

The Archbishop of York today shared the opening Presidential address with the Archbishop of Canterbury at a special session of the Church of England General Synod. The Archbishop of York's speech follows in full...

I hate this Coronavirus. I hate it because not only so many have died, but because so many people have died alone, unable to hold the hand of a dear beloved. I hate it because our health service has been stretched to the limit. I hate it because so many are bereaved and could not sit next to a family member at a funeral or embrace each other. I hate it because weddings and baptisms and ordinations have been postponed or have gone ahead without the parties that have meant to be with them. I hate it because children's schooling has been disrupted. I hate it because so many people have been so ill, crying out in pain, so many isolated, lonely, fearful, depressed. I hate it because behind locked doors terrible things have happened. I hate it because the poor and the disadvantaged have been hit the hardest. I hate it because it has left so many people across the world feeling hopeless as if life itself has been taken from us.

I hate this Coronavirus and I reluctantly acknowledge that because of this Coronavirus we have learned some hard lessons about ourselves. We have learned that we belong to each other and my interest is tied up with your interest. We have learned again that death is real. We have learned that progress does not mean living in a pain-free world. We have learned that those jobs that we had thought of as menial or inconsequential are vital and essential. We have learned that at the moment the best way to love one another is to keep a distance. And we have learned that love transcends boundaries and can happily easily jump 2 metres.

And in the Church, even without the much grieved for assurance of sacrament and congregation and all the other happy familiarities of worship, we have learned that Christ is with us. With us, as He has always been, present in the midst of endeavour, suffering and ministry. We have learned that the local Church is the centre, and that pastoral care, and all sorts of worship – old and new – can go on in old and in new ways and loving your neighbour is after all what this is all about. And I reluctantly acknowledge that although there is nothing good about Covid 19, good can come out of it, if we respect and love each other, and learn how to inhabit the world differently so that the spread of the virus can be kept under control. We, the church of Jesus Christ, have an opportunity to take the lead in this, speaking out for the poor. Making sure that the restrictions that we live by are administered fairly and work for the common good. And making sure that other things like the curse of racism, the way that we inhabit the planet, and our relationships with each other within the UK and in Europe do not slip from the agenda.

Therefore, despite all this, I am thankful. I am thankful for the faithfulness and hard work and ingenuity of all those who serve in our health and emergency services. I am thankful for all in public office who have made hard decisions, inevitably come in for sharp criticism but who continue to give themselves to serve us and keep us safe. I am thankful for the witness and service of the local church in our parishes, chaplaincies and in other various expressions of Church life, for peoples' creativity and tenacity especially for care of the vulnerable and in sustaining the life of worship. I am thankful for those in the national church who have sought to interpret Government advice and guide the Church through these difficult times. I am thankful that despite all the horrors of a Covid world that we are learning a new commitment to Christ and how to be a humbler, simpler Church. That we are putting Christ at the centre of our lives and learning very very painfully what it really means to be a Church that is dependent on Christ alone. And, I am filled with longing. I long for us to find ways of affirming and thanking all the people who work for us and with us. I long for us to find our voice in the building of a better world. I long for us to be a more Christ-centred and Jesus shaped Church, witnessing to Christ and bringing the healing balm of the Gospel to our nation, for this is our vocation.

Synod, I hate this coronavirus. Nevertheless, I reluctantly acknowledge that there are important things for us to learn. I am thankful for the good things that have emerged, not least our dependence on each other and on God. And I long for us to share this more effectively in the world. Finally, I am sorry for the inevitable mistakes we have made along the way but confident in God's mercy and of your own forbearance. I invite us now even in this strange synod to do no other than to boldly and humbly share the Gospel in deed and in word across the life of our nation. Therefore, I cry out and invite you to cry out with me: "Death, where is your sting? Grave, where is your victory? For I am convinced that neither death nor life, nor angels nor rulers, nor things present, nor things to come, nor powers, nor height, nor depth, nor anything else in all creation will be able to separate us from the love of God in Christ Jesus our Lord."

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