

Presidential Address – Diocesan Synod 21 June 2022

Bishop Stephen Lake

Thank you for your welcome and for listening to my first ever Presidential Address. The bad news first, I do not have any golden envelopes for you today.

Carol and I have been bowled over by the welcome we have received, and I know you know that for us, it feels like a homecoming. In particular I wish to thank the South Canonry team, the chairs of the Houses of Laity and Clergy Gillian and Andy, Bishops Karen and Andrew and Diocesan Secretary David. Earlier today I was at Wilton CE Primary School to bless their new playground. Their vision statement is *Everyone Belongs, Everyone Achieves*. It is a good phrase for a diocese too. Phoebe who is 7 asked me how old I am. 58 I replied. 'No you're not,' she said, 'You're only about 40.' It was a good start to the day.

Just a word, if I may, about Sunday's sermon. The response has been incredible with social media sharing and tv interviews. Based on contact so far; the amount has already doubled with many making the £10 up to £20, £50, £100 and donating it to foodbanks, favourite charities, the Sudan, the cathedral, the women's refuge, starting a Messy Church, the list goes on and on. Someone has sponsored a piglet in Burundi. And one gentleman got in touch today, saying that because of what we did, for his forthcoming 90th birthday, he is going to give a talent to every member of his congregation to see what they can achieve together. We'll pull all the stories together and share them soon.

When a candidate stands before the eighteen members of the Crown Nominations Committee, you have to give a presentation on your vision and plans for the diocese. The Salisbury Six will remember this moment. I was able to reflect that I could recall exactly where I was, 30 years to that day in November. It was because November 10th, the day of the interview was Carol's birthday so the memory was clear.

I was with the then Bishop of Sherborne, to see if I was to be offered an incumbency at the end of my curacy.

So, thirty years ago today, the bishop in his pastoral way, suggested a parish to me, the only parish available, and the brief was – and I quote – 'Make it work or close it, we don't really

mind which.’ It was top of the closure list. 30 years on that parish is still alive and well, Bishop Karen was there on Sunday morning with 8 baptisms and 16 confirmations.

And yet, in these same 30 years, the diocese of my heart has seen a major decline of 45% in church attendance. Painful isn’t it. The Diocesan Secretary describes this to me as ‘crunch time’ so the need for clear vision, good strategy and living a confident Gospel is acute. And all of this was obvious even before the onslaught of Covid 19. We live in challenging times. That said, I look at the Sudan in comparison and would point to our resources, our protections and our opportunities, and I am determined, just as I was 30 years ago, not to let all this go on my watch, our watch.

The Diocese of Salisbury can be and should be one of the jewels in the crown of the Church for England. We ought to be leading the way in generosity and evangelism, in social engagement and community resilience. To do this requires understanding the future we are already in and deciding together what we are going to do about it. This is a theological task, a leadership task and an organisational task for our time and place.

The diocesan vision of Renewing Hope : Pray – Serve – Grow has served its time. A new vision is needed, one that inspires hope and action rather than one that reminds us, by implication, what we are not doing enough of. Behind this new vision needs to be strategic plans that are robust, argued over, owned, set against budgets and measured. There is good strategy and bad strategy, and we need a good strategy that fulfils the priorities of the Gospel today that is an investment in who we are and who we can be. As your Bishop I will ensure we listen to those outside of the church and what they think of us, and that might be difficult to hear. The national Vision and Strategy will dovetail with this and help us focus and have outward looking priorities. This is not difficult – we do not need to spend the next two years wondering what to do; the recent consultations during lockdown can be revisited and we have the free consultancy of this appointment process to use as a springboard.

Every new diocesan bishop receives a confidential briefing from the Appointment Secretaries which reflects and summarises what they gleaned you said from the consultations when considering a new episcopal appointment. I will be using that with the Bishops Staff and Bishops Council as it describes us. Some of it is wonderful. Some of it is hard-hitting. It will help us shape the visioning discussion. People expect change with a new bishop but as I said on Sunday this is about us not just me, it is about our common life and

our future not just our past. Working together as one diocesan family, we must find a way forward that is about both rootedness and reach. We can do this. God is doing this.

The task is clear. Pastoral care and evangelism need to go hand in hand. The bishop must be ambitious, must ensure alignment and action, and together we must hold ourselves accountable to God and to each other. I love setting good culture and we need a culture that serves our vision and strategy, a culture of confidence, of trust, of disagreeing well and of Team Salisbury. There are challenges with two different but sibling counties which need a one diocese approach with local understanding, especially in our rural areas. As it said in the Archbishop's Charge, we have work to do in Bishop's Staff. In a diocese the senior team must be a sign and an instrument to all.

We will need to look at how we have been historically structured and decide what is the best shape of organisation for the coming season. We will need to be bold in that, and yet not throw anything out with the bath water.

David and I have identified five areas we need to focus on early;

1. Accountable leadership
2. Effective Governance
3. Moving into our calling in Mission and Ministry
4. Establishing sustainable finances
5. Making good if hard decisions whilst we remain in deficit.

The team at Sarum College describe this as a theological triad of nuturing identity, managing the present, and creating the future. I am someone who really wants to hear the cry of the parishes, and to help us all to grow sustainable worshipping communities. Mixed ecology yes, but for me it's more about an ecosystem which creates life and mutual flourishing, interdependent and one.

Everywhere I have served with others in our church in these 30 years of decline, has grown. We can do this together in the wonderfully blessed diocese of Salisbury. We need rural resilience and coastal creativity. We need our military families to feel at home. We need the Channel Islands to really feel part of the diocese – this has to be got right this time. We need servant leadership with clergy well-being and lay seniority in making good decisions. The

new Community Hubs are really exciting. I would also want to draw together, with the convening power of the bishop, those who can work with us and advise us – from the leadership of the RNLI, the military, the agricultural colleges and the community foundations and many others who want the church to be present and a hub for all. And I would champion those under-represented, those who miss out, and those who disagree. We are one diocese.

I am responding to this call which feels like it has been a long time in God's planning. I am not called to managing decline in the best way we can until we can't, we need to create growth and enjoy grace in these post-Covid years with sustainable communities of all ages and backgrounds. I remind you of that statistic I shared on Sunday. If just one in fifty of us in church, brought one person to faith each year, every year, the Church of England would be in numerical growth. That fact is both encouraging and shameful, that God has already given us this, and yet our distractions and our lack of trust in one another get in the way of growth. The church needs to be present, to be curious about the common good and then re-imagine how we serve God's people.

Those of you really listening to my sermon on Sunday would have heard me return again and again to a phrase. Your Kingdom Come – Here and Now. As your new Bishop, I suggest it to you as a working title for what we need to do, what we need to reshape and what we need to give. God's Kingdom, a present reality and a fulfilment to come, here and now, in every parish, every school, every community – brought in here and now by us, the agents of the Kingdom of God. It is also my prayer and I invite you all to join with me now, to stand, and to offer this as our prayer together. Please stand. We will pray aloud together and three times to the Blessed Trinity of Love.

Heavenly Father, in the name of your Son our Saviour Jesus Christ, and in the radiant power of the Holy Spirit at work among us, we pray aloud to you and together : Your Kingdom Come – Here and Now. Your Kingdom Come – Here and Now. Your Kingdom Come - Here and Now.

Amen.