

Presidential Address by the Bishop of Newcastle to the Diocesan Synod, 11th May 2024 at Newcastle Cathedral.

On Thursday evening, it was a joy to be at Brinkburn Priory for a celebration of the Feast of the Ascension. The event was well summed up by vicar Rich Townend in his social media post: “Something quite fitting about Standing Room only (prompted by my own social media comment) at an Ascension service. Brinkburn packed, 150 communicants at a church in the middle of nowhere. Spirit-filled worship...Rural ministry at its best. #ThyKingdomCome”.

As I commented in my sermon, Ascension provides that pivot or bridge between Easter and Pentecost. And while it's common to think of it as representing a form of departure by Jesus (up, up and away, if you take it literally) I see it as more of an arrival. For it represents a shift in strategy, and an awareness on the part of the disciples that there is Kingdom work to be getting on with and that this is work done in Jesus' presence not his absence; a presence carried in the imprint that Christ makes in and on our lives in Baptism, Confirmation and the Eucharist. I was confirmed on the Feast of the Ascension, in St Matthew's Silksworth in Sunderland by +David Jenkins, and as I also said in my sermon on Thursday, the Ascension is also the feast day some years later I intentionally chose to sit my driving test and passed on the first attempt!

Returning to my point, Ascensiontide theology best understood is the start of the intentional process of handing on, handing on the Gospel into new lives and new journeys.

This is at the core of the ordinal and of every licensing service in the Preface: *The Church of England is part of the One, Holy, Catholic and Apostolic Church, worshipping the one true God, Father, Son and Holy Spirit. It professes the faith uniquely revealed in the Holy Scriptures and set forth in the catholic creeds, which faith the Church is called upon to proclaim afresh in each generation...*

These words were included in my own installation service in Newcastle Cathedral just over a year ago. And three weeks after that, I delivered my first Address to Synod here in our Cathedral church. I don't intend (you will be relieved to hear) to recap the last year, but I will say that it has taken the last 12 months to recruit capacity into the Bishop's Staff Team and I am delighted that we now have a strengthened resource in vocations as well as an excellent Director of Mission and Ministry. I did take a look at my first Synod Address and noted that it was here I first populated the words that I had discerned as part of my calling to be your Bishop. I will repeat this bit here:

The **commitment** to be a Church turning outwards in mission and ministry, and younger and more diverse is **characterised** by:

SEEKING through *being* Open to God's transforming love;

SHARING through *being* Generous with God's transforming gifts;

SENDING through *being* Engaged in God's transforming work in the world.

These words are gift and invitation, they are not imposed, and at the end of this Address I will handover to John Marshall and Tara Russell to say a little more about where we will go next with this developing vision. John and Tara are representatives of a small working group I asked +Mark to convene so as to develop the vision. The word *handover* is important here, because I am not holding these words to myself. Of course I wouldn't ever do that, but it needs saying

that I am not precious about them. They are part of my discernment but not *just* for me, they are for me as Bishop of Newcastle who is called to lead our Diocese in this season. I do not do this alone; I seek to do this with all of you.

This idea of handing over is significant today also because we will be considering important and urgent matters relating to education and to the environment. Both of these topics matter a great deal to me.

I was educated in a Church of England Primary school and see that as having played a key role in the formation of my faith. I do want to take this opportunity to congratulate Gill Booth on becoming a grandmother during the week. Gill, you are seeing that generational shift unfold in your own life, and this must be a profound experience for you. We share in your joy.

I have seen with my own eyes the devastating impacts of the climate crisis in Pacific Island communities, and closer to home the continued impact of out-of-season weather events in our rural, farming and agricultural communities. Recently, in the House of Lords I asked a supplementary question to the Government Minister about the impact of flooding on food security.

This isn't an issue we can ignore or feel we aren't affected by because we are. The cost-of-living crisis and related poor health outcomes are seen and felt across the diverse communities of this diocese. This is Gospel, prophetic advocacy, and the Church has a role in speaking truth to power and in modelling best practice in how we seek to respond to this Mark of Mission. There are excellent examples of best practice that we can begin to share as we grasp the environmental nettle with both hands, but we need to balance short, medium, and longer-term responses as we do so and be always realistic about the resources available to us without curtailing our vision or aspiration.

We meet today also on the other side of some significant local and regional elections. We have a new elected Mayor, Kim McGuinness who is now responsible for the North East Mayoral Combined Authority, and many new councillors across the region. The new Combined Authority is especially important because it is a vital part of the devolution deal agreed between government and local leaders. This deal means that decisions about investment in areas including transport, skills, housing, and regeneration will now be made here in the North East. This is a huge undertaking, and I have already been in touch with Kim to offer my support. The Church exists to further God's Kingdom in this region, and it is my hope that we will not lose sight of this bigger picture in the conversations and discussions and indeed decisions that we make. In my previous role in the Diocese of Leeds (which itself celebrated its 10th birthday recently) the phrase 'culture eats strategy for breakfast' was often to be heard (particularly in Bishop's Staff meetings. This phrase originates in the world of management consultancy.

It doesn't mean that strategy is unimportant, it does mean that a healthy and empowering culture is vital in ensuring any developed strategy actually works. Describing culture and then changing it is a challenging but necessary process. It's uncomfortable but I think it is ultimately liberating. We are on a journey in this diocese to changing culture and changing lives as a result. You may think that's a bit of a bold statement to make at this point, but here again I return to the narrative of the Ascension. Just read the beginning of the Book of Acts. God's intervention in our world through Jesus changes culture and lives. It interrupts in the most

extraordinary of ways. Through presence we glimpse eternity, and in eternity right here and now is our time, our calling to share God's love.

Angels (one assumes) ask the apostles, 'why do you stand looking up towards heaven?' This question is asked of us too. And it's a question that isn't just about direction, it's about how we attend to the present now and are held to account. In that regard I want to pay tribute to the Revd Dr Rae Caro in our Diocese who, with colleagues has produced this excellent report on ministry and motherhood. Entitled *Clergy babies, maternity policy audit* this report shows that while some good practice is in evidence, there is a way to go for many dioceses, ours included. I welcome this report and hope that the unhelpful aspects of the underlying culture it seeks to bring into the light can then lead to a process towards real and sustained change in our National Church landscape.

Another important aspect of our culture and practice concerns Safeguarding. I wish to thank all those who have been involved in our Audit process this week. The Report will be published in late July.

When I became Bishop of Newcastle last year, I was handed back the authorities and legal aspects of this role. Bishop Mark carried the leadership of this Diocese throughout the episcopal vacancy, and I am pleased that he will be taking a sabbatical later this year. This will be a time of refreshment for him, and rest. More details to come, but we wanted Synod to be made aware of this now as it will help diary planning if nothing else at the moment!

As I bring this Address to a close, I bring in to my reflections insights recently gained during a visit to Newcastle Airport. I was invited by the chaplaincy team to spend a day with them, most of which was airside seeing and learning something of their mission and ministry context. I got to ride in a huge fire truck, and I got to see the new scanners that Newcastle is amongst the first of the UK's airports to install. I met all sorts of people and gained an understanding of how valued the chaplains are by people who pass through the airport but particularly by the many staff who are employed in all manner of occupations there. I was especially struck by my visit to Air Traffic Control and as I look back on my time at the top of the tower I think of aspects of what I experienced in that place and what it means to be a bishop. I was particularly impressed by the calmness of the atmosphere, which enabled attentive awareness of surroundings and adaptability when needed. Tiny details matter in that space, like the degree to which the windows are tilted so that reflection doesn't adversely impact the Air Traffic staff.

The senior controller on duty who I spoke with described the runway as sacrosanct, it was his role to keep it clear. *Make straight the highway of the LORD* came to mind! But it was the very obvious detail of the handing over that struck me most, particularly in the approach to the feast of the Ascension. Air Traffic Control helps a plane take-off and then hands it over to the next Controller responsible for onward airspace. All of this requires patient trust and absolute clarity. Precision timing, and a calm outlook.

So it is then, that I now handover to John and to Tara who will take my discerned vision of seeking, sharing, sending, and set out to this Synod an invitation to engage with this gift in the next while, with gratitude and joy.

John and Tara, I handover to you now...

+Helen-Ann Newcastle.