

There is something surreal about today for me. You see friends, 35 years ago this very week, I stood here in this school, and I took my first secondary school act of collective worship. I was the new curate of Sherborne Abbey and having passed the test of a primary school assembly on arrival in July, I was allowed to take an assembly, here, at the big school, in this hall, on this spot, for the first time at the start of a new term. 35 years ago. I now stand here as diocesan Bishop. I have to say that this hall, full of teenagers who were ready to ignore every word I said, was not as tough a gig as this Synod. We'll come back to that.

As your Bishop, I was asked in July by a fourteen-year-old in a school, "Was I enjoying being a Bishop?" It was the most difficult question I have yet faced. I paused, and then replied, "Yes, but only because it is the Diocese of Salisbury". I don't think I could have been as positive about being elsewhere. It's about being a Bishop in today's church. I'm not after sympathy, it's just the way it is. I'll come back to that.

We live in fractious times. It's largely to do with the outwash from the pandemic which we have chosen to ignore, and the total loss of confidence in leadership. It's bad at the moment with speeches in party political season, and it's only going to get worse for us all as the impending general election approaches. As Christians, we need to have a different discourse. I shall come back to that.

We live in challenging times, far more complicated than 35 years ago, and sadly, is there anyone here who was born in less than those 35 years to inform our common life. (*One person raised a hand*).

So, what is the response of the church? What do we engage in? How are we judged by our words? I'll let you decide that. You ask the questions. I'm only interested in *Making Jesus Known*.

We have so much good news in this diocese. What a place to live and thrive in! How fortunate we are! As I have said from the beginning, 'If it can't be done in Salisbury Diocese, it can't be done'. The rest is simply a matter of what we choose. I have just commissioned our new Director of Education. Our schools are a jewel in the crown of the Church of England. Over 40,000 young people, half of all those learning in all schools in Dorset and Wiltshire, are in our spiritual care. What a privilege, what a joy, what a mission. I shall come back to that.

Today, we have a choice around how we choose to live as followers of Jesus Christ in this place. Do we choose to be faithful, or do we choose to listen to the noise? Is God faithful or are we faithless? Where do we place our trust in uncertain times? And when we speak, is anyone listening? It's not unlike that first assembly.

35 years ago in this place, I broke bread. One loaf, broken into so many pieces, to be shared over prayer with everyone here. A moral for everyone, a sign for one and all. Everybody ate. No one refrained. We all shared, even those who didn't want to be there. All equal. All one. 35 years ago. As Jesus showed so many times, action can speak louder than words.

My brothers and sisters, we have a choice. And that choice is going to become all the more stark in the days to come. Our nation is going to become more fractious, more polarised, less generous, and less honest as the next election approaches. As Christians, we have a higher calling. Do we respond with our own divisions, or do we model Gospel values to our desperate nation? More and more I come to realise in this job that unless we focus upon the person of Jesus Christ, and seek to be like him, and say what he said, and do what he did, and be with those he spent time with, then unless we are like him, we are lost. I've been amazed by the dedication of so many in my first year and saddened in equal amount by our lack of love for one another. That is not making Jesus known.

I have to be honest with you. I am trying to be what you asked for, and to be as visible and as engaged as possible. I'm loving being everywhere, alongside +Karen and +Andrew. It's working. We have amazing people changing communities and being good news. That fact is off the scale. But if together, we don't believe in ourselves, belong to one another even with differing views, just as the disciples had, then no-one will believe in the person we proclaim. The Vision and Strategy we shall speak about today are generally recognised as among the best the church has produced thus far, and we must rejoice in it, no matter how we feel about the so called concept of the 'diocese' (which is only the sum of our parochial parts) or #TeamSalisbury. I was asked the other day what the three things are that are the most important to me in our plans: I answered,

1. The local church, 2. Children & Young People, and 3. Evangelism. All three intertwine.

Everything about our vision & strategy is about that, shot through with the Five Marks of Mission. Whatever our differences or parochial preferences, surely, we can agree on that.

Recently, I've been challenged by a number of sources about the cure of souls. Those doing so, might think the diocesan Bishop has a powerful magic wand to change decisions and implement priorities at a whim, whilst our Anglican system does anything but that. But the genius, indeed the gift of the Holy Spirit in our bonkers church is that the cure of souls is both yours and mine. We bear the responsibility for the spiritual lives of everyone in our populations, not just those who choose to be in a congregation, you and I bear that responsibility equally. No other denomination does this, enshrined in law. Yours and Mine. If you go away with nothing else today, go with those three words. Yours and Mine. On behalf of our Lord, in the power of the Holy Spirit, and in the name of the Father, when you drive back today, you share in the cure of souls, they are yours and mine. Different in every place. United in one diocesan family around a Bishop. The Apostolic model. How does that make you serve them? All of them. Especially those different from yourselves or those with whom you disagree.

I said I would come back to those questions. I love visiting schools. It is just the best thing. I see the faith alive in our schools in this diocese more than in our churches. Sorry if that is hard to hear, but it's true. Last week I visited Bishops Cannings Primary School north of Devizes. We broke bread. Bread they had baked. We talked openly, questions and answers, no holds barred. And then, and then, 35 years on,

we shared in collective worship. Towards the end. Six children came forward and asked if they could pray over me. I just had to listen and to receive. It was the most spiritual moment since my arrival among you. These are their prayers as they exercised the cure of souls.

Ayla: Dear God, please help Bishop Stephen to look after all the churches with all of his heart and all of his love. Amen.

Ella: Dear God, please help Bishop Stephen when he is finding things tough. May he know that you will be there in his heart. Amen.

Andrew: Dear Lord, please give Bishop Stephen perseverance, wisdom and graciousness so that he can do his job well. Amen.

Max: Dear Lord, please help Bishop Stephen when he is scared or nervous. Please help him to persevere. Amen.

Noah: Dear God, please help Bishop Stephen to be wise in his choices and carry out the word of God, and show kindness. Amen.

Phoebe: Dear Lord, please help Bishop Stephen to persevere and have wisdom when making hard choices. Amen.

My message for you today is this. Matthew Chapter 18.

At that time the disciples came to Jesus and asked, "Who is the greatest in the Kingdom of Heaven?" He called a child, whom he put among them, and said, "Truly I tell you, unless you change and become like children, you will never enter the kingdom of heaven. Whoever becomes humble like this child is the greatest in the kingdom of heaven. Whoever welcomes one such child in my name welcomes me".

The Lord be with you.

And also with you.