowing space for the regret and lament which our hearts feel. We will return to this shortly.

Secondly, we must continue to rediscover our identity and trace where we have neglected our God and his call. What repentance, what turning away, must we do? What is it that God has called us to be and do, that we have neglected? What sets us apart as a people, or are we just like everyone else but with a funny Sunday hobby?

Thirdly, we must help people to live as a separate people who dwell in the world, and who will work and pray for the peace and health of the 'city'. We must recognise that there will be some things where we will compromise for the sake of our call, and some places where we must stand firm. For example, in the Bible, Daniel took the blasphemous name, Belteshazzar, yet refused to defile himself with the royal food and wine.

Finally, we will not be going back. The past is now in the past and a triumphant return to what once was is not possible. Exile has taken us away from where we were comfortable. To use the exodus imagery again, this means that we are also free. We might grumble in the desert, but we are now free and heading somewhere else. We must carry with us the essentials that give definition to us as followers of Christ, which give us roots, but we will not be going back to carry on as before. We will not be a different community, but we will be changed.

Lament

Some of us love change, others do not. In a world which celebrates the new, often we do allow ourselves to name what we have lost. This can even be when we have left a bad situation. Israel complained to Moses that at least in Egypt they had food to eat. We may feel excited about the possibilities that are before us as we rethink mission and ministry in the diocese. We may feel apprehensive or long for what once was. Yet a community needs to have both hope and excitement for the future and be able to mark the passing and ending of what has been before. Old Testament scholar Walter Brueggemann speaks of Isaiah as the prophet who gave the exiled Israel hope, but that they also needed to experience the grief of Jeremiah. Whatever the next steps are, we need to find space to lament, to offer it to our loving heavenly Father, and so find freedom to move on further.

Difficulty

There is a danger that we only value success. Yet we also follow a God who hung on the cross as a criminal, who seemed to have failed utterly in what he tried to do. Throughout Scripture, there are numerous examples of faith in the midst of profound moments of difficulty and failure. We can either be too cautious because we do not want the pain and rejection of failure, or we only celebrate what is obviously successful even if its long-term impact may not yet be known. This is not a plea to celebrate mediocrity or lack of thought. Rather it is the realisation that not everything we do will succeed, and the measure of

‘success’ may be quite subtle. The picture which Scripture often gives of the journey of faith is often one of disappointment, struggle and difficulty. We need to embrace this more whilst always living in hope. In the Second Book of Kings, four leprous men have to make a choice, which they define as, *‘we may die if we go there, but if we stay here we will definitely die.’* (2 Kings 7.4) Sometimes, even though what lies ahead seems like it will kill us, staying put is not an option. Again, we return to the character of God. Though we face struggle, we still hope because we believe in a God of hope, and trust that he will do whatever is necessary to continue his work of the renewal of all things.

Some final thoughts

Too often, visions and strategies are lost through being complicated. Jesus spoke to people in a way they could understand. Yet, we know that in Scripture there is all that is needed for a child to grasp easily and for us all to spend our entire life exploring. There is both joyful simplicity and satisfying complexity in our faith. It is a faith which has brought hope and transformation to myriad places and cultures across centuries. How do we find vision for the way forward which captures these things – a simplicity which enables us to speak of it easily and plainly, and a complexity which allows for the deep variety of human context, perspective and experience?

An image which we find particularly helpful, and linked to Exile, is that of singing the Lord’s song in a strange land (Psalm 137). How does the Church sing the Lord’s song today, as sojourners and exiles?

There is something here about the unity of singing the Lord’s song together, with each singing their own part. In Peter Shaffer’s play, ‘Amadeus’, Mozart explains to the Emperor what you can do with music that you cannot do in a play. In a play, people talking together just makes noise. In music, different voices, layers and expressions can be added together to make something beautiful. How do we sing the Lord’s song? How can we find that unity in diversity that God calls us to? How do we sing a song together which, because it is God’s, will be full of beauty and grace and hope for all things?

And how do we help churches to speak dialect? It was missiologist David Bosch, who said that, ‘God only speaks dialect.’ Too often, we can end up speaking in a foreign language. How, in this fresh vision for the Diocese of Newcastle, can we allow the Church to speak in the dialect of Northumberland?

Finally, there remains something to be learnt from Cormac and Aidan’s experiences of our area. Whereas Cormac found us to be difficult and unresponsive, Aidan spoke our language walked alongside us and showed us we were loved. We believe in a God who speaks our language, walks alongside us and shows us we are loved. How can we grow to be a church that shows this in our own day?

Having started with scripture, we want to end with scripture, and these verses from Luke 12 were shared with us at one of the recent conversations. The verses are followed by a warning to be ready, for the Son of Man will come when we do not expect him!

'Do not be afraid, little flock, for your Father has been pleased to give you the kingdom. Sell your possessions and give to the poor. Provide purses for yourselves that will not wear out, a treasure in heaven that will never fail, where no thief comes near and no moth destroys. For where your treasure is, there your heart will be also.'

Luke 12.32-34

So, as we continue these conversations, seeking both enough light to illuminate our next step and also a great vision to inspire us as we go, what is it that God is calling us to? What do we long for? And what are we prepared to do to get there?

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