

Bishop Jonathan's Inauguration Sermon

In the name of the Father and of the Son and of the Holy Spirit. Amen.

"We are living in unprecedented times." How often we have heard words like that over the last two or three years! Yet in reality, they remain all too appropriate. With COVID-19 and everything that went with it, then the outbreak of the war in Ukraine with all its consequences, the death of our longest-serving and much-loved Queen Elizabeth, the cost of living crisis and of course the huge challenge of climate change. Taking all these things together, and with their coming one on top of the other, these do indeed feel like unprecedented times, certainly within living memory.

And the cumulative effect of these events has been truly traumatic for many of us, leaving people feeling exhausted physically, emotionally and spiritually, as well as uncertain and anxious about what the future may hold. That is the reality of where we find ourselves at this point in our history. So as we gather for this service today, the question I would like to ask is this: In the midst of all that is going on, what does God have to say to us as we gather today to commence a new chapter in the life of this Diocese of Rochester?

In response to that question, I want to focus on three themes, arising from our Bible readings from Isaiah and Mark, and they are these:

- The Character of God
- The Centrality of Prayer, and
- The Calling of the Church

Firstly, then, the *Character of God*.

Isaiah 42 speaks of God's Servant, whom God will use to bring about his purposes for the people of Israel, indicating what kind of person he will be in these striking words: "He will not cry or lift up his voice; a bruised reed he will not break, and a dimly burning wick he will not quench." This is to be the character of God's servant, reflecting the character of God himself. He is gentle, recognising when people are struggling, and bringing healing and encouragement to those who have been through so much. There are echoes here of the gentle and compassionate words of Jesus in Matthew 11:28: "Come to me all you who labour and are heavy laden, and I will give you rest."

This is the character of the God we serve – and this is the message of compassion and care that our hearts and souls need to hear and receive today. God knows what we have been through and he longs to heal our hurts and to refresh our souls for what lies ahead. And that in turn is also how we are called to be with one another, after all that we have been through and are still living through, as a result of COVID-19, the war in Ukraine, the cost of living crisis, and now the death of Her Majesty the Queen.

We may still be feeling somewhat battered, bruised and confused, and Jesus looks on us – on our nation and our world – with the same compassion he felt towards the crowds, who were like sheep without a shepherd, as we heard in our gospel reading. Jesus saw how exhausted his disciples were and he tried to take

them away to rest, until another pressing need came along (as so often happens in Christian ministry), to which he responded, but the story ends with the crowds fed *and* the disciples sent away for a break. I take that as an encouragement, that Jesus cares both for the crowds and for those who minister alongside him!

What we see from both of these passages is that the *character of God* is one of gentleness, compassion and care. That is who he is for us, and that is how we are to be for one another and for those around us, as followers of Jesus Christ.

Secondly, the *Centrality of Prayer*.

I have touched on this already in our reading from Mark: the apostles were exhausted and Jesus tried to take them away for a rest. Yes, as we have seen, he was initially frustrated by the needs of the crowds, as his compassion compelled him to minister to them first, but at the end of the story, he escaped to be alone with God to go up on the mountain to pray.

Time and again in the Gospels, we read of Jesus doing this, culminating in his prayer in the Garden of Gethsemane on the night before he died. And if prayer was essential for Jesus, then how much more it needs to be central for us and for our churches. Time and again we are called to give out to others, to minister to the hurting, the broken and those who have lost their way, and that is costly for us, physically, emotionally and spiritually. My dear sisters and brothers, we cannot just go on giving out, *unless we also stop to take in*. And that means taking time out, time set aside, time for rest and time for prayer.

This takes us back again to Jesus' words in Matthew 11:28: "Come to me all you who labour and are heavy laden, and I will give you rest."

Please remember – we are *not* the saviours of the world; that job has already been taken and fulfilled by Jesus Christ! Instead, we are *disciples*, followers of Jesus, and *apostles*, meaning those who are sent by Jesus. We need to learn to walk in step with him, we need to seek his grace and the gift of his Spirit, day by day and hour by hour. God's servant in Isaiah did not serve in his own strength – but in the power of the Spirit whom God had put upon him.

As I have said to several people over the last few months, I do not intend to *hit the ground running*, as if somehow it all depended on my energy and drive. Rather, to borrow Archbishop Stephen Cottrell's phrase, I (and we) need to *hit the ground kneeling*, by making prayer and seeking after God *central* to our lives and our ministry.

That brings me to the third thing I draw from these passages – the *Calling of the Church*.

Isaiah sets this out so beautifully, beginning with the priority of bringing forth justice on the earth. The first calling of the Church is to worship God with all our heart and soul and mind and strength, and that worship must issue in *changed lives and changed priorities* – ones that reflect the character and priorities of God. Isaiah proclaims these priorities here in this passage: seeking justice, opening the eyes of the blind, bringing prisoners out of dungeons, and doing all

these things, as we reflected a moment ago, with gentleness and with compassion, as well as with determination and courage.

The Church of Jesus Christ does not exist for its own sake, but for the sake of the kingdom of God – that is, for the sake of seeing God’s reign of righteousness and peace prevail in our world. Now that can seem a daunting task when we feel that we have few resources – maybe in a small rural church or in a deprived urban parish, or wherever we find ourselves – and certainly the disciples may well have felt daunted when Jesus said to them as they looked at the huge crowd, “*You give them something to eat!*”

But as on that day, Jesus takes what we have, blesses it and then asks us to share it out, to give of ourselves and our resources, generously and liberally, trusting that he will use what we give to feed the hungry and refresh the thirsty.

This is the *Calling of the Church* in this Diocese, in all our parishes and communities: to put what we have in the hands of Jesus and to ask him to bless and multiply what we have given, so that the hungry may be fed in both body and soul, and discover more of the love of God for themselves.

Precisely what that looks like and how we go about it will of course differ from place to place in this wonderfully diverse Diocese of ours, but whatever our situation, I believe we need to keep in mind the three priorities I outlined back in March and have re-stated in the order of service today: *Grow – Change – Serve*.

God longs for his reign of justice and peace to **grow** in our communities and in the wider world, *and God wants his Church to be part of that growth*. We should therefore expect and pray for growth in the life of the Church, numerically, spiritually and in terms of our impact in the wider community, not for our own sake but precisely so that we can play our part in the growth of God’s kingdom. Of course there will be challenging situations where this is incredibly difficult, but growth should be the default setting for the life of the Church.

And growth in our churches will only come about if we are willing to **change** – to become more like Jesus and to reflect more of the life of Jesus in our communities. We all need to work out what that means in our own situation, but it must surely include striving to make our churches even more welcoming, safe and nurturing places for all, as well as ones that reflect more fully the ethnic diversity of our communities, both in our membership and our leadership. And it must also involve reflecting more fully the age profile of those communities, so that children and young people of a new generation can discover God’s love and purpose for their lives, just as many of us were privileged to do when we were growing up.

That change must include learning how to **serve** our communities and to strive for justice in new ways, building on the tremendous work that has been going on across our diocese, often in partnership with others, especially in the challenging times we have faced during the pandemic, the war in Ukraine, the cost of living crisis and the climate emergency. Our service to our communities helps to make the love of Christ visible to others – and as Her Majesty the Queen famously said, we have to be *seen* to be *believed*!

To return as I close to the words of Isaiah, I believe God is doing a new thing amongst us, in the midst of all the turmoil of the last few years, and he is inviting us now to join in with what he is doing. So let's remember and hold onto those three themes:

- The Character of God – above all his compassion and gentleness
- The Centrality of Prayer – because we can do nothing in our strength
- The Calling of the Church – which is to further God's reign of righteousness and peace

And let us go from this Cathedral to live out that calling, focusing on these three priorities for our lives and for our churches: **Grow, Change, Serve.**

Thank you for being part of this service today and for your welcome and support as I take up this new ministry to which I have been called, and may God bless us richly as we journey forward together in the years to come. To him be the glory now and forever. Amen.

24 September 2022