

Message from Bishop Robert

29 April 2025



It is in many ways fitting that Pope Francis died on the Monday of Easter Week, a day of rest after the rigors of Holy Week and the celebration of the resurrection on Easter morning. It has been very clear to us all that these last years have been ones for him marked by much pain, yet through this his faith in the mercy of God and the promise of new life sustained him. God now enfolds him in his arms.

Some years ago, as a Bishop's Staff Team, at time of challenge and change, we spent time together reading his 2014 book 'The Church of Mercy', a simple but moving account of his desire for a Church that would be open to all, a place of renewal, where we care and pray for one another. Perhaps most memorably in that book, as in other writings, Pope Francis reflected on his desire for a Church and for clergy that 'smell of the sheep', present with God's people in the place of their need.

In the coming days there will be much speculation on who will be Francis' successor. It's a shorter process than appointing a new Archbishop of Canterbury, for which we will have to wait till the autumn, but as one not directly involved in either process I am left asking what my part should be. How might I contribute to making ours a Church of mercy, where all are welcomed. Rather than idle speculation, where might I, where might we, focus our time and energy?

My first reflection is to take up Pope Francis' challenge – how might I, we together, be those who help our Church become a place of mercy and welcome to all? That will almost certainly mean asking how others might see my community and my part in it and being prepared to face some challenging questions. Are we really the welcoming Church we say we are? How do those who might be different to me find their place and their voice? What might I, what might we, need to change?

My second takes me to another of Pope Francis' recurring themes – how might we as a Church play our part in caring for creation? Have we played our part, for example, in signing up for the Eco Church Award? And if we have, have we told the story – the story of a Church that is interested in God, God's people and God's creation more than its own internal politics?

The death of the Pope, even for those of us who are members of the Church of England is a significant moment to stop and as we remember, give thanks to reflect on who are as the Church and who God is calling us still to be.

May Francis rest in peace and rise in glory.

+ Robert