

Presidential Address for Diocesan Synod by the Rt Revd Karen Gorham, Bishop of Sherborne and Acting Bishop of Salisbury

Last Sunday it was a privilege to be with the congregation of St Nicholas, Corfe Mullen to celebrate 25 years of the church there. Many members of Synod will be familiar with that building as they have hosted many diocesan events in those 25 years including Synod. It was good to hear about the original vision, the parish church of St Hubert's had ended up on the outskirts of the village and with housing growth elsewhere the congregation wanted a church in the middle of the village with facilities to serve the community. An original gift day generated a quarter of a million pounds from members, including children who had saved their pocket money. People were encouraged to buy bricks and church members with expertise in project management and construction gave their time freely. What came about was a large multi purpose building which continues to meet the needs of those who gather there.

We read in the Bible 'without vision the people perish'. I have spent most of this week in meetings many, including General Synod, talking about the future of the church, and as I have heard people speak, as I get out and about and meet people in the diocese having experienced the worst pandemic our generation has known, and as I open email or twitter, I can divide them into two types of people, those who can and those who cannot.

Firstly, those who can, these people are seeing the opportunities, and also the reality and the challenges we face. PCCs who know they can no longer afford a full time incumbent, but are prepared to see that paying a manageable parish share they could join with others in a collaborative venture; churches excited about whole life discipleship, developing further their online courses, such as the Bible Course or living in love and faith; groups of those wanting to learn new skills training up as LPAs and LWLs. Churches rediscovering worshipping together once again with renewed commitment, trying to find ways that all can join in safely and comfortably, including those who wish to receive both bread and wine. Incumbents, knowing that ministry is a marathon and not a sprint looking ahead to strike out in their diaries retreats and quiet days so they maintain a work life balance and enable God to renew their energy. These churches look at what they have and see with God what is possible.

Then I meet those that cannot, cannot see that expecting another Benefice to subsidise their ministry is not a long-term solution, who look at what they have or do not have and worry about the future, hoping somehow that someone else will rescue the situation, who settle for managing what they have rather than seeking out those who need to hear the good news of Jesus.

Yes, there is a need for realism and pragmatism, however if we are mindful of last weeks gospel reading about the miraculous catch of fish, it is hard not to see that our God is a God of abundance and possibility.

St Nicholas, Corfe Mullen, has discovered over the years of its life, years that have not always been plain sailing, that it is required to change and develop to meet changing needs. Instead of sitting in rows on Sunday morning we sat around tables, drinking coffee. As well

as my sermon, we all did a fun craft activity, and with breakfast baps the morning lasted a couple of hours, the fellowship was so good no one really wanted to go home. This was a regular pattern, with St Hubert's being used for a quieter communion service, with the congregation exploring further how that ancient building can be used to develop retreats or more contemplative events.

This morning we are going to be hearing stories of churches who have adapted and changed. Including an update on our Rural Hope project and the difference it has made. It is all about mixed ecology. Something highlighted in the Church of England's vision and strategy. Doing what the church has always done - being a place for people to meet with God in worship, receive from God in Sacrament and be equipped in discipleship through preaching and teaching, and a place for gathering and sending out; and doing it in ways that people can connect. It's about being open to who God sends us, and sharing all we have.

We have seen since Covid an increase in the creation of new ways - gathering around a fire pit in the churchyard with families as forest church, or for sausage church; making bird boxes together or going for a short walk; gathering around a glass of something as Gin Church, or eating together as Breakfast at 9am, messy church, Cafe Church, or Beer and Pimms and hymns. All making connections between faith and life. It's possible if we see where 'we can'.

Two weeks ago I was at a confirmation in Poole, and during the service we heard testimonies from some of those who gathered, it was very moving. One lady in her 50s in a civil partnership had been surprised about how welcome she had been made to feel at her local church, she had engaged with an online enquirers course I had run last year and decided it was about time she was baptised and confirmed; A man in his 80s had been helped by friends to reach the decision to get confirmed; a boy of 11 had grown up in a Christian family; a another boy had come along with friends and described how God had helped him cope with his disability. 4 stories out of the 11 individuals taking that step of faith to meet with God because someone had introduced them to him. That is the reason also for seeing what is possible, because this is not about keeping the show on the road but about introducing Jesus to those who are looking for that meaning in their lives.

Who could not be struck last week by the amazing letter that the queen wrote on the 70th anniversary of her accession, signing the letter 'your servant' . As Christians who also seek to serve the Servant King let us see how we can continue to serve, selflessly and joyfully.

Those who work for the diocese, are there to serve too, to enable the local to thrive; to assist with the possible. Our new giving adviser is here to help address the problem of having little money - we know we have it, even though many are struggling, however we may need help maximising how people can give - does your church have summer visitors? Then ask to have a contactless giving machine in your church. Apply to the Adhelm Mission Fund for a grant towards a new project; have a vision morning and invite a member of the senior team or rural hope field officer to facilitate it. We are grateful to those who have engaged with the share review process and want to work with you on that in a spirit of generosity rather than scarcity. What can we give to ensure we have clergy, church buildings and all we need for mission? Rather than ensuring we retain for ourselves before we give

anything away? We also look forward to the arrival of Karen Hutchinson as our Lay Ministry Development Officer in the next few months and I look forward to working with her to further strengthen and serve our ministry in that area. A large number of our fresh expressions are already led by lay teams.

I look forward to hearing from our guest speakers this morning and to us engaging with the art of the possible. I am, of course, looking forward to our new Bishop joining us. Dean Stephen Lake will be consecrated Bishop in Southwark Cathedral on 25th April, and more details will be given about that in due course should you wish to be there. His enthronement and welcome will come later in the summer, hopefully before the ordinations. We look forward to all that he brings, particularly from other dioceses and his experience of Cathedral life; I hope that as he comes he will not find too many 'cannot people, who are expecting him to perform the miracles for us, instead I hope he comes finding a 'can do' church across the diocese who understand and are prepared to address the realities we face, but who are also prepared to take risks trusting the God of abundance. A God who is able to do far more than we ever can ever ask or imagine, Give, and it will be given to you: good measure, pressed down, shaken together, and running over.'

Thank you for all that you are doing, it is together that we make a difference and together we can be the Good News that our world so needs at this time.