

Bishop John's Diocesan Synod Address, 24th February 2024

If I had not been at Synod this morning, I would have been at the Castle, in the Memorial Chapel, alongside Ukrainian Friends, praying for peace after two years of the terrible conflict with Russia. I'm grateful that the Stephen Holmes, Rector of Holy Cross and Priest-in-Charge of St Salvador's, is representing us at that event, and I've asked him to assure everyone that this Synod offers its support and its prayer.

Our meeting today takes place in the context of a troubled world. It is often said that there are no bad people, just people who do bad things. On the other hand, our faith proclaims that God loves each member of the human family, even though each of us falls short of the perfection God calls us to – that we are all caught up in a pattern of failure fed by the pride and selfishness that we call sin. This might suggest that there are no **good** people, just people who do good things. And it means that the bloodiest conflicts in the present are rooted way back in the past and that decisions made now by powerful individuals are themselves shaped by the history those individuals have grown up within and the thought-patterns and political priorities of the culture that surrounds them.

All this is true. Yet, though it explains the mess we are in, it does not excuse it. Each of us still bears moral responsibility for the decisions we make – especially when we make those decisions from a position of power. Each of us has the opportunity to imagine a better world and to use what power we have to move our world in that direction. And though it may be said that there are no bad people, only people who do bad things, let's be honest, there are some people so fixated on doing bad things that it becomes almost impossible for us to differentiate the person from their actions. We are, as Jesus tells us, known by our fruits. And that is as true for me, and for you, as it is say, for President Putin or any other of the demagogues wielding absolute authority or seeking it.

The situation in Gaza is one of unalloyed horror. Whether we call for an 'immediate ceasefire,' or a 'humanitarian ceasefire,' or a 'sustainable ceasefire' or merely a 'pause in the fighting,' all of us want the killing to stop, we want the hostages returned, we want an end to regimes that treat human life as expendable, we want modern nations to be accountable to a realistic and sane version of international law. And we want all that just for starters. I know that some of you and some of our congregations have said this loudly and forcefully – thank you. And I am aware of others who have been passionate about voicing solidarity with the Scottish Jewish community, in the light of a rise of

antisemitic abuse – thank you. And like you, I recognize that this is not about taking the side of one set of victims against another, but about a yearning for justice and mercy, born from the call of Jesus to love our neighbour as ourselves.

What I am getting at is that in this troubled world, we need to have some sense of the direction we want to travel in, to have the courage of our convictions and, whether we are an activist or a quiet worker behind the scenes, or both, this is a time for us to put our metaphorical money where our mouth is, and to be prepared to live with the discomfort that may come with that. Every Lent, after all, we are invited to explore again what it means to deny ourselves, take up our cross and follow Jesus. To reflect on where the rubber of our faith hits the road of daily life – a life lived in 2024, which is the life God has given us.

If you were here for our service earlier, you will have heard the words of the prophet, Moses, reminding his listeners that as God's treasured people, what sets them apart is that they observe God's commandments with all their heart and soul. And you will have heard Jesus' hard words to his disciples, gathered on the mountain, that they are to be perfect as God is perfect. That if they/if we are to be God's people, we must love our enemies, pray for those who persecute us, and find love and fellowship with those who are not family, and who may be uncomfortably different. Our goodness, he says, must go way beyond the ordinary. I think we're wise enough to know that Jesus here isn't offering us a recipe for an easy life.

But then, life isn't easy at the moment anyway, for all sorts of reasons that I needn't list. Do we respond by moaning and complaining, or by trusting that the uneasy life Jesus calls us towards is ultimately a journey into God's future – that however it might appear from our limited perspective, there is reason for hope.

I spoke a moment ago about putting our metaphorical money where our mouth is. There are several examples on this Synod agenda of us putting our actual money where our mouth is. The Lent Appeal, for example, which we will hear more about in a moment. Or our quest for carbon net zero, to invest in a sustainable future for our planet and the life it nurtures. And, of course, our initiative that is releasing significant money to help empower people for mission and ministry – under the banner of Investing in the Future.

It is a convenient title, Investing in the Future, and it is an accurate one. As we all know, in the context of this synod it describes a programme of mutual support with a clear framework of accountability. It seeks to be generous not reckless, to support rather than control, and to plan wisely, whilst accepting that God's measure of success may not be the same as ours. But we should remember that our investment in the future must not be confined to a comparatively straightforward and limited diocesan project. Christians are, by definition, invested in the future. Simply turning up on a Sunday morning is an expression of hope. For we believe that the God who is, is the God who shall be, and that a future with God is a future worth investing in.

Therefore,

when we put more resources into communities when everyone else seems to be taking them out...

when we find ways to right the wrongs inflicted on God's Creation...

when we make a noise for peace and justice...

when we set up counselling services, memory cafés, food banks, youth projects...

or when we simply get up each morning ready to show kindness, to believe the best of others, to seek the little signs of God's grace and try to aim our lives towards God's perfection...

when we do all this rather than giving up or sinking into despair or retreating into self-interest and apathy, we invest in the future. For it is to witness to the hope that God's light shines, despite the darkness – and by that witness offer hope to others.

Investing in the future is what we do, and we do it because we believe that it is what God did and does through Jesus Christ, and because we believe that the God who promises to be with us and to call us by name even in the deepest of dangers, is a God who can be trusted.

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