

THE BISHOP OF ST ALBANS' PRESIDENTIAL ADDRESS

DIOCESAN SYNOD - AS DELIVERED

27 JUNE 2015

I wish to address three areas in this Presidential Address: the Archbishop of Canterbury's visit to the diocese; synodical elections; and finally, I want to think about some of the changes that we are facing as a society, which are presenting us with some particular opportunities over the coming months.

I imagine that many of you will have come to at least one of the events during the Archbishop's visit. Taking him to so many places to see some of the work that is going on in every part of the diocese was both exciting and humbling. We received a high level of media interest and it is still possible, if you weren't able to be present, to get a flavour of the visit by listening to the reports and the Archbishop's talk from Thursday evening. At the end of the transcript of this address you will find links for the radio coverage.

I would like to thank Canon Dave Middlebrook for heading up the organising team and for all those who worked with him to make the visit such a success. Let's listen to a short clip in which Stephen Fletcher interviews the Archbishop towards the end of his visit.... (This can be heard at: <https://clyp.it/mdq2gzxr>)

This is the last meeting in this triennium of this Diocesan Synod and in a couple of weeks the last meeting of the present General Synod will take place in York. Elections to both synods are underway and will take place over the summer. (The Bishop asks current members of General Synod to stand up and suggests anyone interested should approach them). The closing date for nominations is 3rd September.

We often hear critical voices about our synodical system and you and I are only too well aware of some of its shortcomings, it's not perfect, but it does create a place where we can talk, pray and discern and plan together and I certainly want to thank all of you for what you've given over this past three years and we've achieved quite a bit.

I want to ask you to think carefully about whether you are willing to stand again, either for General Synod or for Diocesan Synod, and also can you reflect carefully if you know others who might consider standing. The synodical system relies on having a wide representation of people from every part of the diocese, acting as a sort of microcosm. So we need people from urban, rural, suburban; from all sorts of churchmanship; with a good mixture of young and old, male and female, and particularly what we are lacking is proper representation from the black and minority ethnic groups. This is a real cause of concern amongst the councils of this diocese as we have many superb BME people in our parishes. And there's some wonderful work going on and that's growing, but somehow we are not getting the message across that we want them to share in the wider aspects of the governance of this

diocese. Would you please think carefully and to stand for either Diocesan Synod or General Synod.

This is also an opportunity to thank those who are not going to stand again. Please will you indicate if you are one of them? Thank you very much to all of you who have given a great deal over this past time. I am now going to do something risky. I am going to mention a couple of people by name because of the many years they have served on the Synod. I am aware that there may be some others who have also been on Diocesan Synod for a long time, so please forgive me if I do not mention you by name.

Clive Richardson is going to stand down from this diocesan synod after over 30 years and his significant contributions here, on Bishop's Council, and in many other parts of the diocese have been widely appreciated. Clive will continue with his work in Farley Hill.

Christina Rees came onto this synod back in 1982, so has been here for more than thirty years, and she has also spent 25 years as a member of General Synod. She has been on numerous diocesan committees and has been one of the leading advocates in this country for the ordination of women. Christina has been appointed CBE for her services to the Church of England and her involvement in the campaign for women bishops. Christina, thank you.

Please forgive me if there are others who have served equally long and I just don't know the facts. I know many of you give generously of your time and energy and thank you very much indeed.

I wish those who aren't standing again, best wishes for the next phase of our ministry.

Finally, I just want to think about some of the quite serious challenges we are facing. In fact what I want to say is highlighted by what is taking place in Luton today and you may have heard last night that the judicial review meant that Britain First march is going to go forward. One of the things the Archbishop was referring to was the work he went to see. We have some of the most difficult bits of the country in our diocese, in Luton there are some of the most exciting responses being led by the churches and in particular Peter Adams who is a lay canon at the cathedral and Mike Jones, both members of this Synod who are not here today because they are in Luton, on the streets trying to do something about it. And Bishop Richard is hoping to get up there as well.

This is not to say there are not profound questions about the numbers of migrants and how we welcome people, and we live on an island and there needs to be... These are legitimate debates, but unfortunately with some groups, like Britain First, it's being couched in terms which are very unpleasant indeed and we need to be very careful with our language when we are having these discussions some, of which are quite justifiable and which we need to have.

But we do need to think about what it's doing to people, many of whom have been fleeing oppression. The notion that everybody who is a migrant is somehow a

sponger is patently false. We know that. We know, because of Yarlswood (the detention centre in the diocese) which unfortunately has hit the headlines on a number of occasions. Yarlswood is a place where people in this diocese have been very involved to try to make sure people are treated humanely and there are fairly regular questions in Parliament about it. It is concerning and I want to pay tribute to those working on this and I want to use this as a backdrop to the other change which we I believe we just need to note.

The summer budget takes place on 8th July is likely to make some very significant changes to the social contract we have known and got used to for a number of years.

Now, I need to stress that I am not making a party political point, although there's a place for that. Within this synod there will be a wide range of views as to the relationship between Government and welfare and what an appropriate social contract is. Not least after a time of austerity, (and I pay tribute to the present government and their predecessors for the number of jobs that have been created and all of that) and some here will feel that any further cuts in welfare are to be deplored and fought at all costs; but some of you may feel it is a necessary change for the long term good of the nation, whilst acknowledging that there is going to be, for some people, quite a considerable amount of pain. These are important debates and I am not entering into the party political bit of that.

What I do want to say is that, with the so called 'bedroom tax', (and I am aware that even using that phrase will be seen by some as being slanted politically so I am acknowledging that and please don't think I am trying to make a point) there is no doubt – and we have anecdotal evidence from quite a few parishes around the diocese – that this has caused especially for some people who are disabled and don't have the ability to move, huge pain and cost. Some will want to argue there have been some gains as well. But the changes to be announced in the summer budget could well have far, far more serious repercussions on some of the poorer and more vulnerable people in our society.

Some here will wish to demonstrate and argue against these changes, indeed a quarter of a million people were demonstrating in London last week. However, there is also an opportunity and this is what I do want to stress, is that actually one of the things we can and should do as people across the grass roots of this country and for us that's Beds and Herts is to think about how we can help people weather our times of transition. That's not to say we have endless resources and many churches are already stretched. It has been gratifying to see the many different ways and I believe there's been a step change in the way which churches around the diocese are getting involved with their local communities in food banks, credit unions, debt advice centres and homelessness projects, the charities like the Living Room working with people with addictions, as well as all the practical on going support using whatever little local resources we have. I hope that, as well as engaging in the political debate, we will also see this as an opportunity not simply to retreat into victim mode and think we can't do anything, but to seek to work often if we can as catalysts with other people of goodwill and other groups out there in society, thinking about what practical support we can offer to people as they negotiate these changes. I actually think in the context of what we are doing of Living God's Love this actually is an

opportunity God's giving us to see it as a time not to pull back but to use it to meet new potential partners, talk with our local politicians and with other charities and so on, engage with the schools and so on to be absolutely practical in the support we give to those in need. Remembering the words of our Lord Jesus Christ 'Whatever you did for one of the least of these brothers and sisters of mine, you did for me' (Matthew 25: 40).

+Alan St Albans
24 June 2015

**Media coverage of The Archbishop of Canterbury's visit to the
Diocese of St Albans
18 – 20 June 2015**

Mike Naylor's report on Luton Town Centre visit on Thursday: <https://clyp.it/ofiidxe>

Stephen Fletcher's report on the Archbishop's talk to the diocese:
<https://clyp.it/kfnw4agj>

The Archbishop's talk given to members of St Albans' diocese in the Cathedral on Thursday evening: <https://clyp.it/p5m1yril>

Mike Naylor's report on Farley Hill breakfast meeting for Pioneer Leaders, Bedford Prison, Waterways & Prison Chaplaincy and interview with the Archbishop:
<https://clyp.it/g0r1rsbr>

Stephen Fletcher's report on the Alban Pilgrimage: <https://clyp.it/t1mbr3qj>

Stephen's Fletcher's interview with the Archbishop at the end of his visit:
<https://clyp.it/mdq2gzxr>