

Presidential Address to Diocesan Synod

July 19th 2025

You will say on that day:

I will give thanks to you, O Lord,

for though you were angry with me,

your anger turned away,

and you comforted me.

² *Surely God is my salvation;*

I will trust, and will not be afraid,

for the Lord God is my strength and my might;

he has become my salvation.

³ *With joy you will draw water from the wells of salvation.* ⁴ *And you will say on that day:*

Give thanks to the Lord,

call on his name;

make known his deeds among the nations;

proclaim that his name is exalted. (Isaiah 12, 1-3)

Major conflict in Gaza and Ukraine causing perhaps the greatest threat of global war since 1938. Heatwave and drought indicating global warming. Trade wars spooking the money markets and threatening every national economy. Growing inequality with over one in five of Lancashire's children growing up in poverty. And yet here in Synod we are going to be discussing joy. Are we crazy? Are we hopelessly out of touch? No, we just believe in the scriptures.

The prophet Isaiah at the start of Chapter 12 draws us right into the heart of our salvation. God was angry with us because of our sin. But there is comfort and there is salvation. With joy we will draw water from the wells of salvation. And what is that well? Of course it's Jesus. It's the living water that flows from his heart pierced on the cross. That's the source of our joy. And because the triumph is won, that joy is inalienable. The changes and chances of this fleeting world can't touch it. Our joy is not some thin, self-generated happiness. It is gift, pure gift, poured out upon us through the saving work of Jesus.

That's why any diocesan vision must have Jesus at the centre. We are joyful followers of him. I was chatting to a priest a few weeks ago to ensure they had no plans to leave the Diocese and they said, 'Why would I leave? This Diocese believes in the parish and in Jesus.'

We believe in Jesus. Regardless of tradition, our faith is Him. Not some vague disembodied message of love. Not some philosophical concept of the divine. But Jesus, God from God, Light from Light, True God from True God. As we celebrate 1700 years of the Nicene Creed, we are reminded of the utter scandal of the Gospel. That God has taken a human body and by so doing has been able to die and so set us free. That's the good news. Not a message, but a person. It's in him that we rejoice.

And we also believe in the Parish as the best means available to us to declare Jesus. We relish the cure of souls to remind us that nobody is beyond the radar of our ministry. We treasure our schools to form the young in the faith. We value stipendiary clergy to declare Jesus in word and sacrament. We love our buildings because they point us to the divine. And above all we need joyful communities of faithful lay Christians in every part of the Diocese who can make known the love of Jesus through their worship and fellowship, through their commitment and generosity, through their lives of service and their new congregations.

We have a really important job before us at Synod this morning. Today is a key stage in the long process of listening to God as we discern our new diocesan vision. The new vision will run until 2033 and note that year. Two thousand years since the cross. Two thousand years since water flowed from the side of Jesus and filled to overflowing the deep wells of our salvation.

And that surely must emphasise the heart of our task today. This new vision is not about what we are going to do for Jesus. It is about what Jesus has already done for us. And so it is about what Jesus is still doing for us through the Holy Spirit here, now in Lancashire. How we hear that and where we join in.

And we do that discernment confident in the knowledge that Jesus has already won the victory and the future is already his. There is no jeopardy today. Our task is not to rescue the church or work out how to save an institution we have grown fond of. No, our task is to be joy spreaders. It is to point to Jesus, the source of our joy. We don't need to make Jesus present. He already is. We don't need to build the kingdom. He's done that already. Our task is to invite to the party, to help people find that joy which is his gift.

So our joy is not something we generate. It is something we live. But at the same it is all too easy for Christians to undermine that joy through anxiety or faithlessness or sin. In the Church of England in recent years we have come to see how our failures to be a safe church have stripped from so many survivors the joy of the Gospel and that is an egregious failing.

Recently our Diocese received the report published by INEQE into the quality of our safeguarding and we'll be discussing this later on our agenda today. It shows significant progress in changing the culture of the Diocese and I especially want to pay tribute to Cath Smith and our safeguarding team, to our Diocesan Secretary Stephen Whittaker whom INEQE especially praise and to clergy and PSOs in our parishes. We are already working to address the recommendations which will grow our safeguarding team and help us to embed a safeguarding culture into every area of our life.

The report on our Cathedral, a separate charity which has chosen to make safeguarding arrangements separate from the Diocese, was more challenging. The Diocesan Board of Finance is offering all the support that it can to the Cathedral and will continue to do so. I am delighted that Canon Andrew Horsfall has agreed to serve as interim Dean and I would ask you to keep him and the whole Cathedral community in your prayers.

Another joy blocker is exhausted and undervalued clergy. I am so grateful to Canon Neil Kelley, our Assistant Archdeacon for Clergy Wellbeing, who has helped us better to

understand the complex set of factors that enable our clergy to flourish in ministry. Our DIP funding has helped us to make changes here including regular sabbaticals for clergy and strengthened support in ongoing formation from Mike Print and the Growing Leaders team. But it is also excellent news that the new financial arrangement agreed by General Synod at the weekend introduces a single national stipend for all Church of England clergy which will lead to stipend increases next year.

That whole package of measures is good news for us as a Diocese and will help us in setting healthier budgets in the next few years. But in this regard we are also helping ourselves. The sustained giving from ordinary laymen and women in this diocese has been beautiful and heroic. We are one of just two dioceses in the country whose share income increased in 2024. That is remarkable and a wonderful testimony to the joy that Christians across the diocese find in the Gospel. I am also enormously grateful to David Barlow, the Chair of our DBF, and Nick Aves, the Chair of the Finance Committee, whose tireless work at countless Parish Share Meetings has changed the atmosphere. Nick Aves will soon be stepping down after a heroic shift as Chair of the Finance Committee. Nick, we are so grateful to you.

Lancashire is a county of wells. So today, as we discern our vision, let's imagine a county filled with wells of joy. May every single one of our parishes, our schools, our chaplaincies be a well of joy, flowing over with the life and love and saving power of Jesus. The world says the church is a busted flush, faith in an interventionist God crazy superstition, belief in the power of prayer for the deluded. And they are wrong. Many Christians are tempted to despair, to believe the lies that the game is over and that we need to reduce, cut back, plan for decline. And they are wrong. There is only one source of salvation for a thirsty and dangerous world and it is Jesus Christ, the living water flowing forth from every church and school and chaplaincy in Lancashire.

So let's keep our vision big as we discern who the Lord is calling us to be as his people in Lancashire. Let's imagine a county where living water flows free and refreshes every part of our county. Our task is not to tinker or maintain or to survive. It is to transform, to change lives, to let justice roll down like a river and righteousness like an everlasting stream, to revivify arid lives with the water of life that is Jesus. As we join in with his work, may every single person in Lancashire draw deeply from the well of salvation that is Jesus and in so doing find life.

+Philip Blackburn
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