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Bishop's Charge
Preached during the Synod Eucharist
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God's Church for God's World

You are the light of the world. A city built on a hill cannot be hid.

Matthew 5

In a world experiencing upheaval and war, with peace shredded before our eyes, and in the midst of turmoil and rising chaos, what kind of sign does God want to give to the world? How might people be hopeful and find their way to a better, healthier and more peaceful future?

Jesus, in the Sermon on the Mount, tells those gathered around him that they are like a city on a hill – such a city cannot be hid, it is open to view. Others will look and see, Jesus is suggesting, so it would be better if that which they saw was full of light and gave glory to God. This is a time, then, to give attention to the city on the hill. What kind of city are we?

This summer the bishops of the Anglican Communion will gather in Canterbury for the Lambeth Conference. We really hope that this happens, knowing that right now nothing in the world is certain.

What a diverse gathering this will be, bishops from the ends of the earth: from places that know a great deal of suffering and poverty, places at war, places where dioceses are disappearing under the ocean because of climate change, places where abuse of women and children is common place, places of ease and places of plenty – from all of these, bishops will gather together, committed to walking a common road, listening to each other, and witnessing to God's love.

In every place the call of Jesus is the same: to love God, and to love our neighbour as ourselves – to be what we are called to be – God's Church for God's World.

This is the challenge to us, the challenge for our times. Hearing the call to be "God's Church for God's World" reminds us that we don't exist for ourselves, but for God. It is a call to look outward, to seek the Kingdom, to join with what God is doing. It is a call that requires us to travel more lightly, to plan for a changing world and a future difficult to anticipate.

Change brings a forward momentum, it propels us – whether we are willing or not – into the future. The gospels show Jesus always on the move, calling those who would follow to leave behind all that hinders them, and to go on with him. The call for the bishops – collectively and individually – is to live this out, and encourage all in their care to follow Jesus.

After a difficult winter, I believe we are entering a springtime for this diocese, a time when we can plant something new, that will grow and bear good fruit, fruit that will last.

When speaking about times such as these, about the tasks of springtime when new crops are sown, Jesus speaks about the direction we must face:

‘No one who puts their hand to the plough and looks back is fit for the kingdom of God.’

Luke 9:62

We go forward, and not back, if we want to plough our field, so that seeds can be planted, new growth come, and we become together a fruitful diocese.

In preparation for Lambeth the bishops are meeting together in zoom groups.

We read the bible, listen to each other’s stories, pray for each other.

As a Communion we are planning for the future. We are articulating a shared vision, describing the kind of church we want to be in five, ten, twenty years’ time. We are describing a destination, and discerning the road we will travel together to get there.

As in the Communion, so in the Province. We are actively working on plans for the future. These will help us determine priorities, not least with the use of limited resources. When we have priorities, we can determine the steps along the way that will enable us to journey as one church, sharing what we have. The five-year planning process which we are about to engage in as a diocese fits with this. The work of this synod today is our first step, the first of many.

In our pre-Lambeth zoom meetings, every bishop’s story – every story – contains conflict. Sometimes the conflicts are with those beyond the church, where the values of the Kingdom conflict with the values of a political or economic system, but very often they are within the churches themselves. Sometimes these internal conflicts are about the best way to respond to the challenges of the day – what must be retained, and what must be changed. What does it mean to be God’s church in the light of challenges related to climate change or evolving social relationships, for example.

Given that conflict is so prevalent, one of the purposes of the Lambeth Conference is to enable the whole church to commit to placing reconciliation and peace at the forefront of all that we do, understanding this to be part of our primary call. The Archbishop of Canterbury puts it this way:

‘The life, death and resurrection of Jesus are the story of God’s reconciliation with humanity. Through them, Jesus opens the way for a restored relationship between God and us. If we embrace that joyful new relationship, it should overflow into the way we relate to one another. This will look different in each of our lives – from making cups of tea to acting as professional mediators.’

++Justin Welby, Archbishop of Canterbury

If as a diocese we are to be a sign of hope to those beyond us, out-with us, we will need to commit to the journey ahead of us: through mediation, and on to reconciliation. Why must we do this?

It is very clear that our diocese is not well – this is publicly known, sad to say. And when something is not functioning or relating well, then time and energy can be expended on the wrong things. Now is the time to commit ourselves to getting well.

In this charge I have already used two images of the church – the city on the hill, the farmer ploughing the field, and I come now to a third – the body.

We have been reading 1 Corinthians week by week on the Sundays following Epiphany. There St Paul returns again and again to the image of the church being like a body. This is a good image for us – we might not all be farmers ploughing fields, we might not be great travellers seeking out safe cities on hilltops – but we all have bodies, every one of us. We know what it means to be sick.

Most of us will have had the experience, either our own, or relating to a loved one, of receiving a diagnosis which is frightening – that moment when you hear a doctor say that a person is very seriously ill, has cancer for example.

At that moment denial is not really an option. If you want to get well, if you want to live, then the diagnosis has to be faced, as does the treatment.

Now here's a thing with serious illness, the treatment can be as demanding as the disease, more so sometimes. Indeed, for a while the patient can feel significantly worse than before treatment began. If you have experienced chemotherapy, then you might know about this. However, the treatment is endured so that health and renewed life are possible. The treatment is only for a season.

The Meditation Process being offered to our diocese is our treatment. If we want healthy relationships, not just to the benefit of some but all, then it is this mediation process that can help take us there. It is a forward looking process concerned with health.

And another thing about serious illness, in order to get better, to be well again, the whole person – body, mind and spirit – has to be engaged and desire healing. An operation, drugs, therapy, will not be sufficient on their own. The chances of success are greatly improved by whole person commitment.

So, although it might not be that everyone is involved in the meditation process, the whole of the diocese needs to be committed to this. Through prayer and encouragement, those most needing to be part of the process will be enabled to participate.

So in this charge I am encouraging you all to be a part of this – not underestimating for one minute the demands of the road to reconciliation, for which the mediation process is before us.

Again – from the Archbishop of Canterbury:

'The journey towards this is not easy. It requires humility, time and patience. Most of all, it demands a decision to let go of the destructive power of memory and past hurt. It's precisely because reconciliation is so difficult that it is so powerful.'

++Justin Welby, Archbishop of Canterbury

The road to health for us all (individuals, churches, diocese) is a forward movement, into the future God has planned for us. None of this will be quick – after mediation, and through it, some relationships will need to be built up – then we have to learn new ways of behaving and being together. If we were able to do this, then this in itself would be a sign of hope to many in the Scottish Episcopal Church – for we will be a diocese to be imitated. We will in fact be a healing church, a living part of God's Church for God's World – ploughing our field to sow for a new crop, being filled with the light of Christ, so that as a city on a hill we can give hope.

***You are the light of the world. A city built on a hill cannot be hid.
Let your light shine before others, so that they may see your good works and give glory to your Father in heaven. Amen.***