

## **Bishop Julian's Presidential Address, July 16, 2019**

I am grateful for the opportunity to give this Presidential Address which, while sounding rather grand in its title, gives me the chance to reflect on where we are as a Diocese. It is in fact a unique opportunity for me as Bishop to share my thoughts with a wide range of people from across the Diocese.

In a prayer recently I found myself using a phrase, without having planned or thought about it, that spoke of this time in the diocese as a time of God's favour towards us.

I was rather surprised I found that phrase coming out in my prayer and it reminded me there are always going to be different seasons in God's work; seasons of blessing in one moment and seasons that are rather different; tough, hard and challenging.

There will be those times when it feels like an easy ride. When everything seems to be going well and people are coming to faith; growing in faith; volunteering to step up and do things. In wonderful moments like that it seems to be a time of blessing.

But there are also going to be times when it feels as though it's hard; that it's not straightforward, there is opposition to some of the things we think should be done within the life of our church and we are making little progress.

I want to say that it feels now, in God's purposes, that this is a time of favour in this Diocese in terms of the work that so many people are doing.

There are so many examples of encouragement around the diocese. The Diocesan Conference last year was a particular gift from God and a sign of His favour towards us.

And then there is the very remarkable work on our estates at the moment including the work of the M:Power urban ministry training centre in Lower Darwen, training up people to be leaders on our estates.

There is the beginning of the resourcing churches in Preston, at the Minster and St George's, starting formally at the end of September.

Then there are the people God is sending to us to join the team - recently bringing Nick McKee as Director of Vocations; Ruth Hassall as Director of Discipleship and Carolyn Barton as our new Vision Coordinator - all joining the central team. And there are significant appointments in parishes all around the Diocese, placing gifted men and

women of vision and energy into positions of leadership and responsibility.

So, it feels like a time of favour.

Some of you may have read Mark Ireland's article in a recent edition of 'The See' Diocesan magazine about the projections made in 2011 in a Diocesan document, 'The Shape of Things to Come'.

In the document it said that, by 2019, numbers of stipendiary clergy would be reduced by a third and that finances would be critical.

In God's grace and mercy neither of those projections have been realised.

Last night some of us were at St Thomas, Blackpool marking the arrival of David O'Brien, as the new vicar there – returning to the Diocese after nine years elsewhere. The reading was from Luke chapter 4 and contained those words of Jesus as he was in the synagogue quoting from Isaiah about the importance of proclaiming the year of the Lord's favour.

And then, without planning and without knowing what Kirkham Deanery's reading would be tonight at Synod (and it wasn't the set lectionary reading) they chose Luke chapter 4; containing those very same words of Jesus.

God is wanting to say something to encourage us in our work and in our ministry, that this is a time of His favour.

We should embrace it and make the most of it.

Paul picks that theme up in his Letter to the Corinthians, chapter 6, verse 1, when he says 'as God's fellow workers we urge you not to receive God's grace in vain' for, he says, 'in the time of my favour I heard you, and in the day of salvation I helped you; I tell you, now is time of God's favour, now is the day of salvation'.

I suppose that we should say that because of the work of Jesus every day in God's purposes is a day of His favour and every day is therefore a day of salvation.

But within this period of grace it is right to observe that there are times and seasons of His blessing and His judgement.

So, we should be encouraged by what is going on around the Diocese in so many places. We have a focus on making disciples at the moment and we see that as a key to unlocking all sorts of issues that we face.

You will be aware of the Bishop's Bible Challenge for adults and as well as children. Why should the children have all the fun?!

A total of 2700 children have completed their Bible Challenge – I was at a school today where they have completed it online and they were so engaged.

As adults we have our own Challenge, with two parts to it – encouraging daily bible reading is the first and remembering key verses in scripture, which are found in the Daily Prayer email and the monthly Blackburn Prayers, is the second part.

We have produced a new Diocesan booklet – ‘Knowing the Scriptures Better’ – and if you haven’t got copies yet please contact Ruth Hassall and the Making Disciples team at Clayton House to get some for your church and start using them.

All of this is part of our aim to be ‘making disciples’ around the Diocese. Meanwhile the last month has been full-on; tent week at Bishop’s House, where we erect a marquee and invite all sorts of groups to come and meet, network and socialise, was a great time – with 12 events in eight days and more than 750 people passing through.

Part of that was the ordinands’ lunch; prior to the ordination weekend when we had five different services across the two days.

People said: ‘you must be mad’ ... but we are committed to mutual flourishing and so it is important that we allow for different views about ordination of men and women to ministry and for those people to be able to flourish in our Diocese and the Church.

It was a privilege to welcome and commission a great cohort of men and women for ordained Christian ministry around the Diocese and bringing with them a fresh energy, new ideas and commitment to the Gospel. Then Bishop Philip was telling me that he went to Mill Hill in Blackburn last weekend, where they had the most wonderful community event in the middle of Mill Hill. Lots of people turned up for this thrilling new engagement of church with the wider community. It’s a great example of what many of our churches are doing regularly to engage with the wider community.

At the weekend I was also at the South Asian Christian Convention annual service, which took place this year in Nelson. It is really encouraging to see Kamran Bhatti and Munawar Din and Victor Sohail developing that work.

We have also booked another Diocesan conference for October 2021 to build on the momentum of the last conference. There has already been a first planning meeting, with more to come.

Alongside all the positives, we need to recognise that sometimes difficult decisions have to be taken, especially when a season draws to a close

and a piece of work has to stop. Last Sunday, I went to a service at Bleasdale, in the middle of nowhere in the trough of Bowland, and the church was absolutely packed – I don't think they had seen anyone in the gallery for hundreds of years!

There has been a school there for 190 years but there are now only two pupils and it is therefore not sustainable. So there has been a time for a school in Bleasdale but it is now a time for the school to close.

And it was wonderful to have such a great celebration of thanksgiving for that school and all it has done and especially with a former pupil present with us in her 99th year!

So, there are lots of encouragements and reminders too that, in the midst of change, there will always be things that start and things that end.

I went to St Barnabas Blackburn last week – opened as a new building 31 years ago (an old Co-op) and now Anglican ministry there has come to an end.

A Russian congregation, a Nigerian congregation and a community church congregation continue to meet there now, and the Church of England is drawing back, but that is OK. There are always going to be changes.

It isn't all plain sailing and there are many challenges and I am fully aware of them. But we must see them in the context of all the good things that are also taking place.

You will all be aware of the challenges we face in relation to safeguarding at the moment; particularly the recently concluded IICSA hearings into the Church of England.

Some of you may have followed the transcripts of those who were called to give evidence. They told terrible stories of abuse of power and of the sexual abuse of people by the Church over a number of years.

That is a real challenge to us – and particularly to our credibility as a church community.

Some of you will be aware that on the back of the recent IICSA report into the diocese of Chichester and Peter Ball, the Bishops, Archdeacons and the Dean sent out a letter to our Diocese urging the interim IICSA report to be read. That letter has since reached a much wider audience and has been widely commended and for that we give thanks to God.

Can I take this opportunity while I'm talking about safeguarding to remind you of the importance of making sure there is a safeguarding link on the front page of every parish website, offering more guidance, information and help.

It is essential. I have already had some Clergy Disciplinary Measure, CDM, complaints in relation to some parishes that have not got safeguarding on the front page of their websites.

We have got to take safeguarding seriously.

One of the other challenges we have at present is recruiting a replacement for Archdeacon Michael and filling the huge gap his departure creates.

We said farewell to Michael and Ruth on Saturday at the Cathedral and gave thanks to God for all they have done in their 27 years in the diocese. The advert for Michael's replacement is now out and the interview date will be September 24. Please do pray for that whole process and for the appointment of a new Archdeacon.

In the vacancy, Simon Cox will continue as Assistant Archdeacon and I have asked Linda MacLuskie in the vacancy to also be an Assistant Archdeacon. I am very grateful to both of them.

Also in the vacancy Gillian Beeley – secretary to the Archdeacon of Lancaster – will continue to field enquiries and questions that come to her at Clayton House.

Just a couple of other things ... on August 12 my new Bishop's Chaplain, Sam Cheesman, will begin work. He will serve the rest of his curacy at St Peter's, Salisbury.

Do remember Sam and his family as they make the move.

Sam begins while Heather and I will be travelling to our Link Diocese of Free State for a week when we will be leading a clergy school and then another week in Kenya to do a similar thing in a different Diocese with a week's holiday in the middle.

Let me just conclude that by saying that if we believe this is a time of God's favour we must also remember the freedom to worship, evangelise and serve that we have in this country compared to other parts of the world.

We easily forget how blessed we are with that freedom. In the news recently we learned of the murder of 100 Christian villagers in Mali on June 10 for their faith in Christ.

We must seek to make the most of the freedom we currently are given in this country to make Jesus Christ more widely known, loved and believed.

'For I tell you,' says Paul, 'now is a time of God's favour; now is a day of salvation.'

Thank you for listening.