

Transcript of an address to the Newcastle Diocesan Synod given by the Bishop of Newcastle, the Rt Revd Christine Hardman at a meeting of the Synod held on Saturday 11th May 2019 at the Dr Thomlinson Church of England Middle School, Rothbury.

There are key points in the journey of our lives which have great significance. There are moments when an opportunity appears which is significant, exciting, probably frightening, and the choices we make at those moments really matter - they have consequences.

I want to share a very favourite poem of mine which I think expresses something of the significance of these moments. It's called Annunciation. I'm just reading the beginning of it, it's by a poet called Denise Levertov and it expresses I think so powerfully that moment when the Archangel came to Mary.

*We know the scene: the room, variously furnished,
almost always a lectern, a book; always
the tall lily.
Arrived on solemn grandeur of great wings,
the angelic ambassador, standing or hovering,
whom she acknowledges, a guest.
But we are told of meek obedience. No one mentions
courage.
The engendering Spirit
did not enter her without consent.
God waited.
She was free
to accept or to refuse, choice
integral to humanness.*

*Aren't there annunciations
of one sort or another
in most lives?
Some unwillingly
undertake great destinies,
enact them in sullen pride,
uncomprehending.
More often
those moments
when roads of light and storm
open from darkness in a man or woman,
are turned away from
in dread, in a wave of weakness, in despair
and with relief.
Ordinary lives continue.
God does not smite them.
But the gates close, the pathway vanishes.*

I think as a diocese we are at one of these moments and I want to urge us not to turn away but to say yes to God, and mean it. The choice is ours, as it was Mary's. I want us to have the courage to respond to God's call to us. I have a strong sense that we are at a Kairos moment in our life as a diocese. We are seeing glimpses of a new landscape. There is a real sense of hope and expectancy.

"They say Aslan is on the move- perhaps has already landed." And now a very curious thing happened. None of the children knew who Aslan was any more than you do; but the moment the Beaver had spoken these words everyone felt quite different." A wonderful expression of course from CS Lewis, *The Lion, the Witch and the Wardrobe*. More conventionally and yet

also wonderfully expressed in Isaiah 43 Verse 19, *'look I am doing a new thing. It springs forth, can you not perceive it?'*

If we're going to respond to this Kairos moment, if we're going to have the courage to say yes to whatever it is that God is calling us to now in this diocese, to be and to do, then the first step we need to take is to look at the things that block us or divert us, and I believe that one of the biggest blockers on this journey we're called to make is money. Anxiety about money is playing far too big a part in our diocesan life at the moment, and we have to change this.

As a child I grew up in a family where money, or rather lack of it, blighted our lives. I was conscious from the earliest days that my parents lived on the edge, just about managing with a variety of loans, but always knowing that an unexpected large bill would tip things right over the edge. What this fear does to people is seared on my memory of one awful night when I was eight years old. My father had seen a little ornament that he thought my mother would love, and he brought it home as a surprise for her. When she saw it, all the fear about lack of money and debt surfaced for her, and she said to my father, *'how on earth could you waste money on this when you know what desperate straits we're in'*. A row ensued which ended with my father smashing the ornament on the floor. It lay there in pieces.

We need to use what many of us know about the destructive nature of anxiety about money in our personal lives - what debt does to us, what that worry does to us. We need to use it to help us in our life as a diocese, we need to sort ourselves out. We need to face up to our situation, and the important first step in doing this is to take a hard look at our income and expenditure. There's a gap between the two, and that gap is in the wrong direction, and we can't go on like this.

Our funding from the central church is going down each year until ten years is finished. This is tough and it doesn't help, but to be honest it's not the only cause of this situation. We've been struggling with our finances for many, many, years. So, let's look first at our expenditure. The biggest item by far is what we spend on ministry. At the moment we theoretically have 101 stipendiary posts. We can't fund 101 stipendiary posts. We get by, by having a growing vacancy rate. The trouble with relying on the vacancy rate is that we can't control where vacancies are going to occur, and we also know that having ever longer vacancies leads to a drop in attendance. We're shooting ourselves in the foot if we carry on doing this. What we're doing is reactive. We are not developing an intentional deployment strategy.

Ian Flintoft, in his role, has been helping us to look at how to develop an intentional deployment strategy, and has been leading the work where members of the Bishop's Staff Team have been going around to speak to deaneries. This work, together with other things, is feeding into our real grappling with this issue now. At a recent residential of the Bishop's Staff, we really grappled with this issue, and we were helped by the reflections of some members of Bishop's Council and Diocesan Synod who came for a session to reflect with us: Tony Thick, Catherine Pickford Carol Wolstenholme, Emma Doran and Liz Kerry.

Our best estimate is that we believe we can finance 80 stipendiary posts. It will take us 3 years to move towards this target. With this number of posts we hope we would not have to rely on long vacancies to balance the budget, and we will actually be able to do some hard thinking and praying about where our precious 80 posts ought to be. We could see this drop in the number of posts as a negative thing, but we really don't have to do that. This realism

gives us an amazing chance to move into the future with energy and with faith, and not anxiety.

Just as any family would do, as well as looking at our expenditure, we also need to look at our income, and see what we can hope to achieve. At a diocesan level we need to make sure that we do all we can to make our resources work for us. We are already doing that and we need to keep on doing that and doing it the very best we can. Under Robin Brims' leadership, we're reviewing our parish share system. A new system to be honest won't affect the amount of share we need, but it will help us to make sure that our system of allocating share is as fair as we can make it. We also have decided to move forward to appoint two new part-time posts to lead our work in stewardship and giving.

My deep hope beyond all this is that we will be able, each one of us in our diocese, in our congregations, to look prayerfully at our giving at a personal level, and decide about the amount we should pledge. Ideally through the parish giving scheme, because when you do that, you don't have to keep reflecting on it every year unless your circumstances change, the cost of living increase happens, if you wish it to do so. The lovely thing is that once we do this hard thinking and act, we can stop worrying about it, we don't have to keep being obsessed by money. God, and I can't say this too strongly, is not calling us just to balance the books, that is not the goal and purpose of our diocese. It's a necessary, but not sufficient, condition for us to be able to respond to all that God wants us to do. It's not our goal, but we need to get that sorted and out of the way. If we find at an individual, parish and diocesan level we can move on from anxiety about money then we'll find the faith, the imagination, the creativity to respond more fully to God's call to us to be agents of reconciliation and transformation in the communities we serve. That's what we're called to do, to work with God's mission, that's our goal, that's our purpose.

Look. I'm doing a new thing. Now it Springs forth. Can you not perceive it? Aslan is on the move. We're in a really exciting place in our journey. All over our diocese, God is at work. Extraordinary things are happening. Get hold of a copy of this week's Church Times, and just see what's going on in Byker, if you didn't know already. Incredible things happening in our city centre with our Cathedral, and the Resource Church at the early stage of its life at St Thomas the Martyr. In the West Tyne, God's Tent is appearing all over the place, there's all sorts of wonderful things happening, and I can't list every benefice and parish but looking at you now, I'm looking at you and knowing what wonderful things are going on. We're going to hear in a moment about our education in our church schools, fantastic hope there, great work going on. We're going to hear later on in this synod about our chance to seriously commit ourselves as stewards of our world that God has given us, stewards of creation with our work on looking at what's happening in the environment. So much that is so important, and it's a privilege that we are being, on our watch, called to take part in all this.

Underlying all of this, and this new landscape, is the imperative to find a new way of expressing our life together. We are not called to do more of the same with less resource. We are called to do something new, and something different. A new partnership between lay and ordained. A new way of acting as a church – *'look I am doing a new thing'*. We are called to travel through a new landscape. Aslan is on the move. Our Kairos moment is not about less, it's about different. The church has faced challenging times throughout her history and now as a diocese we have to make choices about how we live out our calling to share in God's mission. God's words from the Book of Isaiah encourage us to seek God afresh and to look

for God's work that is already unfolding around us. This is our task, to discern it to work with it, to move.

In a week's time, it's coming rather quickly, I will be leading a pilgrimage from Heavenfield to Holy Island along the St Oswald's Way, and at the heart of the pilgrimage will be prayer for this diocese. Prayers for all that we are seeking to discern. The questions we will be seeking to offer to God will be, 'what is this new thing?' and, 'where is it happening?' and, 'how can we join in?' That's the prayer for our pilgrimage. So, let's adventure together, let's say yes to an annunciation of God's call to us, not for our own survival, but for the sake of those we called on to serve.

Later on, in this synod, there's going to be a good chance for us to reflect together on some of this, and as you're listening to all that's going to be happening, and we listen to other presentations, think of perhaps two ways to focus our discussions. If you were to see a film of our diocese in ten years' time, what would you like to see, what would your hope be, what would your dream be for our life together. Also ponder the very practical question of how do we clear the way, dethroning mammon, as the Archbishop of Canterbury so powerfully titled his book, how do we dethrone mammon from our lives, sort ourselves out, so that our finances are as much of our spiritual life as anything else, so that the money, and fear of anxiety about money, doesn't cripple us as in places it is at the moment.

Thank you.