

## **Synod Address, October 2023**

In opening this Synod, let me focus firstly on a couple of more domestic matters. I then want to peer out beyond ourselves into the global situation, before centring back once again on the agenda before us this evening. Apologies that I shall go on rather longer than usual.

It is with deep sorrow that we acknowledge the death of Keith Riglin, Bishop of Argyll and the Isles. I shall be gathering with many others tomorrow for a requiem mass in his cathedral in Oban and I shall be attending his funeral in London on Monday. Please continue to pray for him, for his wife, Jen and his two daughters. Pray too for his diocese. The new Canon 4 allows us to delay the start of the process to elect his successor, and this we have done. I'm sure that many feel, as I do, that having only just got to know Bishop Keith, we were ready to enjoy his company for much longer. Instead, we must pray that there is joy in the company of heaven at his arrival.

A bishop in the SEC is never entirely confined to her or his diocese, so you will understand that both the College of Bishops and the Province as a whole is the poorer for Keith's departure. The remaining members of the College, already stretched by the suspension of one of our number, are now stretched further. Thankfully, we have put in place alternative provisions for Aberdeen & Orkney, pending the conclusion of the Canonical process involving Bishop Anne. I shall be handing over my very much part-time duties there to Bishop Dorsey McConnell who is offering himself as a full-time alternative. This is very much what the diocese needs at this point and they will have just the right person in Dorsey.

This means, of course, that from next Thursday I shall simply be Bishop of Edinburgh and nowhere else. Even so, I have two more trips to Aberdeen in the next 10 days to conclude matters and to handover to Dorsey. After that, well, I'm yours again and I hope that, by the end of November, I won't begin every email with an apology for taking so long to reply. It has meant a lot of extra work, not just for me but for the staff in our diocesan office, and for Dean Frances and Godfrey Robson our Diocesan Secretary. They have kept things moving in very significant ways - I shall touch on some of this in a moment - but I think you know what a blessing we have in our diocesan staff and officials, and I want to record my thanks to them here.

I must underline that my time with Aberdeen & Orkney has offered me much joy. I've met some truly wonderful people and I give thanks for the many faithful congregations who, with the clergy of the diocese, are doing great things for God. There is certainly conflict but, as with most conflicts, there is no clear dividing line between those in the right and those in the wrong, and I'm not sure it's helpful even to speak in this way. Bishop Brian, my predecessor in Edinburgh, was wont to draw our attention to Psalm 85 which looks forward to a time when 'love and faithfulness will meet and righteousness and peace will kiss each other.' How often our disagreements arise because of the tension between being loving and being faithful; standing up for the right on the one hand, pursuing peace on the other. And our perspective on what constitutes love and faithfulness, righteousness and peace is shaped by experiences that go way back into the past.

If this is true in Aberdeen, it is writ large in the conflict in the Middle East. Standing on the outside, we are yet aware that our own country's history makes the UK complicit in that situation. Standing on the outside, we have to be wary of assuming that we even begin to understand the deep traumas and ancient animosities that drive the actions of those who live there. Standing on the outside, we yet recognise this, that each person in Israel or Gaza, no matter what their faith or their ideology, whether babe in arms or rich in years, is uniquely precious in the sight of God.

In the days following the Hamas atrocities I wrote to our local Rabbis and Synagogues expressing my sorrow and assuring them of my love. I acknowledged that many families in Scotland will be affected by this, with relatives and loved ones caught up in the violence. I said, 'All our congregations in the Edinburgh Diocese will be holding this situation in prayer, and we join with people of all faiths across the world who share a longing for peace and shed tears at the deaths of innocent ones caught up in conflict.'

As was clear then, of course, the consequences of that attack are proving to be horrendous for the people of Gaza too and our minds recoil at the profound suffering in a part of the world so dear to Christians as well as Jews and Muslims. Just days before the calamity struck, I was asked to write a message to be included in the programme for an interfaith event in our Cathedral on 13th November. I said, 'Like so many people of faith, Christians take as a golden rule that we should treat others as we wish to be treated. Yet we are conscious that we live in an angry world where loud voices denigrate others and stir

hatred of those who they perceive to be different. ... the strong message echoing through Christian Scripture is that the love of God is for all, and that I am to regard my neighbour first and foremost as a child of God, just like me. Christians believe that each person reflects the very being of God. This means that the challenge we face is to respond to others not in fear or prejudice, not out of our hurt or our ignorance but in love – love that reaches out to embrace the unloved and the unlovely, in both human and non-human creation.'

I believe this with all my heart, but I am all too aware that words are easy, what matters is action, and I thank God for those dear, brave people, in Israel and Gaza and beyond, who put themselves in harm's way and whose selfless actions daily affirm the dignity of each person and who, amidst the agony and terror, the dust and rubble seek to rebuild shattered lives in the face of such a terrible humanitarian disaster.

With so many hard things happening around us at the moment, it is tempting to fixate on the negative and to read everything in this way. And I am conscious that there's a lot of anger around and a tendency, even in the church, to construct a narrative of 'half empty' rather than 'half full'. Yet, turning to this evening's agenda, I want to acknowledge the many signs of hope in the continuing life of our diocese.

These past two months have been exciting, with some ordained to new ministries, some inducted into new roles. Come December, the reshaping of the Borders charges will be complete, for now, and fully staffed. The Priory Church in South Queensferry will have a full time priest at last and, shortly, we would hope to announce a 75% appointment at Roslin. And I'm sure you share my delight in welcoming the Franciscan Brothers back to St David's, Pilton.

Around the time I became your bishop, Provincial funding to support mission initiatives ceased to be administered centrally and was dispersed to the dioceses. This allowed us to make our own decisions about diocesan appointments and support for charges. These funds were supplemented for us by the return on the investments we made following the closure and sale of St Hilda's church in Oxbgangs. Over the years, this has meant that we have been able to encourage, with significant grant funding, a number of charges to fulfil their plans for new life and growth.

The pandemic concentrated our minds in all sorts of ways, and one outcome was the extra money released to support some of the charges I've just

mentioned, offering an investment into their mission to their locality, at a time when so much other investment is being withdrawn from those same communities. As we shall hear later, this isn't intended as a one off act of generosity from the diocese, nor is this money to be given without both ongoing support and accountability.

But let's be clear, money alone is no solution, even if we had endless supplies of it. When I look around the diocese at what might be called 'successes', by which I mean congregations that are thriving, where faith is deepening, enthusiasm stirring, or numbers growing, and there are a significant number of these, it often comes down to the people who, by divine grace, find themselves serving God in these places. The vision and pastoral wisdom of those now long gone, the continuing resilience of congregations, the leadership of clergy and lay readers, the willingness of members of one congregation to offer their talents to others, the imagination to reach out into the community in all sorts of ways, the joyful discovery that we serve Christ every day, not just on Sundays.

A certain amount of reorganisation has been necessary, the willingness to try new things, plant new things, but ultimately, the church's mission is fulfilled by Christians living out the promises of their baptism in response to the God who reaches out to us in Jesus Christ and calls us to live in Him. This is why we are in a Season of Christian Life, it's why we put so many provincial resources into discerning and training those called to ministry, ordained and lay - and it's why I feel so encouraged and hopeful at the moment.

It's as if we are turning a corner, changing our perspective. We no longer need to look backwards or to measure our success against what we imagine the church was in the past, but we can look forward, open to new possibilities, trusting that God, far from giving up on us, far from letting us slide into inevitable decline, actually has plans for us, plans to give us hope and a future. And the great thing is that we are beginning to discover that though the future may be unknown, with God beside us we have no reason to be afraid.