

Bishop Michael's Presidential Address

Diocesan Synod – 16 March 2025

Last weekend we were invited to remember its being five years since the start of the COVID pandemic. I found it challenging to think back to that time. One of the things I remembered was making decisions about listening to the news, with its daily statistics about the numbers of people being infected with the virus and of those who had died in the last twenty four hours. Five years ago our children were still quite small. We very quickly noticed the impact that listening to the news reports was having upon them; generating fear, anxiety, disturbance. So we took the decision to stop turning on the news and decided that each morning we would listen instead, for reasons that now escape me and would probably best not be gone into, to CDs of the Cornish group 'Fishermen's Friends' singing sea shanties. This was definitely the right decision to take for our children. It calmed them considerably though it does now leave me with very strange associations any time I hear anyone breaking into any such songs.

I've thought about this experience more than once during recent months and not just because of the calls to remember the pandemic that happened last weekend.

For I have found it really hard to listen to the news during the last few weeks. It has raised anxiety in me as I've heard about the kind of new world order that seems to be emerging around us. Of two million Gazans being told they need to leave their lands so that they can be redeveloped as a beachfront destination. Of the people of Ukraine being told that responsibility rests with them for Russia's aggressive invasion of their own country. Of the likely deaths of several million people due to the suspension and potential withdrawal of funding from programmes that enable access in low income countries to medicines for HIV. Of the possible dismantling of the NATO Alliance that has been the cornerstone of our country's security for more than 70 years. All this has led me to want to turn the news off.

While this may be a very natural response to the events unfolding around us, I hope as we meet as Diocesan Synod here today that will we resolve to adopt a very different course of action. For I believe that our calling as God's people in these days that we have been given to live in is not to be people of denial or despair but people of hope. Hope is one of the great Christian virtues that we are called to live out. It is spoken of consistently and insistently in our scriptures.

Romans 15 verse 13 says this: 'May the God of hope fill you with all joy and believing, so that you may abound in hope by the power of the Holy Spirit.'

What do Christians mean when we use the term 'hope'? We're not talking about the ideas of hope that are current in the everyday language of the world around us. Hope that's little

more than wishful thinking – ‘I hope it’ll turn out fine tomorrow’. It’s also much more than mere optimism ‘We hope that something will turn up’.

For the Christian, our hope is based in our faith and in our confidence in the death and resurrection of Jesus Christ. That through these things God has ultimately conquered sin and death and evil, all that would enslave or destroy or demean or annihilate us. Our hope comes out of living out our confidence in Jesus’s story – that’s why when Paul writes to the Church in Rome, he prays that his hearers may be filled with all joy and believing in what God has done and accomplished through Christ.

Our faith in Jesus’ victory won on the cross of shame and torture and scandal is called to be such that it demands that we don’t turn off the news, but rather find ourselves empowered to stare full into the face of the worst that the sorrows and injustice of this world can be. To look on these things and get involved in them when they cross the paths we tread. And that when we do so we face those realities and enter into them with a message of hope. A hope that’s not mealy mouthed or half hearted, but one that abounds, because it knows that nothing and no one will ever have Jesus beat. We’re not just called to achieve this by ourselves, by our own efforts, through our ability to do our best to whistle in the dark. Paul prays that his hearers will be filled with the power of the Holy Spirit. We offer and live out hope because God here with us, beside us, inside us, with us, a constantly source of strength and grace to sustain us.

God’s way is always to work with us, to empower us to join in his gracious mission to the world. As well as giving us hope, God calls us to be people who join with God in generating hope too. In Hebrews Chapter 6, the writer says this ‘God will not overlook your work and your love in serving the saints, as you still do.

We want each of you to show the same diligence, so as to realise the full assurance of hope to the very end’. To realise the full assurance of hope. We are called to be co-creators of hope, witnesses and co-generators with God of its reality in our world.

That’s why today I’m so delighted that we are going to be thinking together about the work that our churches do in transforming the communities around us. I’m not going to do a spoiler right now. We’ll be looking at examples later. For now, I just want to say that as I make my way around the parishes, schools and chaplaincies of our diocese I am constantly amazed and astonished at the different actions that Christians gathered together undertake in service of their local communities and in God’s name. What are we achieving through the work we do? Of course, and wonderfully, our actions are joining with God in enabling God’s way, God’s life, God’s kingdom to be more and more present in the world around us. But I increasingly wonder whether even more importantly our actions are speaking both to ourselves and to our world as signs and symbols of Jesus’s story, of the victory that is his, of the fullness of his reign that we long and hope for and that will ultimately be complete.

Our actions are expressions of God’s life that build trust in the Gospel message that is ours to share. We show by our actions that our hope is real, tangible, solid, that it can be seen at work in lives transformed, communities healed, justice enacted, mercy shown.

So let us today and all our days be people of hope, God's hope. Let us look unflinchingly out toward the whole world around us, bringing through our words, our faith, our actions to all of its care and concerns, its injustice and shortcomings the message that in the story of his son Jesus, our God has overcome and that through his Spirit he is with us always. Let us join with God in showing that the hope we carry is real, that it can be trusted and relied on. Let us hear and live the words of Paul: May the God of hope fill us with all joy and believing, so that we may abound in hope by the power of the Holy Spirit. Amen.