

Bishop Jonathan's Inaugural Presidential Address to Diocesan Synod - 12 November 2022

Good morning. It is very good to be with you today. I would like to begin by thanking everyone for the wonderful welcome that Toni and I have received since we moved to Rochester over the summer. We are so grateful for the warmth and kindness that have been shown to us and we have greatly enjoyed meeting people from across the Diocese, both at Bishops Court and as we have begun to get out and about in the parishes and deaneries.

I would also like to say a huge thank you to my colleagues in the Bishop's Leadership Team for all they have done during the period of the Vacancy in See. They have worked incredibly hard during that time and they have also made the start of my ministry in the Diocese as smooth and straightforward as anyone could wish.

At the same time, I want to say thank you to all of you here today, as well as to your colleagues, lay and ordained, in your deaneries, parishes, chaplaincies, schools – and countless other places and organisations – for all that you have done and are continuing to do, especially over these last two or three very difficult years. No-one should underestimate that challenges of ministry during the pandemic, never mind all that has followed as a result of the war in Ukraine and the cost of living crisis.

Thank you for your persistence, dedication, compassion and sheer hard work in the places where God has called you. The heart of the Church is not our Diocesan structures (including dare I say our Synods!), it is the praying, loving, serving people of God in each of our parishes and other communities, where we are seeking the coming of God's kingdom on earth as it is in heaven. I *mean* that and I *know* that from twenty-five years and more in local church ministry, and my ministry as your Bishop will be focused most of all on seeking to support and strengthen the life and mission of our local churches and parishes.

As Toni and I have begun to travel around the Diocese, whether for formal services or simply taking the dog for a walk and nosing around churches and churchyards, we have been struck time and again by the fantastic variety of the communities we serve and by the commitment and enthusiasm of our congregations – even after all we have been through over the last three years. We have been to places as far apart as New Beckenham (which was described as a "frontier parish", being on the border with Southwark!), Rainham, Tonbridge, Pembury and Sevenoaks. And last week we visited five churches on a dog-walking outing, including Leigh, Chiddingstone and Penshurst. The variety is fantastic – and the pubs and cafes we found are pretty good too!

We are of course only beginning to scratch the surface, but it has been great to meet with people in Deanery clusters, to have the chance to introduce myself and to hear and respond to some of their questions. Bromley and Bexley are

still to come later this month, in case any of you were wondering! Each time I have been asked to say something about my background and faith journey, my sense of calling to the Diocese of Rochester and naturally enough about my vision and my hopes for my ministry here, and it is to that I want to turn now.

And the first thing any new minister needs to remember (whether priest or bishop) is that God was already at work here long before we arrived! Now that may sound obvious, but my point is that I am not starting with a blank canvas. A big part of what I need to do is to listen and learn, and to understand how things work and what God is already up to in this Diocese and all its varied parts. It's about learning how things work in different places – that Bromley is not Lamberhurst is not Chatham is not West Malling, and all the rest. I am so grateful for the way in which my colleagues, lay and ordained, are helping me to learn and understand "the way we do things round here". In particular, I am very conscious that you have already developed a shared vision of who God is calling you to be and of how he is calling you to serve him, under the heading "Called Together". That is a really important piece of work and one that I want to affirm very positively.

But of course, at the same time, I have come with my own history and experiences, with my own convictions about the life of the Church and what it means for us his people to serve him in our context in the third decade of the twenty-first century, and alongside *listening and learning*, I am also called here to share in *leading* this Diocese forward in the years ahead. And with this in mind I have already spoken on a number of occasions about three themes that I believe will be important for us in the coming years, as part of our fulfilling what it means to be Called Together to serve God in this Diocese.

I will say a little more about each of these in a moment, but I do want to explain that I don't see these themes as *replacing* the work that has gone into Called Together, so much as giving this a particular focus, which in turn can help us to identify where we are trying to go and what we need to do to get there – more about that in a few moments.

These three words, as many of you will know already, are *Change, Serve and Grow*. Now, please don't worry if you have heard these elsewhere in a different order – the order is much less important than the content – though I do think there is a particular logic to starting with them this way round.

Change, as we all know, is not something that comes easily to Anglicans (nor to many other people, come to that)! But change is at the heart of the Christian faith – the change that comes when we accept Jesus's invitation to follow him, the change that comes where we grow more and more into the likeness of Christ by the work of the Holy Spirit within us, the change that follows as God's kingdom comes a little more here on earth as it is in heaven.

And all around there is change – not all of it for the best – in the world in which we live. There is change too in our churches, as many of us have seen a significant decline in numbers attending, in our income (not least during COVID) and in our capacity to do all the things we used to take for granted. If we are to address and meet these challenges, then we need to be willing to change – to

find new ways of doing things for the sake of the gospel and the kingdom of God; sometimes that will be alongside what we are doing already, but sometimes it will have to be instead of what we have done for many years. The hardest question can sometimes be, how do we stop doing some things, so that we can do something else even better?

Serve is both about our attitude to one another within the Church and our orientation towards the world outside the Church. It is about the way we behave and it is about directing our energies to engaging with the needs of the wider world – expressing and making visible the love of God in tangible, practical and spiritual ways. Many of our churches are already doing this in a whole *host* of ways, not least during the pandemic and now as a result of the cost of living crisis. But maybe we need to change the way we think about how we serve, either by developing new ideas and projects – or by thinking about how we could join with others to enable things that we and they could not possibly do on our own.

This is about taking the life of our churches out into the community, and about bringing the community into the life of our churches, as places of welcome and warmth, of friendship and fellowship, perhaps also *working with other partners* to make a difference to the lives of those around us, whether it's running a foodbank with the Trussell Trust or money course with Christians Against Poverty – or whatever else. This is about having the confidence to look outwards and to build bridges over which the love of Christ can flow and in turn people can discover the hope we have through him.

And finally, *Grow*. Growth in the Church comes in many forms. It is about people coming to faith and joining our congregations. It is about people becoming more like Jesus, more loving, more caring, more compassionate. It is about increasing the impact of our churches in their communities, making a difference to those around us, and becoming part of the glue that can help fractured communities find greater cohesion and security. It is about releasing resources through generous giving and careful stewardship, so that our churches have the means to go about their work, and are also able to support God's work in other parts of our Diocese and in other places, including our partner Dioceses in other parts of the world.

We all know that many of our churches have been in numerical and financial decline over many years, and the challenges we are facing now have not made that any easier. *But I do believe that it is God's intention and desire that his Church should grow* in all the different kinds of ways I have talked about. And I also believe that for all the difficulties there is a great opportunity right now for us to help bring this about – in part precisely because of the turmoil and uncertainty that our world is facing at the moment.

You see, we have something that the world does not have. We have hope in and through Jesus Christ. We have hope because Jesus Christ has risen and has conquered the power of death and hell. We have hope because he has promised that his kingdom will come on earth as it is in heaven – and because he has commanded us to pray for that.

This is not simple optimism – that somehow or other things will get better. No, it is the hope we have because we know that God is with us always and that nothing can separate us from the love of God that is in Christ Jesus our Lord. It is the hope that God will guide us and show us the way ahead, even when things are dark and the future uncertain. We have *hope* and that hope can give us confidence when others are fearful – confidence to change and to try new things, confidence to serve and to step outside our comfort zone, confidence to believe we can grow and to *have a go*, knowing that even if we fail, God is there to pick us up and set us on the way once more.

I don't know exactly what this will all mean, and it will inevitably look different in different places, but there are a few things I do believe we should be looking to see and make happen across our Diocese, at least as a start:

- We should be working clearly and intentionally towards our congregations *and our leadership* becoming on average both younger and more diverse, so that they reflect more fully the communities that we serve.
- We should be seeking to grow our congregations and to grow new ones, working in partnership with and supported by our existing churches, not in competition with them.
- We should be seeking to increase our impact in our local communities, so that we are making a bigger difference to the lives of those around us, demonstrating the love of Christ in practical and visible ways.

There will be many more things beside these, but what I would like us to do over the next few months is to begin to explore these things together, with the aim of *refining and sharpening our shared vision*, so that we set some clear objectives for what we want to achieve under God and also a clear plan for how we intend to bring these things about. That is what we will be doing between now and roughly next Easter, by when I hope we will be ready to unite around a new set of priorities that express what it means for us to be *Called Together* to serve God in the Diocese of Rochester over the next few years.

I just want to say one more thing as I close, and it is this. *I do not believe that the Kingdom of God is a zero-sum game*. In other words, just because we say that certain things are our current priorities *does not mean that other things no longer matter*. The Kingdom of God can be about both/and not merely either/or. So if we say we want to become younger and more diverse, that does not mean that our existing congregations and the way they do things is any less valued – though of course it may mean at times that we have to make some hard choices between different priorities.

And that same message – that when we are dealing with God (and when he is dealing with us) then things are never just a zero-sum game – I believe can and should apply to some of the other challenges we are facing as a Church at the moment – including over some of the issues that threaten to divide us. *The Kingdom of God is not a zero-sum game* – God is full of surprises and is able to open new and unexpected possibilities that we have not begun to imagine. That is because he is the God of Hope, who invites us to go forward with him and to share in the adventure with him.

Thank you for inviting and allowing me to be part of this journey with you. I am confident that, however bumpy the ride may be at times, God has great things in store for us in the years ahead. Thank you.

+Jonathan

Bishop of Rochester