

Bishop Philip's Address at the Cathedral during the announcement of the next Bishop of Blackburn.

Some years ago when I was going through a bit of a torrid time, I was visiting a middle of the road Lancashire parish for a Confirmation. At the party afterwards, an elderly woman made a beeline for me through the crowds, her face frowning and full of intent. I assumed I was in trouble, that she was going to tell me off for some fault of failing. But she came straight up to me, poked me vigorously on the chest and said in a broad Lancashire accent which I won't try and imitate, 'You belong here, with us.'

She's right. I may be a Londoner with Yorkshire parentage, but I feel on a very deep level that I belong here with you. I have come to love very deeply indeed this county: its variety, its scenery, its schools, its parishes and above all its people. I have never before felt quite so at home in a place or found communities of people who are so easy to love. I feel that God has called me here, and that is why it is such a rich joy to be invited to offer the whole of my life to you in service as Bishop of Blackburn.

It may seem odd that someone who has already served in this Diocese for eight years as Suffragan Bishop is now to be its Diocesan Bishop. But for an organisation as complex as an Anglican Diocese, there is much to be said for purposeful and Gospel-focussed stability. I am completely committed to seeing through Vision 2026, unashamed by a growth-orientated strategy for the future, committed to a strong focus on the Parish as the core unit of such a strategy and passionate about maintaining clergy numbers and using all our limited resource to send labourers into the harvest.

But every Bishop brings to their work their own passions. There are three things for which I will be labouring tirelessly in the years to come.

First, I would love to see every corner of Lancashire served by a joyful community of Christians. In other words healthy local churches committed to witnessing to Jesus Christ through service and proclamation. Expect therefore to see a forensic focus on what it is that creates the circumstances in which churches can grow and new congregations be established.

That means a real attention to forming and supporting priests and lay leaders. It means bags of encouragement for parishes and permission to try things out and get things wrong. It means developing a national expertise for parish renewal. It means being unafraid to offer additional support and intervention to parishes that are struggling, because every person in Lancashire needs and deserves good Christian ministry. It means continuing with bold strategy for new local congregations to reach communities and demographics we are neglecting.

We *can* keep growing the church in Lancashire. That must be our aim. And if we are to do that, every tradition, every individual has a critical part to play. We don't just want, we need every member of the body to play its part, and that is why I am so profoundly committed to a diverse church.

We know that as a Diocese we still have some way to go towards modelling a true mutual flourishing in which we genuinely want each other's good more than our own; we have much more to do to ensure that people of global majority heritage play a full part in the life of the church without prejudice, conscious or otherwise; we need to be more aware of the voices of other minority groups. And we need to do this in the interest not of ticking the right boxes on the diversity monitoring forms, but because the Gospel provides us with a thrilling vision of the flourishing of all human life under God. That's why I will continue to be committed to playing my part in growing a church in which every gift is used and every voice is heard to the glory of God.

Second, I would love to see the church of England in Lancashire being an ever stronger voice for justice, especially for the poorest. I was speaking to a teacher in Blackpool a few days ago and she told me of a child in her class who had come to school looking hungry. When she asked about breakfast, it emerged that all the boy had eaten that morning was some cardboard. That's all he could do to put something in his stomach.

It is an appalling scandal that in such a wealthy nation, so many millions can barely afford to make ends meet. A culture of low pay, a punitive benefits regime and a global crisis of energy costs has led many into destitution. This means that churches across the county and nation have become first aid organisations, literally keeping people alive through food banks, community provision and warm spaces.

This is heroic work. The small groups of volunteers who offer time, money and donations to such projects are extraordinary. But we shouldn't need them. The Bible provides us with a rich vision of a transformed humanity, one in which the beauty and dignity of every person made in the image of God is respected, one in which everyone can play their part. That vision is one we should be striving for, along with partners in the voluntary sector and national and local government.

In addition to our excellent charitable service, we need to be unafraid to be a strong voice for justice, on the side of the marginalised and the poor. We need to go on calling and forming leaders from our most deprived communities. We need to be liberating people to use their gifts and play their part. We need to articulate a clear Christian vision of a nation in which the care and responsibility we bear towards each other makes poverty a thing of the past.

And third, just as Jesus placed a small child at the centre of his community as the role model of discipleship, so children and young people need to be at the very heart of all that we do. The current generation of young people is such an impressive one. They have a passion for the environment, a strong set of values and an openness to ideas and debate. I'd love to see us finding new ways to capture these young imaginations with the person of Jesus Christ.

Our amazing family of church schools are doing exceptional work in this area, as are so many of our parishes. But imagine a Diocese in which almost every church has a space where young people can gather together to build relationships and learn about faith and life. Imagine diocesan events and residentials where young people can inspire each other. And imagine all this happening not as part of a recruitment campaign intended to preserve the church as we

know it now, but because we passionately want young people to find their purpose and their life in meeting Jesus Christ.

Building joyful Christian communities. Striving for the justice of God's kingdom. Inspiring children and young people. I'd love to see us pursuing those three aims together as we roll out Vision 2026 and look to what may come next.

Of course there are threats to our common life. We need to walk through the LLF process together. Some churches are struggling in a post-covid world. Our deployment strategy is a daring one, relying on joyful generosity from our parishes. We are part of a church that can be prey to anxiety and worry about the future.

But Jesus has won the victory. Our call is not to fear but to joy. And wouldn't it be great if the reputation of the Diocese of Blackburn was to be a place of joy – joy in our friendships, our worship, our common life and above all joy in Jesus Christ.

It is such a privilege to be called to this role. Of course I'm human and I'll make mistakes and get things wrong and change my mind and drive you all crazy. But there is one thing I can promise you with every shred of my being, and that's that I will love you. And as I do so I shall pray that through my fragile human love, you might capture some tiny reflection of the infinite love that Jesus has for you. For it is in that love that we find eternity itself.