

Getting to know Bishop Jonathan

Journey to faith

Did you grow up in a Christian household?

I grew up in a village in Cheshire. My parents in fact had moved to Cheshire after the war from South Wales, so they came from Chapel background. So, the Methodist Chapel, the Methodist Church, was just a few hundred yards from our house and I used to go to Sunday school there.

But I guess like many young teenagers growing up, I got out of the habit of going to church in my teenage years and really my faith was rekindled and came to life when I went to university.

Hearing a talk by a member of Billy Graham's team had a big impact

I never got to hear Billy Graham in those days but one of his team came and spoke in our college, and I remember actually speaking up and saying, look, as a non-Christian I have some really big questions about this, you know, especially around the area of suffering and that kind of thing.

But nevertheless, that conversation really did stick in my mind and a few days later I was invited to hear a talk by a Christian speaker, and I think all of those memories from Sunday School and learning the stories of the Scriptures, learning the stories about Jesus, it all came together and fell into place, and I had a really strong sense of God speaking to me on that night.

I look back to that day as the day when I came to a living Christian faith.

When did you first sense a call to ministry?

Over the next two or three years at university, I was given the opportunity to learn a lot more about the Christian faith. I had a college chaplain in particular, who took an interest in me and gave me opportunities for leadership of one kind or another.

By the time I was in my final year of university, I had a job to go and work at St Michael's Church in the centre of Paris, working with students and young people, and it was during that time that I went forward for selection to train for the ministry.

Influences and inspirations

Can you recall any people who have particularly influenced you?

The couple with whom I worked very closely with at St Michael's Church in Paris, the chaplain there of the church, a man called Peter and his wife Marilyn, they were a tremendous influence.

We saw them working together, so closely, and it was actually during that time that Toni, my wife, and I met in Paris and I think we saw a model of Christian living and ministry which was really attractive.

Because it wasn't only about standing up front and doing things, it was about being involved with people's lives and building community and working together as a team, and I think that's a model we've carried with us ever since.

What do you draw on to support you in your role?

Well, I mean for me, Scripture is absolutely central to our Christian faith and for me, I can't, I can't get through the day, if I haven't had that time with God in the reading of scripture and in prayer at the start of the day.

Especially I think, different passages of scripture come alive at different times too.

Particularly important for me one at the moment in the midst of all the turmoil we're facing, Jesus says in Matthew's Gospel, 'Come to me all you who labour and are heavy laden and I will give you rest. Take my yoke upon you and learn from me. Walk alongside me and you will find rest for your souls.'

And I think that's hugely important when people are feeling burdened and anxious at the moment, that wonderful invitation to come to Jesus, to find rest in him, and to be refreshed by him.

And the other verse that's crucial for me is from John's Gospel, chapter 10 verse 10, Jesus said, 'I have come that they may have life and life in all its fullness.'

That's God's purpose and intention for us as human beings, that we should flourish and grow as human beings, that we discover healing for our hearts and souls, that we find his love setting us free to become all that we can be and could be, to serve him in our world and to be those who can bring his love and care to others.

And rooted in that, a deep sense of joy and peace because we have that trust and faith and hope in God. So, John 10. 10, 'I have come that they may have life and have it in all its fullness.' That for me is the heart of the Gospel.

How do you live 'life in all its fullness'?

Well, that could be in all sorts of ways. It might well be out walking in the beautiful Kent hills enjoying creation. Toni and I love to go for walks with our spaniel especially, Ludo - many of you will get to meet him as well. But there's nothing better for me.

I mean there's some wonderful countryside around here and you know I think that's tremendous. On the other hand, we're also great lovers of history and of many of the beautiful historical places there are to visit.

I'm privileged to live in a very historic house here in Rochester, and there are some wonderful places which speak of the history of our nation, and that are rich in terms of architecture also, but also wonderful gardens and beautiful buildings to see and explore, and understand more of the story and the history of this part of the world, so looking forward very much to doing that.

And the other thing, we love to get together with friends, to get to know people to sit around the table over good food - maybe enjoy a glass of something together, I didn't live in France for several years for nothing! - and you know that opportunity to get to know people, to build friendships and relationships, and we're so grateful for the wonderful welcome we've had already in this wonderful Diocese.

Hopes and priorities

What are some of your priorities as the new Bishop of Rochester?

I long for and hope to see and believe God wants to see our churches growing. Growing in numbers, growing spiritually, growing people, growing in the likeness of Christ. That means of course that we need to be on a journey of change.

We can't imagine that things will grow unless we're part of the change that God wants to bring about in people's lives, in our churches, and the, and the communities of which we're part.

And that means of course that the Church itself also needs to be active in serving those communities and bringing the compassion and love and mercy of God to the people amongst whom we live, and being a witness, an example to the hope that is ours in Christ.

So, grow, change, serve, you'll hear me saying those words many, many times in the years to come, but all of those rooted in the love of God in Christ and the hope that we have in Jesus.

How do you respond to the challenging times we find ourselves in?

We are in a time of uncertainty at the moment, so much going on in the life of our nation and our world. And at the heart of that is our faith in Jesus Christ who is the same yesterday today and forever, and the hope that is ours in him for this life, and the world to come.

That hope is really, really important. It's what's distinctive for us as Christians in the midst of an uncertain and changing world

Do you have a particular encouragement for young people at this time?

There's nothing more exciting than seeing young people discover the love of God for themselves and then go out on the journey of life, taking their faith and hope with them, whether they go off to university or into work, or you know whatever it is.

And what I would say to those young people is, that what we discover in Jesus is a tremendous sense of purpose. God has a purpose for us and for the world in which we live. He wants us to be involved in bringing about his kind of change in the world. That we see more of his kingdom of justice and peace and care of God's wonderful creation.

These are the things that God is passionate about. These are the things that God is calling you to be part of, that adventure, that journey of discovering the love of God, and sharing the love of God throughout your life.

So young people, God has a purpose and an adventure, he wants to invite you to join on that adventure with him and to share with our Lord Jesus in bringing about that change in God's world.

Remembering announcement day

Well, it was a wonderful day and I got to meet so many wonderful people in in different places.

The start of the day was to go to Trinity School at Belvedere, very impressed with the leadership there but even more impressed by the young people.

They were fabulous and incredibly enthusiastic and gracious in their welcome, but loads of questions and that was absolutely really, really good question. So great to meet them - and some selfies of course afterwards.

And then we went to Sidcup to St John's Church. Very different. A huge privilege to meet some members of the Ukrainian Community, some refugees just arrived and who didn't speak a word of English.

And of course, we were very early on in the conflict in Ukraine, just a few weeks into that conflict, but great to see the church engaging with those people and meeting a young woman who had just driven back from Ukraine and from taking aid over - a young Ukrainian woman, so very moving and a great privilege to meet them.

And then meeting an ecumenical group of people in an ecumenical cafe in the centre of Edenbridge. Great to see Christians working together, engaging with one another, a place of welcome for people from the community.

On the other hand, struck also as we walked around the town, and indeed since, even in what we think of those as quite well to do parts of the area, but facing real challenges economically at the moment and recognising that that across the whole of our diocese.

And then we were whizzed up from there to Chatham and to St John's Church. Fantastic to see the community gathering there. A privilege to share in the licensing of two new members of staff and to hear a little bit about the story of how that church has grown over the last year or two, and the part it's playing in the regeneration of the town.

And then lovely to visit also the university campus, to meet the chaplaincy team and to learn about the way that they are doing things across the three universities who share that campus.

Finally, of course back to the Cathedral, and it's been lovely over the last few weeks to worship in the Cathedral and to get to know the people there. What a great welcome we've had.

But just to have the chance to come together and to pray, with brothers and sisters in Christ from across the Diocese at that service of Evensong, and then of course to meet people informally afterwards.

It was a very, very special day as you can tell I'm sure, and lots of memories that both I and my wife Toni will treasure for many years to come.