

THE ARCHBISHOP OF CANTERBURY'S FIRST PRESIDENTIAL ADDRESS TO THE GENERAL SYNOD ON TUESDAY 10 FEBRUARY



Photo credit Geoff Crawford/Church of England

Synod, thank you for the warmth of your welcome.

I stand here among you by no means for the first time, but for the first time as the Archbishop of Canterbury. It is a humbling privilege to be called to serve in this role. It brings with it huge weight of responsibility, at a time when people love to remind me that the Church faces significant challenges.

But when the wind and the waves are rocking the boat, I am reminded that what I need to do is to focus on Christ, who calms the waters and stills the wind. With your help and with God's grace, I pray that I am able to approach this ministry with calm, consistency and compassion – as we seek to be what the Church has for so long been: a stable presence in an unstable world.

I have been overwhelmed by the encouragement, the prayers and support that I have received from countless people, both at home and across the Anglican Communion, the sense of being upheld by the prayers of so many is very precious and gives me hope.

Do, please, continue to pray for me in the months and years to come, as I will always pray for you. I do not carry my new responsibilities alone. We serve God's church together, lay and ordained; uniquely reflecting God's image into one another; offering our richly varied gifts and perspectives; aspiring to treat one another with love, dignity and respect; setting our faces towards Christ and remembering his prayer that we should be one in our love for God and of one another.

At my Confirmation of Election, I was deeply moved to be asked, during the Charge which was given to me, to 'help the Church love itself more ... believing that its best days are still to come'. And I do believe that this is true. Through every challenge, our hope in Christ remains - and our confidence in the Gospel, as good news for our nation and for God's world, is not shaken.

RS Thomas, in his poem *The Bright Field*, says:

I have seen the sun break through
to illuminate a small field
for a while, and gone away
and forgotten it. But that was the
pearl of great price, the one field that had
treasure in it.

I see God's Kingdom, the pearl of great price, revealed in countless places across the Church of England and the Anglican Communion. The Church of England is a Christian presence in every community. In parishes and chaplaincies across the country, day in and day out, faithful clergy and congregations worship God and love their neighbours. With every Eucharist that is offered, with every prayer said; with every child helped to flourish in our schools; with every family cared for in times of celebration and of sorrow; with every night shelter and food bank; with each worship service, youth group and community lunch; with every effort to work for justice, dignity and fairness in our nation and our world – with all of this and so much more, we live out our calling to share the love of God with those around us.

And across the global Anglican Communion, in its profound diversity, we see Anglicans offering that same hope to a world around them: working for peace in places of war, caring for the sick and lifting up new generations of young people, and speaking of the hope that we find in Jesus Christ.

Because with Christ, the Church is there in all those places and with all those people, and the Kingdom is made known. I rejoice in every example I see of this – the pearl of great price - glimpsed in faithful, local, sensitive, intelligent ministry which embodies and speaks of the Kingdom.

And Synod, you give careful consideration to matters and make decisions which help to resource, shape and influence that work of hope and healing in every community. Thank you, every one of you, for your commitment, your time, your faith, and the love which you pour into this task. I know it comes at a cost and I want to say that I see you. I see you as you wrestle with difficult decisions and weigh competing priorities. I see you as you draw deeply on theology and scripture. I see you as you learn to listen more deeply to one another in spite of difference. I see the personal sacrifices you make to be here. And I am profoundly grateful for each one of you. Thank you.

And thank you, Archbishop Stephen, for all of the extra responsibility you have taken on over this past year. Thank you for your leadership of the Church in recent times. It was not easy to step unexpectedly into such a difficult space. We are all immensely grateful to you for the gracious way in which you have done this. During the Charge at my Confirmation of Election at St Paul's Cathedral, you told me wisely from one disciple to another, to look to the God whose face I must continually seek and who is always faithful - and I will.

You also said: "Just be yourself." You may find that in the years to come, that you come to regret that advice – but we can cross that bridge when we come to it!

I was also told during that Charge that I am expected to be an evangelist, a pastor, a prayerful, penitent and resilient disciple, and a teacher. I am also to be faithful, prophetic, a sign of unity, trust and accountability and provide Christ-centred moral leadership, loving the church in all its breadth and diversity, and encouraging others to love her. I was told to work collegially and enabling the gifts of others to flourish.

So, what sort of Archbishop do I feel called to be? As I said when I accepted the nomination, as I respond to the Call of Christ in this new ministry, I remain rooted in my first calling: to follow Christ, to know him – and to make him known in the world. My Christian vocation first led me to become a nurse – then later a priest, then a bishop, and now an archbishop. The theme that has run through of all those chapters of my life has been washing feet and serving and caring for others.

And so, I believe that I have been called to love and serve the Diocese of Canterbury, the Church of England, and the Anglican Communion, not through developing new programmes and initiatives, but by being a shepherd, who works collaboratively and in partnership, enabling others to flourish.

And I will work with you, Synod, with my fellow bishops, and with our national church bodies, striving to ensure that the Kingdom is being nurtured everywhere - in parishes, chaplaincies, cathedrals and schools, in the smallest and most fragile communities, as well as the larger and more confident expressions of church, wherever disciples seek to be salt and light.

I have always, in any leadership role, been committed to accountability and transparency. The way we treat one another, lay and ordained, through our various institutional processes, is vital to the health of our life together in Christ. We have too often failed to recognise or take seriously the abuse of power in all its forms. Robust and transparent processes are central to the health of any institution; proper process around appointments; clear guidelines around conduct and good processes for handling concerns, complaints and whistleblowing.

And nowhere is accountability more imperative than in relation to safeguarding, where in the past we have fallen tragically short. Safeguarding is a fundamental, non-negotiable responsibility, sharpened by our past failings and shaped by the work we still have to do. I am committed to bringing an approach of seriousness and focussed direction to all matters relating to safeguarding in all contexts in the church. This approach must be trauma-informed, put victims and survivors at the heart of all we do and be committed to proper independence.

I am grateful for the countless parish safeguarding officers, diocesan safeguarding professionals and the National Safeguarding Team and survivors and victims, who have worked and continue to work to make progress. Progress has been made, yet we are anything but complacent.

We must be wholly committed to listening to victims and survivors, to independent scrutiny of our safeguarding practices, and to delivering timely and robust trauma-informed processes. We must be willing, always, for light to be shone on our actions and our decisions. We can only begin to rebuild trust and confidence through openness and integrity.

The role of the Archbishop of Canterbury is a complex and challenging one. But at its heart is something profound and simple. Along with my fellow bishops, I am called to share the hope that we have found in Jesus Christ – and what that means for us all as individuals, and as a society. I pray that the thread running through my time as Archbishop will be that of nurturing confidence and hope, rooted not in institutions, but in God and the Gospel of Jesus Christ. With our confidence in God, we can believe that indeed, the best is yet to come for the church that we love and nurture, and therefore for the world that the church is called to serve.

It is sometimes said that hope is a muscle that we must build and develop. In the seemingly impossible situations that we see around the world, we must flex the muscle of hope, strengthening our sense of God's work and presence in the world. This does not mean that we deny the challenges that are in front of us – the challenges of inequality and injustice, the volatility of global politics, the climate crisis and more - but it means we can say with confidence that God is in the midst of us.

As a Church we have many reasons to be hopeful. There is a visible sign of hope in the anecdotal and statistical evidence that, over the last four years, people have been returning to church. There are early indications of that rise in attendance and participation having continued last year. Of course, we must be cautious – these are early figures – but the trend is clear. People are returning to Church. They are finding welcome, friendship, community, meaning and purpose and we rejoice with God in these green shoots of hope.

As Archbishop of Canterbury, I commit myself to nurturing, supporting and praying for all our parishes, chaplaincies, cathedrals and schools, where quiet faithfulness is coupled with a readiness to respond to every opportunity, however small, to embody the hope of the Gospel at the heart of a community; where people, together, become places where the Kingdom happens.

One of the glories of both the Anglican Communion and the Church of England is that we are, and always have been, an intentional church which embraces the breadth of traditions. Just as we should never underplay our unity in Christ, it would be naïve of any of us to underplay the challenge our differences bring. Reflecting on the parable of the pearl of great price, we might recall that pearls do not come out of nowhere. Pearls are formed over a long period of time because of grit in the oyster. There is no pearl without grit.

For us, the grit often comes in the shape of the challenges of difference, conflicts and misunderstanding among ourselves. This grit is real – it is not just uncomfortable - at times it can be deeply painful. At times it is easy to be tempted to withdraw from one another or throw stones from a distance. But we are limited in our understanding, fragile in our humanity, and in need of one another. Only by finding the humanity and the courage to remain in one another's presence do we truly, as individuals and communities, become places where the pearl can be formed.

This does not mean that we should not challenge one another, as iron sharpens iron. But we always do this always with kindness and always in order to encourage one another. We do this in order to build one another up, never to tear one another down. We do this because we are called to break bread together as the apostles did, around God's table.

And so I pray that my ministry, shared with you, will be of hospitality and of breaking bread; that together we learn to be good guests and good hosts; that we might create places where people can grow towards one another in trust, where difference is held with grace; where we offer deeply of ourselves and value the gift of one another; where we are accountable for one another's flourishing and where healing is possible.

And I pray that our practice of hospitality may be offered as a model to a polarised world, speaking into the deepening divides in our society with the possibility of hope and of healing. Our calling is to live out that hope in a fractured and anxious world. And so, we must bridge the gap, for those who have no experience of church, to encounter Christ, by offering spaces of belonging, dignity, and conversation, where the love of God is encountered and the world is changed.

As a shepherd, I will strive to be calm, consistent and compassionate to all in this role. I commit myself to enabling the Church to be the Church. May we continue to offer ourselves in God's service for God's world: our hope rooted in the Gospel, and our confidence rooted in God, who holds the Church and its future in love.

Please pray for me as I pray for you.

Amen.