

Bishop Philip's Presidential Address to Diocesan Synod, October 14, 2023

¹⁶ So from now on we regard no one from a worldly point of view. Though we once regarded Christ in this way, we do so no longer. ¹⁷ Therefore, if anyone is in Christ, the new creation has come: The old has gone, the new is here!¹⁸ All this is from God, who reconciled us to himself through Christ and gave us the ministry of reconciliation: ¹⁹ that God was reconciling the world to himself in Christ, not counting people's sins against them. And he has committed to us the message of reconciliation. ²⁰ We are therefore Christ's ambassadors, as though God were making his appeal through us. We implore you on Christ's behalf: Be reconciled to God. ²¹ God made him who had no sin to be sin for us, so that in him we might become the righteousness of God. (2 Corinthians 5)

As we meet in the calm of this room, a tragedy of unspeakable proportions and unimaginable consequences is playing out in the land that St Paul, like the Lord Jesus he followed, knew and loved so well.

Those of us who follow affairs in Israel and Palestine are not surprised by the sudden outbreak of violence. The growing extremism of Palestinian politics has posed an increasing, existential threat to Israel, and where there is fear there is no desire for peace. The policies of successive right wing Israeli governments have taken away hope from the Palestinians, and where there is no hope there is no incentive for peace.

But no explanation can come close to comprehending the horror that is unfolding. First those horrible acts of terror. The massacres of families and children in Israeli kibbutzim. A slaughter at a music festival costing 260 lives. Hostages even now living in terror. Then in retaliation the Gaza strip under siege and the horrifying prospect of a ground invasion in the most overpopulated part of Planet Earth.

Meanwhile the consequences globally are vast. I have been in touch with Muslim and Jewish leaders this week and heard how much the situation in Israel and Palestine impacts upon their own sense of security. For the Jewish community a threat to Israel leaves even diaspora Jews feeling homeless and alone in a world that has so often scapegoated and persecuted them. And I do not doubt that we stand united in condemning the rise in Antisemitic attacks that we have seen in the UK in recent days. For Muslims the plight of Palestine is the greatest symbol of global Islamic oppression.

Worst of all, it seems so hard to imagine what the future might be. We used to think that a two state solution was the way ahead. But very few think that is possible any more. There doesn't seem to be a solution. Only an endless downward spiral of violence and retaliation.

What everyone longs for is reconciliation. What we all pray for is reconciliation. But the problem is that reconciliation is difficult when the two sides have such very different visions of what reconciliation is. One group's reconciliation is the other group's continued oppression.

It would be nice to think that Christians could show another way and model reconciliation. But the trouble is, in the Church of England, we don't seem to be doing that too well ourselves at the moment. The Living in Love and Faith process has reached a stage where everyone feels they have lost. For some the current proposals are a reason to leave. For others they are no more than crumbs under the table.

And part of the problem is the same as in the Middle East which is different understandings of what reconciliation is. This past week I felt compelled to sign a letter dissenting from a set of decisions made by the House of Bishops about how the LLF proposals should be implemented. I know that some of you will have found that decision very difficult. So let me reinforce something that Bishop Jill and I said in our joint letter on Thursday:

Therefore we want to emphasise in the strongest possible terms that our profound love for every person, lay and ordained, within this diocese, regardless of where they stand on these issues, is absolutely guaranteed. We delight to serve a Diocese where there is genuine theological breadth, and we are currently rejoicing to see new clergy keen to come to the diocese who represent the full range of views. LGBTQIA+ clergy may feel especially vulnerable at this time and we want to reassure you in particular of our ongoing love and care.

So why did I do something that I knew many of you would find so hard? The answer is reconciliation. I am profoundly worried that the way we are implementing these proposals is seriously undermining the unity and the missional coherence of the Church and leaving clergy, those who use the prayers and those who will not, deeply vulnerable and exposed to legal action. However I also accept that there will be many, indeed many in this room, who feel that what I am doing is the opposite of reconciliation and that I should pipe down. We have different visions of what reconciliation is.

There are no easy solutions here. But perhaps part of the problem is that, when we think about reconciliation, we start with ourselves and with our relationships with each other. It is interesting to see Paul's starting point. Not us, but the cross of Jesus Christ.

2000 years ago in the same city as missiles are now falling, a man gave his life upon the cross. That cross is the spring of reconciling love. Paul talks of the cross as a new start, a new creation. The old has gone. For on that cross, the ancient divide between God and the people he made was bridged. The brokenness of the old is replaced with new life.

That is a joy, but it is also a responsibility. In Christ we are reconciled. But as Paul tells us, in the very same breath we are sent to be reconcilers. In a world of conflict and division, the call upon our lives is to model the new humanity. And that's where it goes wrong. You see, we're not very good at being reconcilers. Selfishness, anxiety, sin, confusion gets in the way.

But remember, the one thing we can say about reconciliation with utter certainty is that through the cross those who believe are reconciled to the God who made them. The one reconciling act we can do with utter confidence is to hold up the cross and declare its power. We may struggle to be reconciled with each other. But even when we struggle to know how best to relate to each other, in the cross we are reconciled as brothers and sisters in Christ and so with each other to eternity. For reconciliation, we must look to the cross.

So here is a dare. We are part of a Diocese that is showing a level of missional and strategic coherence that is likely soon to attract tens of millions of pounds of investment from the national church. We have a Parish renewal programme that is turning round ministries and bringing people to faith. We have a team of clergy and lay leaders who almost all share a desire to grow their congregations, not because they want to keep an institution alive but because their own faith in Jesus means that genuinely long for others to have the same. We have remarkable ministry in our schools and chaplaincies. Our greatest shared fear must surely be that our missional coherence is undermined by what is happening in the church nationally.

HEALTHY CHURCHES TRANSFORMING COMMUNITIES

So in the midst of all that, let's hold up the cross. Let us commit ourselves anew to holding up the cross as we proclaim the Gospel, serve the poor, live lives of self-giving love and offer the world the sacraments of the Church. The fascinating thing about church history is that so often it is the times of theological division that have been the greatest moments of courageous mission. Maybe this moment of division is the time when we can commit ourselves afresh to holding up over Lancashire the cross that reconciles all in Christ.

So this is the dare. What if we did this. The latest data is that between 2021 and 2022 the regularly weekly attendance in churches across the Diocese grew, even though very few of you were as yet including new local congregations in the data. That growth came from churches of every tradition. What if we committed ourselves to praying for five years of consecutive growth as a Diocese. What if in 2026, when we celebrate the centenary of the Diocese, we could celebrate also 5 years of consecutive growth in numbers. Bishop Jill, that queen of the hashtag, has coined yet another new phrase, not mutual flourishing but mutual missioning, the desire to work in harmony for the sake of the mission of the Church. In the midst of national storms, may we dare to go on ministering and declaring the cross together in the Spirit's power for the benefit of the people of Lancashire.

So let's delight to be reconciled to the Father in the cross of Jesus Christ. Let's do all we can in our communities and churches to be reconcilers who work for unity and the flourishing of all, even when that requires hard decisions and even when we get it wrong. But let's remember that the single most reconciling act any of us can perform is to declare the cross of Jesus Christ through our words and by our lifestyle. For that cross in the world's only hope.

+Philip Blackburn