

**Bishop Rachel's Presidential Address to Diocesan Synod
on 27th November 2020**

Tomorrow is Advent Sunday – the start of the new Church year – and with Advent comes a time of watching and waiting. You might feel as if you've done a bit too much of that recently.

Going back to those words of Isaiah from our canticle in our opening worship, it does seem as if there is quite a lot of wilderness about these times. Many people each day are longing for change but the change which comes is not always what people are wanting – new restrictions, new illness, new loss.

And of course, as we live these days we are called to live in the present. In many ways we can do no other because we don't know what next week will bring let alone three or six months' time. And living in the present means paying attention to what is going on within us and around us: the big things and the small things; the painful thing and the things for which we are thankful.

In living the present, we are also looking to the future. I suspect we long for a new thing....or do we? It's an important question. Perhaps we simply want to go back to the old – the way it was? And while some of that is undoubtedly good, do we also have the appetite for the new thing?

One of the many paradoxes about God which you will have heard me say before is that God is unchanging yet is in the business of change. Creation and creativity are at the heart of who God is, and each day we pray for that new creation as we pray 'your kingdom come on earth as in heaven'.

So, as we live the present, praying for the wisdom to be still and to notice, we are also saying 'yes' to shaping the future with our eyes fixed on God who is continually doing a new thing in a kingdom story which is unchanged.

My hope is that in your own context in your worshipping community you are identifying what was significant *pre-pandemic* which needs to be part of the future, and what needs to be bravely left in the past; And then identifying what from *this time* you might need to carry into the future, and what needs to be left behind.

[And do remember that I use the term 'worshipping community' to cover every sort of worshipping community which includes gatherings in schools, chaplaincies, Fresh Expressions, pioneer ministry etc.]

Four years ago, [we launched our LIFE vision](#). Some of you may remember that glorious party at the university in Nov 2016.

As I reflect in this time of pandemic, I have been struck by how some of what we discerned together has seemed almost prophetic in what we are living at the moment. For example all the ways people have been living 'new and courageous ways of worshipping, in different places, which connect with more people' (who had heard of Zoom in 2016?); the ways we have been 'sharing stories through digital media'; the ways you have been 'enabling people to 'discover new depths to prayer and spiritual growth' and 'nurturing confident disciples to live out their faith seven days a week' – The faith at home venture has been encouraging. Then there have been all the many ways people have been 'advocates for flourishing through initiatives which combat injustice, exclusion and isolation'; and there's been a new awareness of environmental issues.

In July I wrote to the Diocese to say that we would not be changing our diocesan vision as we move into the next 5 years but we will be looking at where we see the Spirit of God shining the spotlight for the next season of LIFE.

Some of you may be aware of the emerging vision for the Church of England for the 2020s. I encourage you to look at the presentation on the CofE website which captures [what was presented to General Synod this week](#). There are good resonances with what we are discerning here in this diocese.

One of the ways we can discern the way ahead is to listen to one another's stories, as we continue that commitment to prayer and conversation which was so important in discerning our vision in 2016.

Over the coming weeks and months there will be strong encouragement to share stories of what you have been noticing, and what you have been living and doing, both before the viral pandemic and during it so that we can all hear what is bubbling to the surface in our LIFE vision.

Stories which might seem personal to your context, or even rather insignificant, are actually part of the bigger story we are living and discovering together – which brings me to the vine.

I frequently return to Jesus Christ's words as told by John, regarding the vine. The image says so much about our belonging together – particularly poignant at a time when there has been so much apartness and disconnection.

Christ's words speak of being pruned and bearing fruit. At a time when we are so aware of loss and what is lacking in our lives, it's all too easy to focus on what is scarce, yet at the heart of God is generosity. Where growth is lacking there is vital pruning but it's always with the purpose of enabling healthy growth and abundance:

John 10:10: 'I have come that they may have life and have it to the full.' – The Authorised version translates 'full' as 'abundance'.

If you look at a vine there is both mess and order. Vines don't grow in neat straight lines and they do require tending. Often there is quite a lot of investment in support structures to ensure maximum harvest. Yet it's always important for us to remember that when it comes to the Church, God is the vinegrower, and our starting place is abiding in Christ. Any wires and posts we put in will always be about our partnership with God – That amazing invitation to join in, staying rooted in Christ without whom we can do nothing.

The appearance of fruit is not in our control, and sometimes new branches might seem to grow in rather inconvenient places for us as another branch. How do we encourage and support one another in seeing that we are all part of the whole? The fruit is not accredited to a particular branch but to the vine.

'Growth' can be an unhealthy word (e.g. the consumerism of acquiring 'more', or the rapid growth of a tumour, or the spread of a virus ...) but fruitfulness *does* involve healthy growth.

The growth we long to see is growth in the number of people of all ages and backgrounds encountering Christ – and that is not measured simply by numbers of church-goers but rather seeing people, young and old, encountering Christ, discovering new depths to prayer and spiritual growth (as stated in our Faith commitment) and impacting the local and the global as disciples of Christ joining in with God's kingdom work of transformation. Healthy growth will see an increase in the impact of God's people living justice, kindness, mercy, hope and healing in our world. It's our 'E' of Engagement.

All of this healthy growth about numbers, spiritual depth and social impact, is reflected in what are known across the worldwide [Anglican Church as the 5 Marks of Mission](#), which you will hear more about in the coming months, not least in relation to the vision for the Church of England.

Yet as we long for God's abundance, we also need to be honest about recognising where the vine is not healthy or, to use the image from those words from Isaiah, we need to be honest about those places and situations where the ground is parched.

We need to know where we long for rivers to resource and refresh if we truly seek to tell the gospel afresh in each generation.

When I look at inherited church across the parishes of this diocese there are many inspiring examples of worshipping communities already blending the old and the new—strong and healthy branches with life-giving different expressions of church in the same context. For example, the 8am BCP communion and the afternoon Muddy Church both nourishing and nurturing faith. There's creative ministry with young people and so much going on in and with schools. Many people who gather together to worship are deepening their faith in ways which create streams in the desert Sunday to Saturday in many different places of daily life. And there's community engagement and partnership which is truly kingdom-shaped. And so much of this is also reflected in chaplaincy ministry.

And alongside all that is healthy in what I'm referring to as 'inherited church' there is the need and opportunity for some new things which can be resourced in different ways.

Life around us is not standing still. Our communities and contexts are changing – you've only got to look at the new housing, existing and planned. I am so encouraged by how people are engaging with that and huge thanks to Bishop Robert for his leadership in this area.

We need a church landscape of varied configuration (it's what is sometimes referred to as 'mixed ecology'). It's about looking out at the landscape, rural and urban, and seeing a rich picture of being church which is truly there for all people to encounter Christ, grow in faith and participate ever more deeply in God's work of transformation in us and around us. It's about all shapes of healthy church being equally valued.

At the Synod last November (2019) I spoke about fear and uncertainty in relation to where we are as a Church amid all that is changing around us – and that was before the viral pandemic was even a dot on our horizon. What I said then still stands, but the viral pandemic has focused us even more on that question of what it means for us to be the church, gathered and sent.

At that November synod, I spoke about resourcing, and I spoke about the Church Army Centre for Mission, and about launching Trinity Cheltenham as a resource church planting church; and we also heard about the OneLife venture focusing on physical activity. Just some examples of new ways and rivers as we seek to create new worshipping communities.

In a moment, you're going to hear more from some of those closely involved with these aspects of our life together.

Recently Bishop's Council have taken some big financial decisions particularly around OneLife and some additional capacity to support youth connection (and Ben will hopefully help us understand a little more of the big picture around finances later on).

The danger is that all these can seem like new and shiny add-ons, but all of this is emerging from our LIFE vision, and I want to stress again that this is not about inherited parish church versus pioneer ministry and Fresh Expressions of church – it is about who we are together as the diocese – branches of the one vine. All our parish churches and patterns of worship were once new in a particular time and season.

It's important that we reflect on all this within the context of the deanery strategic plans and Bishop Robert will speak about those again today.

We are also working at getting the right shape of structures and roles at College Green for the next season, because everything that goes on at College Green is an integral part of the diocese, and enables and supports mission and ministry across the whole diocese.

To summarise, all that I am speaking about is how we say yes to God tending and reshaping the vine as we seek to be the Church for the present and the future, faithful and fruitful.

It's about our LIFE vision and how we go on weaving strands together and discover more of what it means to be those integrated healthy branches in Christ the vine as we pay attention to where the spotlight is shining. We will need imagination and courage, and an attitude towards one another which is non-defensive as well as having appropriate challenge, and always abiding in Christ.

And of course, it needs prayer. So much of this is about our hearts and minds being transformed. It doesn't begin with our money or our planning. It begins with prayer and our commitment to abide in Christ, longing for the fruit to come, and opening our ears afresh to those words of God spoken through the prophet Isaiah:

'I am the Lord, your Holy One, the Creator of Israel, your King. ...Behold, I am doing a new thing.'

Rt Revd Rachel Treweek

A Song of the New Creation (verses from Isaiah 43)

I will make a way in the wilderness, and rivers in the desert.¹ *'I am the Lord, your Holy One, the Creator of Israel, your King.'*² *Thus says the Lord, who makes a way in the sea, a path in the mighty waters,*³ *'Remember not the former things, nor consider the things of old.*⁴ *'Behold, I am doing a new thing; now it springs forth, do you not perceive it?'⁵ 'I will make a way in the wilderness and rivers in the desert, to give drink to my chosen people,*⁶ *'The people whom I formed for myself, that they might declare my praise.'*

John 15: *"I am the true vine, and my Father is the vinegrower. ² He removes every branch in me that bears no fruit. Every branch that bears fruit he prunes^[a] to make it bear more fruit. ³ You have already been cleansed^[b] by the word that I have spoken to you. ⁴ Abide in me as I abide in you. Just as the branch cannot bear fruit by itself unless it abides in the vine, neither can you unless you abide in me. ⁵ I am the vine, you are the branches. Those who abide in me and I in them bear much fruit, because apart from me you can do nothing. (John 15:1-5)*