

THE BISHOP OF ST ALBANS' PRESIDENTIAL ADDRESS

DIOCESAN SYNOD

13 MARCH 2021

I don't usually begin a Presidential Address with a biblical text, but today I do want to give you a sentence from the Book of Haggai. He was one of the twelve minor prophets who are to be found at the very end of the Hebrew Scripture or Old Testament. He lived in the 6th century before Christ, in the time when God's people had been taken into exile in Babylon by King Nebuchadnezzar.

On his return home Haggai finds Jerusalem and its temple destroyed. The familiar and comforting landmarks have been broken down and desecrated. In the midst of this seeming disaster Haggai is given a message: *"Start rebuilding. I am with you," announces the Lord who rules over all* (Haggai 2.4).

Since we last met in October we have been through another five months of the Covid-19 pandemic, three months of which have been in lockdown. There is probably not a family in the country who does not know someone who has either died of Covid or has been debilitated by it. Here in the diocese a number of people have long Covid, including several clergy.

For many - especially the extroverts among us - this latest lockdown has been the hardest; we are tired and weary. Nevertheless, there has been an extraordinary response to the crisis even in the darkest and coldest weeks of the winter. The vast majority of churches have sustained worship and prayer in some form or other; most are recording or streaming worship live. Numerous 'Parish Pantries' and food banks have been set up in places such as Lemsford, Flamstead, Hitchin and Stevenage. There have also been many extraordinary examples of generosity. One church emailed me three weeks ago to say that they normally give about £12,000 away to charity annually but this past year they gave £20,000.

Incidentally, at a diocesan level our income at the end of the year was down by just over £500,000. We had thought it might be worse but so many churches have worked incredibly hard and have been so generous that the deficit is more modest than we had feared a year ago. Because of years of prudent housekeeping we will be able to cover the deficit from reserves which had been put back for a rainy day. Of course, we cannot sustain this level of loss without making some cuts over the coming months. Nevertheless, my thanks to everyone, not least our hard-working parish treasurers, for all you have done.

At great personal cost our church schools and chaplaincies have soldiered on, often with insufficient resources or support and in the face of considerable challenges. They need our support and prayers as they work on the front line.

Despite our present challenges, we need to keep the pandemic in perspective. There is much talk about us living through 'unprecedented' times, but this is not

wholly accurate. Our forebears have been through worse disasters on many occasions. Recently I read an article entitled 'The Prayer Book and Pandemics': 'In 1593 and 1603, ministers were instructed to shorten their services, because it was "dangerous" to keep people for the whole day in "thicke and close assemblies" (sic). In 1625, royal orders to the clergy stated that church services should be held only in places which were 'free and safe from danger of infection', that any persons coming from infected areas should be excluded from the services, and that within the infected areas the fasts and prayers should be observed in private houses - anticipating by nearly 400 years the recent constraints on public worship'.ⁱ Between 1559 and the 1640s 'sixty-seven special acts of worship were ordered in England and Wales, almost all of them observed more than once and some for several weeks or months'.ⁱⁱ

When I was a child, my church, All Saints, Westbury, had to be closed at short notice because it was discovered that it was in imminent danger of collapse. It felt like a terrible disaster and everyone vowed that they must do everything they could to save the building and start worshipping again as they had been doing for decades. For over two years we worshipped in the local Drill Hall. The building works necessitated the removal of the Victorian rood screen, some of the pews, and other furnishings from the church.

When we eventually moved back into the church, it was decided, much to most people's surprise, that we did not want everything put back exactly as it was. We had nurtured new relationships, discovered different ways to worship and, above all, we had been on a journey of spiritual renewal where many of the familiar things had been taken away and we had had to focus on what really mattered: the worship of God and our outreach into the parish.

As we gradually come out of lockdown and return to our church buildings, we need to continue on the spiritual journey that we have been on. Our worship and our mission will not be the same; indeed, they should not be the same. We have moved on and our communities have moved on. We need to listen afresh to God and to those among whom we live and minister. We are faced with an opportunity and if we are going to grow and be a blessing to others then we will need to think about how we embrace the future.

The pessimists may say "Many people have lost the habit of leaving their homes and going to church each week. It's a disaster!" The optimists say "People have lost all sorts of habits. As we emerge, there is new opportunity, if we are open and welcoming".

The pessimists say "It's always so difficult to make contact with people in our parish. They seem so apathetic". The optimists say "We discovered a new sense of community during the lock down. We have to listen and discover what people are concerned and passionate about and work with them".

The pessimists say "I hope they are going to come and join us here in church". The optimists say "Let's go out with imagination and courage and ask how we can help.

Let's work in partnership with all people of goodwill and join in with what God is doing in the world".

Having said that, as a Christian I am neither an optimist nor a pessimist. Rather, as St Paul put it to the Thessalonians: "Your strength to continue comes from your hope in our Lord Jesus Christ" (1 Thessalonians 1.3). This is the irrepressible Easter hope, rooted in the resurrection of Jesus Christ, who conquered evil and overcame death.

Over the coming months we will meet many people with whom we can engage. There will be a need to have memorial services for all those who have died, as a way of supporting those who were not able to have the sort of funeral they wanted for their loved ones and who may still be in deep grief. There will be others who are desperate to get out from their confinement and make new friends. Those who do not want to return to daily commuting are likely to find in a few months that homeworking can be isolating. Can we provide a meeting room with newspapers and coffee once a week or month where they can gather to network and meet others?

Things are not going to be same as they were in the past. But, as in my childhood experience where the faith and life of a congregation was renewed by a shared experience of exile, so it can be with us. This is the time to rediscover the roots of our faith and explore again the things that really matter: the worship of God and the service of our communities.

During recent weeks I've been rereading some of T S Eliot's poetry and I am reminded of those enigmatic words he wrote:

*We shall not cease from exploration,
and the end of all our exploring will be to arrive where we started
and know the place for the first time.* (from T S Eliot's *Little Gidding*)

Rooted in the treasure and riches of our faith in the God who has created us and redeemed us, this is the time to reach out to others with generosity and joy, imagination and courage. As God once said to his people through his servant Haggai: "Start rebuilding. I am with you," announces the Lord who rules over all.

Living God, draw us deeper into your love;
Jesus our Lord, send us to care and serve;
Holy Spirit, make us heralds of good news.
Stir us, strengthen us, teach and inspire us
to live your love with generosity and joy, imagination and courage;
for the sake of your world and in the name of Jesus, Amen.

+Alan St Albans

ⁱ 'The Prayer Book and Pandemics' by Williamson, P. in *Faith and Worship: The Journal of the Prayer Book Society* 2021: 88, pages 12-13.

ⁱⁱ Op cit, page 10.