



THE ARCHBISHOP
OF YORK

The Archbishop of York gave the Presidential address to the virtual York Diocesan Synod on 28 November 2020. This follows in full.

Living Christ's story

St John's Gospel ends with these words –

“There are also many other things that Jesus did; if every one of them were written down, I suppose that the world itself could not contain the books that would be written.” (John 21. 25)

I don't think John is just referring to all the things that Jesus said and did during his earthly ministry that didn't get written down; he is thinking about all the things that Jesus continues to do through the life of his church. Through us.

Through his ascension to the Father and the outpouring of the Spirit on the Church, Jesus' presence with us is now unconstrained by time and space. We, therefore, the Church of Jesus Christ, have two stories to tell. First of all, we tell the story of the life, death and resurrection of Jesus, the story that is given to us in scripture. But we also tell the *continuing story* of what Jesus has done through his Church down through the centuries, the particular story that is our Anglican history and heritage, and then, just as importantly, the story of what Jesus is doing in our lives today by the power of his Spirit. More than this, we don't just tell the story — we are all called to be part of the story.

In his letter to the Church in Corinth Paul says to those who are baptized into Christ –

“You yourselves are our letter, written on our hearts, to be known and read by all.” (2. Cor. 3.2)

He is making a similar point: the story of Jesus is written in our lives, “not with ink but with the Spirit of the living God (2. Cor. 3.3).”

Stories are very powerful. They can help us imagine a new future. They can draw us together. In the York diocese in recent years we have come to realise this afresh. Jesus' own little story of the mustard seed that grows and grows into a huge and fruitful tree, has inspired us to new initiatives, released new people into ministry, and drawn others into the story of God's Church and for the building of God's kingdom.

I wonder whether across our whole diocese this understanding of ourselves as people who are called to be part of the story of God's love and to live and share that story with others might draw us together, give fresh impetus to our mission, and enable us to find other new and inspiring ways to share the story with others.

This isn't a new vision, but it may be a way of looking again at our existing vision and priorities and breathing new life into them.

It will also give us some new, exciting stories to tell.

At the moment our vision is **to be generous churches, making and nurturing disciples, mutually resourcing to build up the Body of Christ to grow in Christ-likeness, commitment, partnership, influence and numbers.**

That's what you'll find on the Diocese of York website.

It's impossible to disagree with. Its all-embracing. But it's not memorable. Nor does it help us know where to put the focus.

It goes on –

Our strategy sets out the action we are taking to help us on this journey, with our goals being to:

- **Reach people we currently don't**
- **Move to growth**
- **Establish sustainable giving**

This bit is memorable. I think if you asked most people in the diocese, if they knew the vision at all, they would say these three words: reach; grow, sustain.

But even though these words are simple and memorable, they still need to be fleshed out and inhabited.

I think I know what it means to reach people we don't.

I also know what we mean by establishing sustainable giving.

But move to growth, could mean lots of things. And once the words just become, *reach, grow, sustain*, they are open to other interpretations.

Sustain might just be heard, as keeping things as they are.

Well, this year, if we have learned anything, it's that we can't go on as we are. The Church of England has been humbled. The IICSA report on child sexual abuse in the Church of England has held up a painful and disturbing mirror to our failings, not least a culture of deference which has prevented us from seeing those failings properly, let alone responding adequately. These things must be addressed. In our diocese. And in the whole Church.

But we are also aware of the financial challenges we face. These have not been created by COVID-19. For some years our main sources of income (particularly the overall Freewill Offer and Parochial Fees) have been static. Whilst vacancies have not been deliberately extended, the difficulties in making timely appointments have led to an underspend on stipends and salaries which, together with a combination of short term actions like cutting back on property maintenance and, arguably, under investing in other central systems and services, have enabled us to balance the books. But as you've heard before, this masks an underlying financial problem. Despite predictions of deficits, the bottom line has appeared to work itself out. But we have not been "crying wolf", and with the added impact of Covid19, and as you shall hear later, we can no

longer simply manage this though short term fixes. We therefore must face up to the practical implications of the very real challenge of finding ways of fulfilling our vocation to be the church for every community in this diocese, and especially the poorest, in ways that are financially sustainable. This will require a transformation in our thinking. We need to tell a new story.

At the same time, we should not be discouraged. This year we have also learned so much. As I said to the General Synod of the Church of England earlier this week we have learned again the importance of parish and place and local ministry and pastoral care. Local churches and local clergy and local lay leaders have responded to this crisis in remarkably profound, imaginative and moving ways. Thank you to you all for your perseverance and creativity.

For instance, in the north of the diocese this year, although our Joint Venture with the Church Urban Fund, *Together Middlesbrough & Cleveland*, hasn't been able to run its normal summer activities for children in places of deprivation, it has responded brilliantly and overseen the provision of 60,000 meals, as well as work with people who are homeless and isolated; and where face-to-face visits haven't been possible, it's developed a telephone befriending service. Recent research by the *Yorkshire Churches Rural Business Support* (YCRBS) also demonstrates encouraging and creative innovation, both in worship and service, by our rural churches.

In particular, and across the board, we have developed our online presence and created all sorts of new communities of faith and found new people engaging in the life of faith in incredible, and nine months ago, unimaginable ways.

Whatever the future holds, we must continue to express our life in this digital landscape. Further theological reflection is needed on what this means for our liturgy, our sacramental life and our belonging to each other. But these are nice problems to have. For once, they are problems of growth. Churches that used to have congregations of 30 or 40 on a Sunday morning now report 130 or 140 online. Of course, those who are gathering online won't automatically start coming on Sundays when all this is over. So we must find new ways of being a mixed ecology church, expanding our vision of what it means to belong.

Thirdly, we have rediscovered the vital link between worship, spirituality, pastoral care and evangelism. We should never have separated these things out. But this year, because we have been forced back to basics, even during the first lockdown having to worship and pray largely on our own and without the nourishment of the sacraments and with church buildings closed, we have had to learn a new dependence on Christ.

With others, I have been leading for the Church of England on a process to discern what our vision and strategy might be for the next 10 years. The ideas that have emerged were shared at the General Synod for the first time on Tuesday. Some of you may have seen them.

The headlines are these: that God is calling us to be a more **Christ centred** and **Jesus shaped** church. Of course, we make no distinction between 'Jesus' and 'Christ'. We are called to be *Jesus Christ centred*, which means primarily a profound spiritual renewal; and we are called to be

Jesus Christ shaped, which is primarily about the lives we lead as disciples of Jesus Christ. The phrase 'Jesus shaped' is borrowed from the Anglican Communion, where many provinces have understood the five marks of mission also to be five marks of what they call a Jesus shaped life. The five marks of mission also focus our mission and ministry away from ourselves, and to the needs of God's world, especially the need for us to challenge the unjust structures of the world and to address the greatest long-term challenge facing us, which isn't Covid 19, but the environmental crisis.

From this centre three other strategic priorities have emerged, and I very much hope we can weave these into our own diocesan strategy. They are that God is calling us to be –

- **a church of missionary disciples**, that is a church shaped by the five marks of mission.
- **a church where mixed ecology is the norm**, that is a church that is better able to serve the smorgasbord of cultures that make up English life today by finding many different expressions. All of this will flow from healthy, flourishing parish ministry. But it will embrace digital; and, we hope, that many other types of church will flourish, not least chaplaincy. These are also the mustard seed and multiply ministries that we have given birth to in this diocese in recent years.
- **a church that is younger and more diverse.**

But none of this works or makes sense, unless it inspires, shapes and informs the life of the church in our parishes, church plants, chaplaincies, fresh expressions, multiply and Mustard seed ministries, messy church, refugee ministry, church schools, food banks and in whatever other ways we live and share the gospel in this diocese of York. And, amazingly, even in this most difficult of years, in every community in our land we continue to offer prayer and service, the prayer and service that flows from our life in Christ and the ways in which Jesus has shaped our lives. This is the hope and the vision we must share with our world: the story of what God has done and is doing in Christ.

I said at the last Synod that our vision may need a reboot. So how about this? Instead of our current all embracing – but rather complicated - way of expressing vision, and mindful that the three words *reach*, *grow* and *sustain* are the ones that people tend to remember, might this be a better way of putting it –

In the York diocese we are putting our energy into **living Christ's story**. Sharing a narrative of hope.

We will do this in four ways -

1. Becoming more like Christ – which means receiving and knowing the story ourselves. Before we do anything else we remember who we are:

God's beloved children, those whom he came to seek and save. We also remember that we know this story by prayer and service as well as by

bible study and learning (we will also start to use the Christ centred and Jesus shaped language of the national vision and strategy).

2. Reaching people we currently don't – by living and telling this story, remembering that the story we share is those *two* stories of what God has done in Christ and what God is doing through the Church down through the centuries and in us.

3. Growing churches of missionary disciples - which will be the best way of reaching new people and is the way we'll grow those we reach, but also to strive to be younger and more diverse and to take on board what the national vision says about becoming a mixed ecology church. In every community we want our churches to be places where the story of Christ is known and lived out, and where we let those stories lead us in the ways we have seen in the *Mustard Seed* and *Multiply* initiatives.

4. Transforming our finances and structures so that together we can support a presence in all the neighbourhoods and networks of the diocese – to find a new story that will not just be about sustaining our life, but recognising that our life needs to be transformed in order to be an agent of God's transformation in the world.

These four priorities clearly build on our current strategy; ensure that the new challenges we face are addressed; and resonate with the Church of England's national vision and strategy.

I'm sure some of you will look at these four priorities and think the fourth is the hardest. It isn't. The first presents the biggest challenge. And without addressing it – our life in Christ – then nothing else of value is likely to happen either. Nor should it. However, for each of these strategic priorities we will need to discover the stories that will lead us, and for this fourth priority I wonder whether Jesus' story of the woman with the yeast may be the one to guide us (see Matthew 13. 33). Its promise of transformation is the narrative we need for the tough choices and changes that lie ahead.

Synod, I believe this may be a way forward for us. I present it on behalf of the Leadership team of the diocese after much prayer and discussion.

It is easy to communicate.

It honours what has gone before, but enables us to set an agenda for the key strategic challenges we face, not least around resourcing.

And story isn't just a unifying concept for the vision, it also a description of the method we will use (and have been using) where story creates ownership of vision and entering into the story is the driver for strategic change.

The Leadership team and I believe that by God's grace and the power of the Spirit there are great opportunities for our diocese. Making them a reality is possible, but it means first being honest about what needs to be different and then having the courage to think and act differently. This is something for the whole diocese to take to heart, and I hope that as a Synod we'll be at the forefront. I share it with you today for your prayers,

your discussion and your input. The next Synod meeting is in April. Before then, the bishops and archdeacons will be having conversations especially at deanery level about this way forward, and how we can move towards actual changes that we'll see. And then, after further discussion and amendment, at the April Synod I'll be inviting us to commit ourselves together to all this.

Or to put it another way –

Our task as the people of God in the York diocese is to share the story of Christ by letting God write that story on our own hearts and by writing the next chapter of all that Jesus is going to do here.

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