

DIOCESAN SYNOD PRESIDENTIAL ADDRESS NOVEMBER 2021

Back in the 1990s, the era of new lads and new Labour, when Oasis were big and Britannia was cool, I served two curacies. In both cases, the incumbent left and was replaced, meaning I worked with four different incumbents as a curate. The first curacy was in a northern diocese and at the end of it the Bishop said to me that the sudden and distressing departure of the vicar, the vacancy period I handled and the arrival of a new vicar meant I hadn't been properly trained and should therefore find another post that could offer this.

At an informal interview at the church I was offered, the incumbent said my time would be my own between 6pm and 7pm. That one sentence alone is a reason I am in Rochester Diocese today, though not the only one. With only weeks left before we had to vacate the curate's house, with Julia eight months pregnant, I took the offer of a second curacy in Biggin Hill.

I do not say this for therapy – although it always helps – but to show that life-defining outcomes in our lives are often forged from chaotic, unsettling moments when you feel God's out of office is on. And also to show I have some background in helping to cover clergy vacancies. Three of the principles I tried to live by during the curacies were:

- Respect the fact that some issues should wait for the new incumbent to be involved in
- That should never be used that as an excuse for inaction when difficult decisions should be made
- Don't stand still in the mission of God because there is never a vacancy in Christ

We have experienced the most awful eighteen months of fear, anxiety and isolation. The pandemic was one of the late Donald Rumsfeld's *known unknowns*. We knew a pandemic would come eventually, but we had no real idea what it would look like and feel like. However miserable the experience has been, it should make for smarter decisions with the next pandemic. Around me in this place, and in the churches represented, are people who kept their trust in Jesus, who experimented in worship, adapted in pastoral care and innovated in caring witness to the community. Supporting you is a diocesan team I work closely with that shows great professionalism, care and dedication in their own ministry.

I am so grateful for, and proud of, the people of this diocese and for the fidelity you have shown in unprecedented times. You have not stood still in the mission of God. The essence of Jesus' message in the Gospels, and which we just heard about, is that the kingdom of God has drawn near.

It's a fascinating phrase. In the ancient world, when kingdoms drew near to you it was universally bad news because it meant you were about to be overwhelmed by the latest regional superpower, with the guarantee of death, enslavement and exile. But this kingdom is of a different order, one of peace, justice and righteousness. And as Jesus said in Luke 10, the kingdom of God continues to draw near even when it is rejected – a thought we should bear in mind when we feel the country is secularising.

The pandemic induced stasis in us. Enforced isolation prematurely aged each of us, depriving us of the stimulation of human company and social variety. But the kingdom of God continued to draw near. As we emerge into community again, the inspiration for us is to find those ways in which it drew near while we were buried in the latest Netflix miniseries. As confirmation services resumed this summer and I got the chance to read the personal testimonies of people coming to faith, it's noticeable how many began to see their lives differently. Christ in a time of Covid.

One of our agreed priorities is to help children, young people and adults live out everyday faith in Jesus. Quite simply, it is the key to our mission now. One way in which the kingdom of God draws near is when the penny drops for people that their daily work is a vocation from God. I doubt there is a single person here who does not agree with that, and yet we have struggled to create this culture. The dog collar still takes precedence in many minds, and if not the dog collar, then the blue scarf. When the blue collar is on a par with each, we will have finally arrived.

In a letter to the clergy this summer, I offered to come and preach on the priority of everyday faith and how to live as a Christian in our daily work. And having preached, to anoint and pray for any person who is seeking God's grace in life. It does not take a Bishop to do this, but having one do it can show how important every occupation is, whether in full time or part time employment, voluntary or family work, full time or part time education.

As I have offered this, children have come forward to be prayed for in their school work, students in their university studies, parents and grandparents in their care of children, people where 24/7 faith literally means round the clock care for a poorly spouse, doctors, childminders, journalists, delivery drivers, community nurses, university lecturers, supermarket workers, chemists, farmers, call centre operatives. Each have been prayed for. The list is going to lengthen in the months ahead as I get round the churches that have asked me. The more people have a sense that God is in their work, the more they will see their capacity to bring the kingdom of God near to colleagues, to friends, to family. The better the sense they have of God's calling right now, the more clearly they will hear that calling if it is to ministries within the Church.

The world of work is evolving rapidly. Some of the advances are for the good, others are not. A number require the wisdom of Solomon to negotiate. The revolution in Artificial General Intelligence is unfolding at speed and in ways that will transform how we understand ourselves and our work. What does it mean to be a follower of Jesus in these environments? And how should it shape our prayers? How often, may I ask, does your church pray for software coders? Because they are the ones shaping this emerging world via algorithm in their air-conditioned offices.

There is something very specific about the way we help children and young people to live out everyday faith in Jesus. In a recent gathering of young people, Cheryl Trice listened to the issues they placed at the top of their agenda. For Generation Z, you would expect climate change and sexual identity issues to be important, but the one thing they felt most strongly about was the need for a platform where their voice is taken seriously; where they are not patronised as a box-ticking add on. A shift from all age worship to intergenerational worship is a key to this. The difference between the two is simply expressed: it's not just doing worship together but doing learning together as well. And that means sitting down with people a quarter our age and listening attentively to them.

You will know that when the disciples squabbled over which of them was the greatest, Jesus called a child to stand at his side. To do so was to put the child in the position of power – at the right hand of Jesus. We are accustomed to saying that the prophetic voice often comes from the margins. To hear that voice audibly we must either go to the margins or bring the edge to the centre. I am quite clear which Jesus intends us to do with children and young people. Not that we find it easy when the prophetic voice emerges from the mouth of an angular teenager. The story of Greta Thunberg shows us this. Adults don't like being lectured by those with little life experience, forgetting that we did the lecturing at their age too, and deeply wished we had been listened to.

Another of our priorities together is to speak, and respond to, the prophetic voice of justice and peace. Humility asks us to respond to this voice in particular. As a diocese we have not been as quick on the climate question as we could have been. This is no one person's fault, and we are now addressing it as a priority. Yes, when China is building coal-fired power stations at the rate it is, our diocesan footprint feels invisible, but it is not invisible to God, and we are committed in Micah's words to *act justly...and walk humbly with our God*. We do this because he made this beautiful earth, and because thousands of individual actions start to add up.

We each respond differently to the prophetic voice. This is not a source of inconsistency, but more about the desires God has put within us and ears that are attuned to different frequencies. The one thing we should avoid as we age is growing progressively deafer to the sounds of injustice within our world. If we have been slow as a diocese to respond as one to the climate challenge, we have led in the Church of England in defiance of violence against women. Twelve days from now, November 25 will be White Ribbon Day. There has been a revolting surge in online misogyny within a decade and psychologists show there are no real boundaries between online and offline behaviour. One influences the other in a continuous loop. We all have a role in this and it cannot be left to women to protest and to lobby; men must step up. That's why I would encourage every man here to sign up to the White Ribbon pledge not to commit violence against women and never to excuse or remain silent over violence or threats of violence against women. The kingdom of God draws near when relationships between men and women are rooted in justice and loving kindness.

And that kingdom is drawing near in our parishes as I speak. Our role is not just to watch for signs of it but to listen for the sound of it too, in the conversations we have with others. The duty of listening is the bedrock of mission and evangelism, because we get to hear how the kingdom is drawing near in another person's life; how in listening carefully we might help them to find the frequency on which God is narrowcasting into their lives.

I said we should not stand still in the mission of God, in the proclamation of the death and resurrection of Jesus. We are, if you like, running with a baton in hand. A runner waiting for another sprinter to arrive at the handover starts their run before receiving the baton, and the best handover does not require them to look back, but to have confidence the baton will be placed in the hand as momentum is gained. That's our goal as a diocese of churches. The waiting runner is a younger generation. They don't want to look back, it will slow them down. The track is ahead of them and they have the energy. We should not let them down.

Bishop Simon Burton-Jones

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