**Address to Gloucester Diocesan Synod 3 February 2024**

**Readings: Colossian 1:15-20 Luke 2: 25-35**

As you will imagine, there is lots of talk around Westminster about the General Election - people of all parties positioning themselves in how they respond to different bills in the light of vote-winning, and deciding what might be going into manifestoes.

As the bishops in the Church of England we have begun thinking about what we want to be saying and doing in preparation for the General Election. What do we want to be saying to the Church of England and indeed to the wider country?

You may not be surprised to hear that one thing I have been asking is how do we do the join-up (you know that’s one of my favourite words). How do we do the join-up rather than replicate those same government silos e.g. housing, education, health, criminal justice etc? But I would like us to go further than that. I don’t want us to live a ‘fixit’ mentality, just looking at how things are now and how we can make it a bit better. I want us to start with a clear vision of the sort of world we want to live in.

What is our vision for the society we want to shape taking the long view? For a child born on the day of the General Election, let’s paint the picture and discuss what the hallmarks would be of a flourishing society as that child grows into adulthood and hopefully enters into old age. Let’s dream dreams and only then ask what joined-up policies and legislation we need to serve the long-term picture across housing, education, health, criminal justice etc in order to live that vision.

Of course as bishops this is not simply an ethos of a secular common good, rather it is about our desire for all to live and discover life in all its fullness as offered us in Jesus Christ, as we keep our eyes on who God is, who we are, and our longing for the fulfilment of God’s kingdom to come on earth as in heaven. *That* is the starting point for painting the vision. We might describe it slightly differently from Isaiah’s picture of people building their own homes and living in them and planting their own vineyards and eating of their fruit (Isaiah 65) but let’s paint a kingdom-of-God vision, and then let the policies follow. **And I will come back to that in a moment as we think about our Synod agenda today.**

Yesterday was the day in the Church’s calendar when we recall the presentation of the baby Jesus Christ in the Temple (Candlemas) which is why we heard those verses today from Luke chapter 2. It is a scene with young parents and two old people – Simeon and Anna (although we stopped just short of Anna’s story today). Adults carrying their pain, longings and hopes of life, but at the forefront is a young child. But more than that, that child at the centre is Jesus Christ.

That resonates with our first reading from Colossians 1 which is one of tomorrow’s lectionary readings. Here is Christ front and centre, the one in whom all things hold together – the firstborn of all creation.

As Simeon stood in the present with the baby Messiah in his arms, he does so with his eyes and heart open to the fulfilment of God’s promises. Simeon prophetically names the pain that lies ahead, not least for Mary the child’s mother. No easy path here on earth, and yet here is the light for all people. Yes, the one who will die, but the one who will rise again, because here is the light of the world.

**Which brings me back to the issue of vision**: In many different contexts and different ways over the last few years I have returned again and again to the importance of understanding what we mean by vision, and only then talking about strategy (and we’ve discussed this in relation to our deanery strategic plans).

We cannot have strategy and processes and plans without vision - and that vision must be the coming in of God’s kingdom. It is a vision with relationship at its heart. Restored relationship with God and one another and all of creation. Transformation. The reconciliation and right ordering of all things. Shalom. All being made new.

What would that look like in your local context? What would restoration and transformed lives look like across our towns and villages? What would restored relationship with the earth look like? What would it look like if we were entering ever more fully into living God’s justice, mercy, peace and love - locally, across our diocese, within our country and looking out to the wider world - living and sharing Christ’s life in all its fullness?

Just this week I’ve glimpsed that transformation in a number of places: one of which was visiting Longborough school nurture hub - being with small children with specific struggles in their lives and hearing of the transformation (Incidentally, when a child asks you why you are nice to the baddies in prison, they’re asking questions about transformation!).

I wonder how often people have visionary ‘why’ conversations in meetings with PCCs and deaneries and leadership groups. It’s so much easier to have an agenda of ‘fixit’ items and focus on the ‘how’ rather than first naming the ‘why’. It's where we began together with the shaping of our LIFE vision: Why. And we painted a vision of what it could look like, and then committed ourselves to *Leadership* committed to transformation; using *Imagination* to open new paths to faith; To bring about transformation through our *Faith* (living as adventurous followers of Jesus Christ), and through our *Engagement* with the people, places and issues of our contexts.

<https://gloucester.anglican.org/about-us/our-vision/#:~:text=Encouraging%20new%20and%20courageous%20ways,diverse%20lay%20and%20ordained%20leaders> Today on our agenda we have safeguarding, the environment, finance, and parish share, and we could be forgiven for thinking that it is all about how we fix things or simply do better… But that would be to miss the point.

The goal - the vision - is not about having a great model for parish share, or more people in the pews on a Sunday, or a balanced budget, or a fabulous plan for perfectly maintained buildings. All those things may well be important in our plans and strategies but we need to keep asking the ‘why’ and go on painting that big picture vision so that we can then ask how all those things will enable us to inhabit that vision.

I hope that as we talk about safeguarding, environmental policies, finance and parish share we will keep asking ‘Why?’, and keep answering that it is because we long to enable the coming of God’s kingdom on earth as in heaven, as we long to see our local communities transformed, keeping Jesus Christ at the centre who is the beginning and the end, and the one in whom all things hold together, and in whom we have life in all its fulness.

This is why, as I say so often, we must not begin our plans and strategies with scarcity and brokenness. Rather, we begin with the vision of God’s kingdom which is one of abundance and generosity. As Simeon says, *‘for my eyes have seen your salvation’*. And St Paul writes, ***‘****For in him all the fullness of God was pleased to dwell’* – abundance and generosity.

…If you were feeling a bit bowed down by today’s agenda, let us lift our hearts with hope. That is not to deny the pain and struggle and challenge as we live the present. Amid all that makes us dance and laugh, we do weep and lament as we look across our world, whether far away or close at hand. We are so aware of the brokenness and the scarcity - and today as we discuss safeguarding and finance and the environment, we are staring brokenness and struggle in the face…

As I’ve already said, Simeon knew and named that, and Anna who comes into the story just after Simeon certainly knew about pain and loss. Yet there is hope, and yes, joy.

We need to be real with one another about the pain and struggle of our lives, of our communities, our country and our world (Life in all its fullness as found in Christ, embraces the pain as well as the joy). Yet because of the *vision* of the breaking in of the kingdom of God revealed in Jesus Christ and made possible through the power of the Holy Spirit, we hold fast to God’s abundant life and generous hope. And we do not need to be anxious:

In that scene in the temple we are confronted once more with that strange paradox: Here are the adults holding the baby Jesus Christ and yet it is Christ who is actually holding them – the one in whom all things hold together.

All these items on our agenda can be anxiety-inducing (and I haven’t even mentioned some of the other issues we are grappling with across our Church and country and world). But as we meet together today, and as we step into the next season, I pray we will let God hold us. This is God’s church - God’s kingdom. We do not need to be anxious.

Of course, that doesn’t mean we all just sit back. If we are followers of Jesus Christ then we do have a responsibility - a responsibility to live and share Christ’s life in all its fullness - to be bearers of that vision of God’s justice, mercy, love and peace. To invite others to ‘come and see’ And as we talk about finance and parish share and safeguarding and the environment, it is about taking responsibility but only ever with Christ at the head. The coming of God’s kingdom does not rely on us: Christ has died, Christ is risen, Christ will come again. It concerns me when we live our plans and strategies as if God is our responsibility. As Paul writes:

***‘****for inhim all things in heaven and on earth were created … He himself is before all things, and in him all things hold together. He is the head of the body, the church’*.

**So: Holding fast to the kingdom of God vision with Christ at the centre; Taking responsibility but with Christ at the head. And only *then* shaping our strategies and plans.**

And then let’s just remind ourselves that we do all this together as the body of Christ - interdependent.

As a Synod, the things that come before us concern people as unique individuals. For example, safeguarding is about the care and flourishing of unique individuals each created in the image of God. Our giving and finance is about how people use the money they have. The environment is about the decisions and choices individuals make. Yet all these things are about who we are in relationship with one another, and with God and with all of creation.

Simeon spoke for himself – a named individual – a servant of God – but he did so recognising his place among the people of Israel, and all peoples.

The obstacles to the actions, the plans and strategies we are talking about today not only include our frequent failure to name the ‘why’ and first paint the Kingdom of God vision, but also include the sin of individualism. That might be the individualism of me/you, but also (if it’s not a complete contradiction) there can be the individualism of groups and parishes.

The 5 spotlight areas in our vision of LIFE Together *are* about each of us as an individual disciple of Jesus Christ *and* they are about our interdependence and relationship with one another and with the world around us. Those like us and those not like us.

May we learn more as Synod members and PCC members and members of different worshipping communities, yes to speak from our perspective using ‘I’ and ‘me’, but always aware that we are members together of the body of Christ, and called to live that responsibility together, even in our places of difference, and recognising our different contexts and needs – All very relevant as we talk about parish share.

**As I close I do want to return to my earlier comments about keeping the child at the forefront:** Simply to ask, how might our discussions today look different if we keep the child at the forefront as they grow into adulthood (after all, every one of us was once a child)? Perhaps we do that much more easily when we talk about safeguarding, but how about the other agenda items? How are we enabling every child born today to flourish, to encounter the good news of Jesus Christ and to enter into life in all its fullness as they grow into adulthood and even old age?

And of course, our starting place must be painting that big vision of the kingdom of God and what transformation could look like with Christ at the centre, the light for all people, the one in whom all things hold together, the firstborn the head of the Church.