

# **DIOCESAN SYNOD**

**Saturday 22 June 2024**

**(Christ Church, Orpington)**

## **Presidential Address – The Rt Rev Dr Jonathan Gibbs**

Today we are marking Windrush Day, when we remember the arrival of a whole generation of people from the West Indies, giving thanks today for all that they brought to the life of a nation and at the same time, most importantly, acknowledging the racial abuse and injustice that they faced – and have continued to face – in our society and also most sadly in our churches. So thank you to Jeremy for leading us in our worship and prayers this morning, as well as for all that you do to help us to face up to and to address these issues here in the Diocese of Rochester.

At the same time, our world is torn apart by strife and wars some daily on our television screens (as in Gaza and Ukraine) and others curiously forgotten (as in Sudan, Yemen and many other places besides). Our nation, of course, is in the throes of a General Election with some kind of apparent bidding war going on between parties to attract our votes – but huge uncertainty about what the future holds, whoever takes over the reins of government in a few weeks' time. And, in accordance with the rules, I will say nothing further about the General Election!

And then, of course, there are the issues which we are facing within the Church of England and, indeed, within our Diocese; our financial challenges (of which more later this morning); the shortage of lay leaders and volunteers in many places; clergy stipend and pensions – not to mention the uncertainties around the implementation of Living in Love and Faith, and the potential challenges of debates at General Synod in a few weeks' time (on which I will not be commenting further this morning).

There are just some of the issues facing us today, whether formally on our agenda or lurking somewhere in the background! And, of course, there are many more besides – including major issues such as the climate emergency, the crisis in our health and care services, and the mental health and wellbeing of our children and young people.

So, just to be clear, it is not my intention – nor indeed, I believe, my calling – to reflect sagely on all of these issues and to propose a grand solution to all of our problems. The world is a complex place and – apart from perhaps a few brief periods (if ever) in our history – the fact is that humanity has always lived in “interesting” times. And, if we don't seem to do so at any given moment, it is only a matter of time before we ourselves contrive to make them more “interesting” through our own foolishness or greed.

Rather, what I would like to do this morning is to remind us of our fundamental common calling as followers of Jesus Christ, which is to love and serve God and to love and care for our fellow human beings and the rich and wonderful world that God has given to us to inhabit and to pass on to those who will share it next.

It is so easy for use to become distracted and obsessed – and then depressed – by the dreadful things that we see and hear going on around us. I heard a statistic the other day (and this mirrors my own experience, I don't know about you) that more and more people are switching off the news – because it is simply so depressing. I cannot do more than listen to the headlines on the Today Programme on Radio 4 these mornings before I listen to something more soothing by turning over to Radio 3.

In these interesting times, our task, our calling, is to focus on the things that really matter to God and that he calls us to care about.

And in the context of this Synod and the agenda before us today that means the detailed business of considering the Annual Report & Accounts of the Rochester Diocesan Board of Finance. You see, the way we use the money entrusted to us is the real expression of our theology, it is theology lived out. It reveals (or should do so at least) our priorities, the things that matter to us, individually as parishes and collectively as a Diocese.

What we have in front of us today is a celebration of the way we, together, are using our God-given resources to serve the cause of God's kingdom in this place, the Diocese of Rochester. And there are some great stories here in our Annual Report. There is so much good news about the way in which the Good News of the Gospel is being made known and experienced and received right across our Diocese and beyond, especially through our partnerships with churches overseas.

But there is another dimension, too. There is the reality (and we need to be honest about it) that we have not yet managed, since before the onset of the covid pandemic at least, to balance the books – and so really to be able to plan to invest in the growth of God's Church and Kingdom, not just to work to keep things ticking over and the wheels from coming off.

So I hope and pray that we will really engage with this Report today – picking up and giving thanks for the good news about which we read, but also recognising the challenges that we are still facing and the need to release the resources required to enable us to fulfil the very things that we believe God is calling us to do.

And the evidence is that the resources are there. Despite the cost-of-living crisis, the finances of many of our parishes have improved significantly since the end of the pandemic – their annual reports and accounts demonstrate that. But that has not yet filtered through in increased levels of parochial contributions to the Diocese.

And that means we are having to face tough decisions about things like clergy deployment and clergy numbers – and I regret that very deeply, not least because in the end it falls to me to make decisions about such deployment.

Let me say this very simply and clearly – I was a parish priest for 25 years before I was called to be a bishop, and the ministry of being a parish priest is in my bones and in my DNA.

I am, and will remain, utterly convinced that the beating heart of the Church of England is in its parishes – in the ministry of clergy and lay people in each and every community up and down this land. And it that ministry that I believe God wants to grow in this Diocese and across the Church of England.

And that conviction is at the heart of our diocesan vision and strategy – “Change, Serve, Grow”, about which we will hear more later on this morning – is all about enabling our local churches to take their full and rightful place at the heart of our communities: serving God and serving the people, loving God and showing his love in and to our communities.

**Change** is about the need for us to adapt in a changing world, so that our churches can play their full part in serving God and drawing people once more to faith in Jesus Christ. That is the longing, I am sure, in all of our hearts.

**Serve** is about the attitude we need to adopt if we are to earn and gain that cherished place in people’s hearts and at the heart of our communities. And we see that going on in all sorts of wonderful ways across this Diocese.

And **Grow** is about what God wants to bring about in our and through us, as people growing into the likeness of Christ and as churches where people are being drawn to follow Jesus through our words and through our deeds.

These, I believe, are the things that really matter right at the moment. And the vision and strategy that we are developing provide us with a flexible framework for working out what this looks like in each of our churches and our communities.

I also believe that focussing on this and working on it together – in our parishes, and deaneries and archdeaconries and Diocese – will enable us to deal with some of the other challenges we are facing.

I believe for instance that, as together we engage with our developing vision and begin to see how it can help reshape and refocus the work we are doing in our local context, then people will be encouraged to commit the resources needed to enable change, to equip people for service, and to grow local churches and even, yes, plant some new ones. It is as we catch that vision together that I believe people will be released to release the resources to enable us to fulfil all that God is asking us to do.

I believe, also, that it is precisely as we meet together, plan together, and work alongside one another – recognising our differences – that we will be able to find new ways of serving the cause of the Kingdom of God, learning from one another – even though at times, sadly, we may find ourselves unable to walk together as closely as we would have wished. That’s the sad reality of some of the issues we are facing in the Church of England at the moment.

That is my commitment and my desire as the Bishop of this Diocese – to enable each of our churches and each of God’s people to find their God-given place within this family, and to work with all our might to serve him in our own context and in the way he is calling each of us to do.

Sisters and brothers, the coming months will bring challenges to us within the Church of England. We will not always agree on everything – and, at times, the bonds of fellowship between some of us may be stretched pretty far.

But in the end it will be our common commitment to Jesus Christ and the cause of his Kingdom that will hold us together.

There is so much that we are called to do, so much that needs to be done, so that every person in the communities we serve can have the chance to know and receive the love of God revealed in Jesus Christ, and so that the Kingdom of God, the kingdom of righteousness and justice and peace, for which we long may come more fully in those same communities.

This is our calling – to love God and to make his love known to all, in word and deed, in our parishes, in our Diocese, and to the ends of the earth.

Thank you for allowing me the privilege of sharing in that calling with you. Amen.