

Diocesan Synod Address

March 9th, 2024

At the start of last month, I had the pleasure of attending a Newcastle University guest lecture given by George Robertson, former NATO Secretary General. The lecture was entitled: 'Can we manage a dangerous world?' To illustrate his theme, Lord Robertson articulated 6 words beginning with the letter 'V':

Volatility of events.

Velocity of change.

Vulnerability.

Values that we are used to under threat.

Vacuum of leadership.

And a lack of *Vision* for the future.

The lecture was a *tour de force* covering a confluence of global events, their impact on the UK and our well-intentioned, but it would seem nowadays, capacity-diminishing response. The packed audience represented a reasonably diverse group of people. It included a large group of army cadets, and our own General Synod representative (himself no stranger to military affairs), Robin Brims. Towards the end of his lecture, Lord Robertson offered suggestions for what might be done to address the mess that the world finds itself in. These include investing in diplomacy, developing a concept of statecraft, looking at our own domestic politics with a sense of collective determination to engage in the defence of our nation, and reviewing, reforming, and modernising our institutions. His final suggestion was this: prepare for the worst and hope for the best.

As I reflected on the implications of his lecture I asked myself the question: when faced with such overwhelming challenges, where might I/we begin? This is a good question to ponder while we are in the season of Lent which can lead to an unhelpful introspective bubble of anxiety instead of a collective stock-taking of where we are in relationship with God, with one another, with our communities

however configured they might be. When I gave my Advent talks last year I unpacked the *seeking, sharing, and sending* of our diocesan values and described theologian +Stephen Pickard's powerful image of the need for human beings to live lives that are untwisted into God, developing a theme with origins in Luther (who warned against the human being twisted into self) and much Pickard's own Durham-based doctoral supervisor, the late Canon Professor Dan Hardy. I like this image of being untwisted into God because of its physicality but it's promise of divine comfort and release: life as a disciple is not set up to be easy. Lent might be about the wilderness, but that is always held with the reality that even in the unlikeliest of places, growth can happen. I'm struck when I look at social media by the frequency of people posting photos of concrete, surprised by a shoot of green that appears. Jesus was tempted in the wilderness, but he also found grace there in resisting what was offered to him as quick-fix solutions to any identity soul-searching he may have been doing.

One answer about where to begin when things look overwhelming lies in an experience I had the day *after* Lord Robertson's lecture. My first attempt to visit Warkworth and Shilbottle schools before Christmas had been thwarted by snow. This turned out to be a divinely fortuitous delay as the visit was rescheduled for Candlemas, and the celebration of Christingle.

I was pleasantly reassured that cocktail sticks and sweets were still in use, but it was an image from Warkworth School that remains with me: a school hall filled with children and staff all holding up a lit Christingle. The children at the front showed immense concentration carefully holding their orange straight out in front of them while those at the back exhibited a more confident but no less thoughtful stance. The candles were held high in the low light, with the sun streaming across over our heads. It was realistic, it was hopeful, it was (dare I say) a bit risky (a hall filled with children and lit candles might be considered a health and safety risk by some). It was the light of Christ shining out illuminating lives which even if just for a moment were

filled with joy and wonder at the spectacle. You could see the smiles ripple round the hall.

We meet as a diocesan Synod mindful still of the many challenges we face. The Church isn't immune from situations that challenge us, but we do have something important to say about how to respond, and about hope, about justice, about the love of God in Jesus Christ. I've said before in addressing this Synod, we aren't separate from the world we are part of it. As we seek to turn outwards in mission and grow younger and more diverse *we will change. It bears repeating, please remember 'younger' is relative. Growth comes in different forms in different contexts.* We live in a broader context of change, with a General Election due at some point probably this year, and a process of regional devolution that will also impact how we live and work in our region.

Paying attention to growing younger and more diverse has a lot to do with *intentionality* in how we engage with young people and how we resource this work (look at the excellent work that 'Beyond Youth' is doing serving Ashington, Seaton Hirst, Woodhorn and Newbiggin-by-the-Sea; and Cresswell and Lynemouth. And Jac Atkinson, Children and Families' Missioner in Denton; I still have my LEGO bishop from that wonderful encounter). You won't be surprised to hear me say that I want all our churches and chaplaincy contexts to be places of inclusion and welcome for LGBTQIA+ people, and above all to be places where attention to safeguarding is given the highest regard. I fully respect theological difference. I don't believe that differences held with integrity and conscience require any hard restructuring of who and how we are as Church. I lament when communities feel they must withhold Share as a result of disagreement or restrict resources in separate funds, something that only fuels division and does not work with the complex granularity of unity. I am delighted that we are making good progress with the establishment of a chaplaincy for LGBTQIA+ people, and I am very grateful to Gill Alexander and Robert Lawrance for their work in developing this important chaplaincy

together with Archdeacon Rachel and others who have given of their time during a period of consultation.

I am delighted that today we welcome Ric Whaite, our new Diocesan Director of Mission and Ministry. Please don't form an orderly line just yet, as his licensing and installation isn't for another couple of weeks: March 17th, 4pm, the Cathedral (all welcome!). At that service, Ric will become an Honorary Canon of Newcastle Cathedral. I am pleased that we are to hear today from the Dean about the Cathedral and its engagement with parish and chaplaincy life across our diocese.

As Bishop Mark continues to develop our strategy based on our values of seeking, sharing, and sending, with Ric's arrival I expect we will now see an acceleration in the development and implementation of our vision and strategy one that will take root in every corner of our diocese in ways that are both big and small, in the now and the not yet. It's exciting!

I want now to briefly address a matter that has already been the subject of speculation: the legacy left to our diocese by the late Bishop of Newcastle, Alec Graham. Some of my thinking on this has already been shared with Bishop's Council. It is my hope that acting as trustees, Bishop's Council will bring a collective proposal with a shared vision about the Legacy for discussion at a future Synod. It's not a good look, being frank, if trustees end up in public disagreement. I expect Bishop's Council to have robust discussions, and I welcome that. I have spent a good amount of time reflecting very carefully about how such a legacy might be used in a way that honours Bishop Alec and the things he cared about in his ministry. We aren't the only entity to benefit from his incredible generosity and as I have spoken with others in positions of leadership who are beneficiaries institutionally I have been struck by the care and commitment and tone that is shown in carefully working out how legacy can form the basis for future development not just plugging a gap where there is deficit, tempting as that might be. The first thing to say is that the amount of the legacy is not settled yet, so anything you might hear about its value at the moment is purely speculative and is *not* based on fact.

The vision I shared with Bishop's Council is to explore using Bishop Alec's legacy to form a 'Bishop of Newcastle Foundation' with the long-term intention of:

- **Enhancing** our children and young people's team particularly in the area of early years provision.
- **Enabling** all licensed stipendiary clergy to receive pastoral supervision (making it a requirement of license for those new in post, and an invitation to those already in post).
- **Establishing** a new role to drive the roll-out of a new faith and disciple course as a pre-discernment track, encouraging confidence in following Jesus. This course would be hub-based across the diocese, and intentionally located in places you wouldn't necessarily expect, specifically aimed at growing more diverse.
- **Encouraging** innovation at a local level with seed-funding for parish and chaplaincy initiatives that speak into the Five Marks of Mission: anything from social enterprise, Anna Chaplaincy, or work with environmental concerns.

I am not suggesting we direct the legacy towards reducing Parish Share or reducing our deficit. I am not advocating for using the Legacy to help us achieve Net Zero. There has to be a balance, and with these proposals there also lies the potential to attract match-funding from the National Church. If we don't disciple ourselves and others (and by that I mean an intentional focus on nurturing lay vocations and confidence in faith) there will be no lasting foundation for the work of engaging in God's mission, only voices that shout loudly on one topic whilst ignoring other issues like safeguarding and racial justice? If we don't care for clergy we will have increasing levels of burnout and low morale.

If we don't support children and young people in their faith and value our work with schools (both Church schools and community schools), looking to children and young people as the Church of today never mind the Church of the future then actually we have no future to

entrust to generations yet to be born. If we don't encourage a culture of innovation and risk-taking and a readiness to fail sometimes then we can set no example to other institutions who are doing just that to help grow and develop. If we assume 'the Diocese' will pay for everything then we will never break the cycle of a dependency culture and expectations that are completely unrealistic. Our diocese is the sum of many parts – and it's for all those parts to work together. The Apostle of Paul had something to say about that: the Body of Christ. Mothering Sunday tomorrow is in origin more about the breadth of the Church as a place of welcome, nurture and prophetic witness into the world (not separate from it).

On Wednesday this week I attended a breakfast roundtable in Parliament ahead of the Budget. Like all parliamentarians I get lots of invites to attend events and I must have clicked 'yes' on this one because I knew I was in London and being Budget day it would be good to show willing and represent the Northeast. One thing I have learnt about being a member of the House of Lords is that my horizons and perspectives are being transformed by the people I meet and the conversations and debates I take part in. In this particular context however I found myself in a relatively intimate breakfast setting hosted by the Quoted Companies Alliance discussing economics with my GCSE B in maths as my foundation (I hope our DBF Chair is impressed!). The phrase, 'out of my comfort zone' applies here. One of my take home phrases was the contribution of one participant who said: *you can't make economic policy by looking through the rear-view mirror.*

In my mind, I swapped 'economic policy' with 'preach the Gospel.' How then can we, as members together of the Body of Christ look forward and dare to hope that we can and will turn further outwards in mission and grow younger and more diverse? It will require change, it will be tough at times, I've said as much before in my Synod Addresses but with the children and staff at Warkworth school my goodness it is worth holding up our candle to see the way forward in hope.

A few days after his lecture, I sent Lord Robertson a 'thank you' note and in it I reflected another 'V' word had come to mind as I listened to his excellent lecture: *Vocation*. Who are we being called to be at this time, and what are we being called to do? And of course it's not just *who* it's *whose*: as God's Church I believe we are being called to transform our communities across our diocese in partnership and renewal, with energy, resilience, and initiative: seeking, sharing, and sending.