

Bishop Ruth's Presidential Address Diocesan Synod 19 March 2022

On Thursday night I broke my pastoral staff. A careless moment as it dropped from my hand. A lapse in attention. A small thing but significant. Something precious to me, broken.

In recent days something much bigger has grabbed out attention. We have seen many precious people and places broken. Our hearts break for the careless way peace has been broken, power wielded, and lives lost. We are seeing a tragedy unfold before us that we could not have imagined. It has touched us. It has entered our homes and hearts through the stories of courage, of generosity, of pain. Many of you are responding with compassion and offering hospitality, practical support, and prayer. Thank you!

But this is not the first time that we find ourselves here.

Last autumn we saw the devastation of a country where peace-keeping troops were withdrawn without sufficient thought or care for what would happen next. Many Afghans saw their country taken by militants and fled. Thousands remain in temporary accommodation in our country waiting for the possibility of resuming a normal way of life. Twenty years earlier, my sister-in-law was one of those refugees as the Taliban tightened their control. There has been a cycle of power abuse across our world, across the centuries. And yet we remain care-less to it, we still seem not to learn. And we repeat the patterns of the past.

The conflicts we experience here in Bath and Wells may be very different from those where bombs explode and shots are exchanged. But they are there. In the unhealthy cultures we sometimes contribute to or refuse to challenge; or the power we exert.

Two years ago, the first lockdown began, as the virus which we had heard rumours of, yet couldn't quite believe, began to take hold in our country. On Wednesday this week we will hold a moment of reflection for the lives lost and the brokenness felt. And it hasn't ended yet. Here in Somerset we currently have some of the highest numbers of people with Covid. We need to remain vigilant and aware of the risks. Throughout this time, hospitals, churches, schools, and communities have responded with compassion and care. Thank you! What an example of the love of God being lived out in the world.

This morning in our worship and in our Synod we are sharing in the stories of our Zambian sisters and brothers. Their experience of the pandemic has been different from ours with reduced access to vaccinations and tests. And yet, as they remind us, 'God is good...all the time!'

The experiences of conflict or pandemic may be very different depending where we live in the world yet as disciples we are all called to respond with the love and compassion of Christ.

This Lent we are focusing as a diocese on what it means to know one another, to know ourselves and to know God. We are sharing resources that get us thinking about welcome, hospitality, inclusion, and generosity. This could not be more timely! How might we grow in these things?

As Christians, 'welcome' is a significant part of what we do. On Thursday I welcomed a new priest to the diocese, to help lead a church in its desire to extend its welcome more widely. They want to improve their buildings, to reach out to those who are marginalised, to share the message of God's welcome. This is St Paul's Weston-Super-Mare, which has done much to welcome many.

This is the story of most of our church communities, whether in town or village. We want people to come and join us, to feel welcome. But how easy is that? We have struggled for some years. Despite trying all sorts of new forms of invitation, across the diocese, we have seen a decline in church attendance. And now, following the pandemic, we are finding it difficult to recover even those who were regular church attenders. Although many are wanting to return, there are those who are reluctant, either through health fears or from falling out of the habit. This calls for a more radical approach to welcome.

Welcoming others means going out into their territory, becoming the guest rather than the host, meeting them where they are. That might mean us stepping into situations and opening conversations where we might feel less than comfortable. Many of you have done this during the pandemic; stepping into the digital world; reaching out by knocking on doors, ringing up strangers, and offering help and friendship. Let us not now retreat to former ways but ensure we combine the best of the new with the old.

We are walking the way towards Easter. Retracing the journey of Christ's walk to the cross. Through Holy week we will revisit something of the pain, betrayal, and failure that we all experience in some form or another. The story of Christ's redemptive love, of His giving of self for us, shows us what welcome looks like. Having experienced rejection His arms are opened in love to us. I'd like to encourage us to think how we might respond to that wonderful Easter message in the way we extend welcome to one another and seek to rebuild a community of worshippers, of followers, of disciples.

Some of you have signed up to extend a welcome to strangers, offering hospitality to Ukrainian women and children who need sanctuary. Well done. Thank you! The diocesan letter we sent this past week signposts to helpful advice and support. It won't be an easy task to show hospitality to those who have been traumatised and harmed by this conflict. We will need to take special care to safeguard all those who come, and our own families too in this journey.

There are many stories of welcome and hospitality shown throughout the Bible and on Thursday at St Paul's we reflected on the encounter of Jesus and the Samaritan woman at the well. In that meeting we see something of the way Jesus stepped into the place of difference, crossing social boundaries to engage her in conversation, to seek her help, rather than offer His own, and to deepen the conversation into one which ultimately transformed her.

This morning we are to engage in some difficult conversations. Ones which require us to step into areas of challenge and difference. We shall be discussing our Eucharistic practice and considering our engagement with the Living in Love and Faith resources. We know that there are a range of views held by us. How might we shape our discussion together?

We are also taking stock of where we are as a diocese following the pandemic. We know we have severely reduced finances and this is unsustainable for the future. It is having a significant impact on how we shape our priorities. Our vision remains the same, to live and tell the story of Jesus in response to God's great love for us. But we are having to make changes. We will have to stop things, to do what is most important.

Within the support team based at Flourish House, we have already undertaken some of that change, reshaping teams to ensure they can make the greatest local impact and be sustainable for the future. Today's Synod focuses on the direction of travel for the foreseeable future for the whole diocese. We have identified the levers for change that will help us to reach a balanced budget. These are hard choices.

Talking money is never easy for those of us who have much nor for those of us who have little. Questions of identity, relationships and sex are another topic we often prefer to avoid. And yet today we are called to address such. As we do so let us hold in mind the conversation we are engaging in this Lent through the '*Knowing You, Knowing Me, Knowing God*' resources. And how we are asked to explore the themes of welcome, hospitality, inclusion, and generosity.

There will be the potential for cracks to appear as we journey together, just as there were for those early disciples. Disagreements were had. Just as we do now. These are often accentuated when life is tough and we feel vulnerable. I have to be frank and say it hasn't been an easy week. Breaking my staff seemed a visible expression of the brokenness I have been dealing with! And yet it is in the very brokenness of our lives, when we are willing to reveal that and offer ourselves to Christ for His healing, that we find the generosity of His compassion and love for us. And we are called to show such generosity to one another too.

I end with something which I have been trying to get my head around for the past couple of days. In chapter 15 of John's Gospel we hear that Jesus calls his disciples his friends and asks them to love one another as He loves them. It is Christ's friendship with each of us which holds us together, not necessarily the friendship we have for one another. At times those human friendships are strained but as we allow the Spirit of Jesus to shape us then our confidence grows and we find ourselves able to develop friendships which are strong enough to engage with difference and disagreement. This doesn't mean a strength which can overcome 'the other' but rather a strength which allows us to give up our life for the

other. What might that ask of me? Of you? In what way is Christ calling me to 'lay down my life'?

I'm challenged even as I write this, having just heard Putin's ill use of this passage! These are not words we can use to excuse aggression but ones which call us to the sacrifice of love. Today may we seek to love one another as Christ has loved us. In all we say and do. In the way we welcome, offer hospitality, include all, and give what we have with generous hearts.

With thankfulness for you all

+Ruth