

One of the key themes of our gathering today is that of the renewal of vows.

I grew up with a well defined concept of what renewing meant. It was the thing that I had to get done to a library book, if I hadn't read it within the allotted fortnight, and wanted to avoid paying a fine of tuppence a day or a shilling a week. I was a fast reader, so it didn't happen very often, but it left me with an understanding of renewal that was entirely about extending the existing state of affairs for a further period. In my office at the present time, we are undertaking a process of renewal that fits very well into that category. All priests with Permission to Officiate are being written to and asked if they wish for it to be extended for a further five year period. I'm glad to say that almost all are responding positively to that invitation and, as long as they have the necessary DBS clearance and up to date safeguarding training, then it all happens fairly quickly and smoothly. Clergy can then carry on doing the things they have already been accustomed to do.

In the mid 1990s, as a vicar on the outskirts of Rotherham, I discovered a very different meaning of renewal. I'd arrived in 1991 as a middle to high church vicar in a parish that would have been described as Lancashire Low, if it hadn't had the geographical misfortune to be in Yorkshire. Over the next few years we went through a fresh anointing by God's Holy Spirit that probably surprised all of us. That process of Charismatic Renewal, as it was known, was very different from some simple extension of our mandate for mission. We held on to, and continued to nurture and grow much of the stuff that the parish had traditionally done, but it had a fresh energy, an energy that was also shared by new ventures that had not previously featured in our common or individual lives. Renewal here was about being made new.

And it changed how I thought about the Annual Chrism Mass. Until then, if I could find space for it in the Holy Week diary, it was largely about committing myself, in communion with my bishop and fellow ministers, to the next twelve months of effort. If I failed to make it to the cathedral it didn't matter very much, my licence wasn't revoked, my priestly vows did not expire in consequence of my failure. The Chrism Eucharist might involve a short period of self-examination, in much the same way that the annual renewal of my Franciscan vows did, and a consequent desire to do a little better, but it was mostly the mixture as before. Now, instead, it was about giving myself afresh to God, in the hope and belief that he would lead me into new and unexpected pathways.

That's how I want to invite you to see this service today. We are not seeking God's blessing to extend our terms of office, rather we are asking him to bless us for new purposes and causes, many of them yet unrevealed. We do this together, because we are not engaged in many separate and distinct personal ministries, both lay and ordained. Rather we are one body, supporting each other in the exercise of whichever calling we have received from God.

It's because we are one body, gathered together to renew our promises, that I want to suggest to you three particular aspects of our common life for which I believe God is calling us to a corporate renewal at this time: renewal in mission; renewal for a safer church; and renewal of hope.

Renewal in Mission

Renewal in Mission is about recognising that carrying on doing just what we've always done, even if we do it with remarkable skill, energy, and prayer is unlikely to bring the level of change we want to see both in new people coming to Christ and existing disciples reaching a new and deeper intimacy with him. Most of you will have seen the letter I sent out just a few days ago, in relation to our *Fit for Mission* programme. I am utterly convinced that the seeds of our renewal will come not from bright ideas in a bishop's study, but through the vision, imagination and energy of God's people, lay and ordained, in their parishes, chaplaincies and gatherings. A people renewed for mission will take brave and bold decisions. We will hold on firm to what still works and works well, accept the loss of what cannot effectively continue, and thereby be able more fully to embrace the new opportunities God is offering us. Wherever possible the key decision makers will be those closest to the point of impact, the ones charged to the task of mission in each place. My colleagues and I stand ready to support and equip our local churches for the challenge. I am particularly grateful to our four pilot deaneries: Ashton, Deane, North Manchester and Salford, who are pioneering this work on all our behalf.

Alongside the work of our *Fit for Mission* programme, we are identifying areas of mission that God is already blessing and where additional support from the wider national church can help us make faster progress. Our hope is to strengthen our partnerships between parishes and schools, and to launch new congregations in areas of high poverty and places with great cultural diversity, where church attendance is often at its thinnest. We want to renew those of our town centres that have seen better days, and to revitalise churches that have fallen on difficult times. All this too is emerging from the lived experience of Christians on the ground, responding both to what God is placing in their hearts and what he is already visibly blessing. I pray that today we can renew ourselves for this holy work.

Renewal for a Safer Church

Around 1230 last Monday I took the witness stand at the Independent Inquiry into Child Sexual Abuse. My particular brief was to give evidence about Safeguarding in Religious Communities - our monastic and new-monastic orders. I was only on the stand for about 50 minutes in total, but my preparatory reading had taken place over weeks and months. I had had to immerse myself in some of the most sordid details of crimes and abuses committed by church leaders, and I had to sit and listen to survivors giving their evidence of such dreadful treatment whilst I waited for my turn to be questioned. I can't pretend I was looking forward to it, but it has probably been one of the most important things I have had to do in almost 35 years of ordained ministry.

It is absolutely right that the church is being called to account for its gross failure to safeguard children and adults effectively over decades. We have made substantive progress from my early days as a bishop, when I repeatedly heard churches argue that God's forgiveness meant that it would be wrong to place any restrictions on a convicted offender in their congregation, even if the person wanted to work where children were present. Others would simply refuse to accept that an offence could have been committed by a respected priest or layperson, or would turn the blame onto the victim. All too often the protection of the good name and reputation of some individual, or of the church at large, resulted in the rejection of survivors and the covering up of crimes. Above all, even then, few of us truly grasped how life changing the experience of being abused is. And lest we think such things only happen somewhere else, let me remind us all that only 25 years ago, this very cathedral in which we are worshipping today, provided the environment in which the senior priest of the diocese, the then Dean of Manchester, groomed and abused young boys for his sexual gratification.

The IICSA inquiry has convinced me that whilst we have come a long way, we started from a very low base and still have a considerable distance to travel. But I'm heartened by IICSA too. We have begun to allow ourselves to be held up to scrutiny and made accountable for our safeguarding work, even where that is excruciatingly humiliating. We can build on last year's very positive independent audit of safeguarding here in Manchester to make this an area of our work that we can take pride in. The work may never be pleasant, but as many of you know from first hand experience, perhaps by taking a funeral in a very conflicted Pastoral situation, there is a particular sense of achievement reached by doing a hard and dirty job well. Even if we wish it hadn't needed doing. As we renew our promises today let us ask God to renew us especially for the demands of our safeguarding work.

Renewal of Hope

If we are not, as Christians, a people of hope, then we are nothing. Our faith is not merely in things that happened in the past, nor even in the assurance of a God who is present with us through the vicissitudes of this life, but in one who calls us towards his future - the coming of his Kingdom. Our hope is an Easter hope. It's foundation is the resurrection of our Lord Jesus Christ. He who came to live as one of us, now invites us to share with him in his eternal destiny. It's a hope both beyond this life and also for this life.

As ministers, lay or ordained, we are called both to live that hope and to proclaim it. Our strap line, "*Church for a Different World*" invites us both to work to change the world around us so that it more

closely resembles the Kingdom of God, and also to recognise that God's work will never be complete until we are united with him in an eternal world far greater than this temporal one.

We are called to be a sign of hope to the poor and needy, as we serve them in our food banks and night shelters, or out on the streets of our town and city centres through our pastors and Angels. We are called to be a sign of hope to the marginalised and oppressed, as we provide amplification for the voices of asylum seekers, and of those combatting the effects of illness or disability. We bring hope to those persecuted for their faith, as the Bishop of Bolton will be doing in Lahore Diocese over the latter part of this Holy Week and into Easter. And we are called to be a sign of hope to the planet, that humanity can become wise stewards of God's creation, and not its ruthless exploiters, as our Dean Rogers exemplified at the mayor's Green Summit in the Manchester Central conference centre five days ago. Not least, we are a sign of hope that communities of diverse faiths and backgrounds can live in harmony for the wellbeing of all; something we saw powerfully demonstrated in the response to the Manchester Arena attack last year. It will be our privilege in this cathedral to host a service reflecting that, on the first anniversary of the attack in a few weeks' time.

The three oils that we bless in this service are each in their own way a sign of hope. At baptism we anoint candidates with the hope of salvation. We anoint the sick in hope of their receiving healing both here and hereafter. We anoint at confirmation and at ordination with the hope that God will give each of us the necessary gifts to fulfil our calling. As you renew your own vows this day, pray that God might grant you a fresh gift of hope, that you may serve him joyfully.

May we be a renewed people, strong in mission, determined in safeguarding, firm in hope. That the world may see and believe in the one who God raised from the dead. Amen.