

Bishop Jonathan's Presidential Address – Diocesan Synod 16 March 2024

Thank you for being here this morning.

I recognise what a commitment this involves for all of you, lay and ordained, and I am very grateful for your engagement in the work of Synod as well as for all you are doing in your ministries in communities across this Diocese and beyond.

We are going to be spending time this morning thinking about our vision and strategy – inviting you to be part of both shaping and implementing them as we seek to move forward together in serving the cause of God's kingdom in the Diocese of Rochester.

I would like to begin by saying a little about the context in which we find ourselves, both in the church and in the wider world. In all the years I have been involved in the ministry of the Church of England (that's forty-two years this year!), I have never known such a time of uncertainty and anxiety.

With wars and rumours of wars, economic and social challenges, the continuing impact of the pandemic on our congregations and finances, the issues around Living in Love and Faith, safeguarding and racial justice, as well as clergy stipends and pensions and diminishing congregations, we seem to be facing an almost unprecedented range and depth of challenges.

We need to recognise and acknowledge how difficult this is for us corporately and as individuals, and how exhausting and debilitating this can be.

With that in mind, I want to encourage us to reflect on the opening words that are on the screen behind me – words that taken together seek to summarise the key elements of our emerging Diocesan Vision. Let me read them to you slowly:

"Seeking first the kingdom of God, we are called together by God to Change, Serve and Grow with Compassion, Courage and Creativity."

Those opening words are particularly important: "Seeking first the kingdom of God..." Those words of Jesus come in the Sermon on the Mount, at the end of a passage where Jesus is encouraging his disciples not to be anxious – and reminding them of the negative impact that anxiety can have on our lives.

And yet which of us does not worry?

Like many of you, I am sure, I often wake during the night and find unbidden thoughts running through my mind about the problems we are facing and about what I should do (or not) or should have done (or not)!

These words of Jesus are a vital corrective for that kind of underlying anxiety that many of us are feeling at present, both as individuals and as those involved in shaping the future life of our churches.

In case you hadn't guessed, I am by nature and temperament an activist. If you put a problem in front of me, I want to try and solve it, preferably quickly – much to my wife's frustration at times!

Now, activism is good – we often do need to put energy into things in order to bring about much needed change.

But these words of Jesus need to be heard and heeded first, because unless we first seek God’s kingdom – seek his will and guidance and direction and blessing – then our labour will often be fruitless and in vain – or at least not as fruitful as it could be!

So, as we go into our conversation later this morning about vision and strategy, we will be spending time in prayer and reflection – seeking God’s kingdom as our first priority, before ever we get into planning and action mode!

And that I think is a key priority that we need to remember time and again as we seek to move forward with the themes of change, serve and grow. Our first calling is to come to God in prayer and to seek his will for us and for his Church.

That is also of course a necessary and healthy antidote for the anxiety that so often fills our hearts and pervades our minds: seek first the kingdom of God – and all the other things you need will be given to you as well.

Let that be our watchword and our lodestar as we think and plan and prepare today, and in the days ahead.

I hope this will also help us to approach our work together on this Synod and in all our places of worship and ministry in a less anxious way. We are seeking to attend to what God is calling us to be and to do – and we are doing that as children of a heavenly father whose good pleasure, Jesus says, is to give us the kingdom.

So please understand that what we are about as we gather together today is not a matter of being given some kind of a to-do list. Rather what we are seeking to do is to reflect on what we are called to be and to do, in the light of the three themes of change, serve and grow which I believe God laid on my heart when I was called to join you as your Bishop two years ago.

What we do need to do, of course, is to see whether and how we can translate those three themes into things that help us to seek and serve God’s kingdom more fruitfully and effectively in our churches and communities. That is what Claire will be helping us to do in the latter part of the morning.

I don’t want to spend much time revisiting these three themes, because I have talked about them at Synod before, but let me just pick out a few things that I hope may be helpful:

- With regard to *change* – we all know that simply telling someone to change doesn’t usually do much good! We need to help people both to know how they need to change – what kind of change is needed – and we need to help people find the tools and resources to bring about that change.

This means helping one another to discern how God is calling us to change (which will be different in our different contexts) and helping each other to

access the means of bringing about that change (which may be to do with money, people, skills or other resources). This is about enabling and not imposing change.

- With regard to *serve* – as I have said before this is both about our attitude to one another – in humility counting others better than ourselves – and about our commitment to reaching out into and serving the needs of the wider community, as an expression of the compassion of God for a needy and broken world.

Again, what this looks like will vary from place to place – and we need each other to make this happen, because none of us can do everything by ourselves. Given the manifold and sometimes desperate needs we see around us in today's world, the Church needs more than ever to fulfil its calling to serve those in need, recognising that this also helps to create relationships and build bridges of trust across which the good news of Christ can flow to others.

- With regard to *grow*, this quite clearly is not something we can either prescribe or demand! Growth happens, as in a garden, as a result of planting, watering, weeding, pruning, and nurturing. These are all intentional activities – things we do with the intention of promoting growth – but it is God alone who gives that growth.

Yet we do all, I hope, believe that God does want his Church and Kingdom to grow, and that he wants us to play our part in that. Again, what that growth looks like and how big the marrows are will vary from place to place, depending on the soil God has given us and the amount of watering and fertilising that we do!

Alongside these three themes – three priorities for us to keep in mind in the life of our churches – we have also included within this draft vision statement three values which I believe are hugely important as we seek to promote a healthy, nurturing culture within the life of our churches and Diocese.

These values, as you will have seen, are *Compassion, Courage and Creativity*, and these together, map quite closely onto the three themes of Change, Serve and Grow.

Compassion as I have said already is closely linked to the theme of serve. It is about how we treat our fellow human beings, and it is about our sharing God's heart of love for all the people God has made.

Compassion should be the hallmark of our churches and of our character as followers of Christ. Is that what people see in how we deal with one another and in how our churches engage with the wider community and the world around them?

Often this is wonderfully evident in all sorts of ways, from care for refugees to relationships with our partner Dioceses, but sadly it is not always so, particularly at times in our dealings with one another.

Courage and Creativity can perhaps be taken together because embracing Change requires both, and both are required if we are to encourage and promote growth whether through evangelism or by taking on a faith-stretching project to do with our buildings.

The stark reality of Church of England attendance across this Diocese – which averages on the latest statistics just 1.6% of the population (and falling steadily) – means that we cannot do without a healthy dose of both courage and creativity if we are to turn things round before all the lights are turned out in many of our churches!

Finally, I want to pick up on what is referred to here as some key objectives within this overall vision:

To grow Missional Churches, Missional Leaders, and Missional Disciples that

- Are growing Younger and More Diverse.
- Are growing numerically, spiritually, financially and in impacting their communities.
- And in turn are planting and growing new Missional Churches.

The point about these objectives is that they all focus *outwards*. The word “mission” is about our being *sent out* by God – the God who sent his Son into the world and who sends us out in our turn to continue his work.

This is about a shift in culture and direction, encouraging us to look upwards to God and outwards to the world, encouraging churches to have the confidence to step outside the walls of our buildings and to reconnect with the communities around them. We have included in this some specific objectives, recognising of course that these will look and feel different in our different contexts.

Growing Younger and More Diverse are two of the objectives of the Church of England’s national vision and strategy, and they really need to be central to the life of our Diocese as much as anywhere else.

We are simply not at present reaching the younger generation of this nation effectively with the good news of Jesus Christ. And neither are our churches reflecting the full diversity of the communities we serve either in our membership or our leadership.

We simply cannot go on leaving these issues in the “too difficult” box – and we have had some trenchant questions posed to Synod today which quite rightly remind us of our responsibility to become more diverse.

The objective of growing numerically, spiritually, financially and in social impact is a reminder of the holistic nature of the mission to which we are called. It is about bringing people to faith, helping them mature in their faith, helping to release the resources needed to support the mission of the church, and increasing the impact we make in our world for good and for God.

We need to have that kind of outward focus in our minds, because otherwise it is so easy for us just to slip into a “business as usual” mentality, which really just means accepting continued slow decline.

Then finally, there is a reference to planting and growing new missional churches, which in some places such as new housing areas will mean opening new church buildings, while in others it will mean planting and grafting new congregations.

The key thing is getting the idea that growth is possible and normal into the DNA of our churches, so that in the end we almost take it for granted that churches not only grow but even replicate and multiply. Of course that will not be possible everywhere, but this is about a change of mindset, because we believe that God is sending us out, just as Jesus sent out his disciples without purse or bag or extra cloak to proclaim and demonstrate the good news of the kingdom.

So, thank you for being here today. Thank you for being part of the Church of England in this Diocese. We are living through many uncertainties. We are facing many challenges. But God is faithful, and he has promised to be with us every step of the way.

I hope and pray that you will be willing to play your part in working out what this means for the Church in our Diocese and for the churches in your communities, as we work together today at this Synod and continue that work in the power of God’s Spirit when we go from this place:

“Seeking first the Kingdom of God, we are called together by God to Change, Serve and Grow with Compassion, Courage and Creativity.”

May God bless the work of this Synod as we explore together what that should mean for the mission of the Church in this Diocese. Thank you for your support and for your partnership in the Gospel.

The Rt Revd Dr Jonathan Gibbs
Bishop of Rochester