

Installation as Bishop of Dorking

1st July 1997. I was 24 years old and had been ordained deacon 3 days. Shiny black shirt. Shiny black hair. And plenty of it too. My first liturgical task: to read the lesson at a Mothers' Union Festival. The Dean welcomed everyone to the service: 'and a particular welcome' he said, 'to Bishop Huw Jones (our diocesan), Bishop Tony Peace (our preacher), and Bishop Paul Davies (our new curate)'. There was instant laughter. The Dean realised what he'd said, turned the microphone back on, and added 'my apologies, a prophetic slip there'. I tried to hide a face which suddenly matched the purple cassocks of the bishops sitting next to me. Someone's laughing Lord. Kum by Yah!

But laugh away. This evening is an indescribable gift. The opportunity of a second calling to serve a diocese and people that I have grown to love is not one I receive lightly. I am immensely grateful to Bishop Andrew for the trust he has placed in me; to Acting Dean Stuart and the whole team here at the Cathedral - including Katherine and this amazing choir for allowing me to choose all the music for this installation; to our civic, ecumenical and inter-faith friends (not just for being here this evening but for a partnership that we treasure greatly); and to you, my sisters and brothers in Christ, for inspiring and teaching me so much over the last six years and for the hundreds of messages of love and support since the announcement of my appointment. I can't thank you enough.

In the last month, there have been two milestones which have felt particularly special for me.

My ordination at Westminster Abbey 10 days ago was an occasion I shall never forget. To be anointed and consecrated in the very place where our King and Queen were anointed and consecrated earlier in the year, and where so many of their predecessors and mine [including Bp Ian] have been prayed over and sent out as servant leaders was a profoundly spiritual moment.

But there was another milestone too. A fortnight before, on 16 September, I celebrated the 50th anniversary of my baptism. A far less impressive occasion. No archbishops or bishops. No big processions. No impressive music. 15 people gathered around a font on a wet Sunday afternoon in West Wales. I have no memory. But I have the faded certificate and photograph above my desk.

As I reflect on both these events, some words of St Louis strike me. He was King of France from 1226-1270. He said this: 'I think more often of the little church where I was baptised, than the abbey at Rheme where I was crowned. For the dignity of a *child of God* is infinitely greater than that of the ruler of a kingdom. The latter I shall lose at death, whereas the former is my passport to everlasting glory'. Whilst I'm not the ruler of a kingdom (and if I ever try to be, please take me to one side), Louis speaks to me: being made a bishop at Westminster Abbey is a big deal, but no-where near as big a deal as being made a *child of God* on that wet Sunday afternoon in September 1973.

This seemed to be the dominant theme of my pre-consecration retreat with the St Beuno's Jesuit Community in North Wales a few weeks ago. Some will struggle to believe that I spent 6 days in silence. But I did - on the whole. And what I heard, in the beauty of the Vale of Clwyd, through reading God's word, joining in the worship, and walking in the hills, was a still small voice reminding me, seemingly over and over again, that my primary calling is to be a *child of God*. I went to prepare myself for consecration, but the Lord gave me a baptism refresher course. I heard him say to me, 'you can't be a bishop - indeed you can't do anything in my name - without knowing and re-knowing me as your Heavenly Father - and you - and your sisters and brothers - as my precious children'.

And I feel he's whispering that message in my ear again through the readings appointed for this evening. Our first reading from the Book of Proverbs began '*My child*, if you accept my words'. Our second reading, from the first letter of John, likewise begins '*My little children*, I am writing these things to you'. Both readings remind us of the deep joy and privilege of being a *child*, a *child of God*. But both readings also give us some insight into what our formation as His children involves.

The first reading from Proverbs is about *listening*. In this book of the Old Testament, Solomon pours out his wisdom for the benefit of the wise, the fool and the simple (I think I probably fall into the latter category!). Chapter 2 is a cleverly constructed acrostic poem. And in the nine verses Llinos read to us, Solomon addresses the question 'what do we need to do to get wisdom?' There are a few leads here, but the one that stands out for me is about listening... 'making our ear attentive'. When I was first exploring vocation, my mother was a bit concerned I might become a monk. There was little risk there. Far too much silence. But if I did, I would definitely be a Benedictine. Many years ago, a friend suggested I read Benedict's rule – written in the 6th cent. I did and I thought it a load of rubbish. But I stumbled across it years later, gave it another go, and it felt like gold. The foundation upon which Benedict's rule is based is listening deeply: to God and each other. It's a deep prayer of mine that we would, as disciples, as a church, become much better at listening.

The second reading from the first letter of John is about *loving*. In this book of the New Testament, John reiterates the theme that is so central to his Gospel – love: its definition in the life, death and resurrection of Jesus; and its application in the *mandatum novum* – the new commandment – that we should love one another as he has loved us. In the verses that Esther read to us, John also links it with another theme which is prominent in his Gospel: light. It reminded me of the story told at our wedding of the Rabbi who once asked his pupils how they could tell when day was breaking. 'Could it be' asked one pupil 'when there's enough light to distinguish between a fox and a dog'? 'Not so' said the Rabbi. 'Could it be' asked another pupil 'when there's enough light to distinguish between a fig tree and a peach tree?' 'Not so' said the Rabbi. 'Day breaks when you can look at another person and see them as your sister or your brother. Until you can do that, it's always night'. In the context of this broken and divided world, and most recently now the escalation of conflict in the Middle East, it feels like daylight hours across the globe are reducing significantly.

So as I begin this new ministry, I feel God returning me to some basics - and I invite you to join me. We are the *children of God*. And as we walk through the wardrobe, clutching those passports to everlasting glory, we need to be constantly immersing ourselves in the language and values of this kingdom we enter: listening and loving. The ordination reminded me last week, it's not something we can do in our own strength – which is why we have the gift of the Holy Spirit – for which this Cathedral (the only one in the country dedicated to the Holy Spirit) is a powerful reminder in stone.

But some of you may be pondering...so what can we expect of the sixth Bishop of Dorking? A great friend of the fifth bishop but certainly very different... shorter, rounder, different gender, pedigree etc. Despite the differences, as I receive the baton from Bishop Jo, there will be much continuity. Through the daily round and common task of bishoping, I will give my all, alongside Bishop Andrew, in our mission of *Transforming Church and Transforming Lives* through deepening our listening to God and each other; deepening our love for God and each other - and in seeking to draw others into that circle of listening and loving too. I'm hoping you will see me around lots - not least because at heart I'm a parish priest writ large who loves being in parishes and alongside people. But there will be some changes too. I have a slightly different portfolio from Bishop Jo. I'm delighted to be the new Episcopal Warden of LLMs and particularly delighted to be a champion for three specific areas in which I'm going to be focussing my listening and my loving over the years ahead.

The first is about helping us to listen to and love the world we have been given. It wasn't all that long ago that when I talked about climate change or our looming environmental crisis, some people used to tell me that I was talking a load of rubbish. Blessedly, we've quickly moved past that stage. We all know that the consequences of not acting, and acting seriously and urgently, will be catastrophic for our children and grandchildren. It's estimated that, by 2050, failure to act will result in 3 billion people living in areas too hot for human survival; 143 million climate change refugees; 26 further wars, alongside the catastrophic consequences on health, economy, biodiversity, the built environment and so much more. There's a possibility that could be within my lifetime. And for Christians, this is in every sense a theological problem. It's about listening and loving. It's about stewardship. It's about justice. Our diocese has committed itself to the ambitious target set by the Church of England that we should be carbon neutral by 2030. We already have a plan and are in the early stages of implementing that. I look forward to being the episcopal champion for this. I'll be trying to lead by example – so expect me to be looking for your bike rack or downpipe!

The second focus is about helping us to listen to and love each other - and especially those who are underrepresented in our church communities. There'll be two particular foci of this (although I recognise there are other aspects we also need to attend to). The first is children and young people. I can't wait to spend more time in our 83 schools (though I can't promise to visit all of them before Christmas!). One of the highlights of the discernment process for this post was my interview with young people in our diocese. I'm so grateful to Aimee (one of that team) for presenting me this evening as a sign of my commitment to young people. We have so much to learn from them and they have so much to give - but they are underrepresented in our diocese and we need to attend to this as a priority. Once again, we have an exciting project to increase engagement with young people which has recently received financial blessing from the National Church and which I shall be supporting in the months ahead. I'll also be chairing the Racial Justice Group which has also been a passion of mine since I heard Archbishop Desmond Tutu speak when I was a student. We have now launched our racial justice policy as a diocese, and I'll be driving the implementation of that as we become a people who more clearly represent what Tutu beautifully called 'the Rainbow People of God'.

And my third particular focus will be about helping us to listen to and love the gifts that God has given each of us. That's about vocation. Blessedly, not everyone is called to be a bishop, priest or deacon. But everyone is called to use their gifts in the service of the Kingdom of God. I remember preaching on this in my last parish once. And a shout out here to them. They're gathered this evening in St Marys, Burry Port and joining us by live stream. They will, of course, remember every sermon I preached there. For their reference, this particular one was preached at the Evening Service on the Second Sunday in Advent in 2009. I remember it well because, after the service, Arthur (at the time 91 and now gone to glory) told me that I was wrong. I'd made a serious mistake. Not everyone does have gifts. For he'd been left out. I told him that we needed a chat about this. So I visited him the next morning and found him in his shed making a beautiful wooden bowl on his lathe. 'So' I said 'this is the man who has no gifts'. 'Well, this is no use to God is it'. 'Quite the contrary' I said to him 'the Lord has need of that bowl'. Oh my goodness, Paul, you've put your foot in it now. I found myself walking down his path saying to God 'I need you to need this bowl'. It didn't take long. In next Sunday's civic service, I presented the bowl to our new Mayor, John, as a symbol of servant leadership. He was in tears and when John sadly died, his widow told me that the bowl had had a profound effect on him. Arthur made me so many bowls after that, I was giving them out like smarties... and not just bowls, but anything he could make for others from wood. He discovered his vocation at 91. What are the gifts that God has given you, and are you using them to their fullest potential as a *Child of God*? We are developing more and more support in the diocese for people to explore this. Have a word with your vicar or speak to one of us here this evening.

All that's going to be fairly effective in keeping me out of mischief in the months and years ahead. Please bear with me as I get used to wearing this shiny new purple shirt. I don't have the hair to match this time. A fortnight ago, at the Evensong here to mark Dean Dianna's retirement, Acting Dean Stuart did suggest that he might purchase a purple wig in her honour. Perhaps you could order two Stuart? And sisters and brothers, of your mercy, as I commit myself to pray for you, please pray for me, that I might daily increase in the Holy Spirit more and more - for the sake of St Augustine's [slightly amended] words, that with you I may be a listening and loving child of God, and that for you I may be a listening and loving bishop.

+Paul, Bishop of Dorking
Inaugural Sermon
8 October 2023