

THE BISHOP OF ST ALBANS' PRESIDENTIAL ADDRESS
DIOCESAN SYNOD
12 OCTOBER 2013

2014 is going to be a year of centenaries. The anniversary that will get wall to wall coverage in the media is the outbreak of the First World War, which will be marked nationally with various events on 4 August next year.

However, there are other significant centenaries coming up. The people of Nigeria will be celebrating the founding of their country. The people of Panama will be commemorating the opening of their canal, connecting the Pacific Ocean with the Atlantic Ocean. And for real geeks, there will be celebrations of the world's first electric traffic lights which were turned on in Cleveland, Ohio in 1914.

Here we have our own celebrations to look forward to because 2014 represents the centenary of the incorporation of Bedfordshire into the Diocese of St Albans. Despite the assumptions of many that we must be an ancient diocese, we are in fact one of the newer dioceses in England. Over the centuries we've been parcelled out around the place. For most of our history we were part of the Diocese of Lincoln, but we've also been part of the Diocese of Rochester and the Diocese of Ely.

However, with the huge growth in population during the 19th century it became clear that new dioceses were needed and in 1877 the Diocese of St Albans was established which then comprised of the counties of Essex and Hertfordshire. As you can imagine, it was a strange diocese which was about sixty miles from West to East with hardly any direct roads across it. Most of the roads and railways ran north - south. Indeed, the second Bishop of St Albans, Michael Festing, opted to live in London near the railway stations because it was the easiest way to get around the diocese.

Eventually it was decided that some fundamental changes had to be made and in 1914 Essex left the Diocese of St Albans to become the Diocese of Chelmsford and the county of Bedfordshire, which had been in the Diocese of Ely since 1837, was joined to the Diocese of St Albans. So next year we will be celebrating 100 years of the family of the diocese as we know it today.

Part of the celebrations will be an event on August Bank Holiday Monday called Celebrate100. It is going to be an all age summer festival, a day out in wonderful countryside with a wide range of activities and events to suit everyone: music, displays, pony rides, sports, classic cars, food, drink and a

central act of worship. We hope that several thousand people will come from every corner of the diocese. So please put 25th August in your diaries now and tell people in your parishes, schools and chaplaincies all about it.

Another aspect of our centenary is a book *Saints and Pilgrims in the Diocese of St Albans*, written especially for our celebrations. It contains 366 entries, one for each day of the year. Each entry comprises a potted history of one of our Christian forebears, followed by a passage or extract on which to mull over and finally a prayer.

Thanks to the generosity of the Verulam House Trust Fund, we are giving a copy to each church and each church school in the Diocese. Today is the first of several launches of the book and copies are on sale for anyone who wishes to buy a personal copy, at a special reduction from £25 to £20.

We hope many people will use the book on a daily basis, reading the entry for each day and making the prayer at the bottom of each entry their own. I also hope that every church and every church school will display the book, open at that day's date, with a special display stand which is also being sent out, so that worshippers and casual visitors to our schools and churches can share in the stories of the *Saints and Pilgrims* who have brought us to where we are today.

In the front of the book we have printed from the King James Bible the well-known text from the Book of Ecclesiasticus:

Let us now sing the praises of famous men,
our ancestors in their generations.

Well there are quite a few famous Christian women as well as men in *Saints and Pilgrims*. We can boast a galaxy of talent, starting with St Alban himself, the first British martyr; Sam Ryder, the founder of the Ryder Cup; Harold Abrahams, the Olympic athlete of *Chariots of Fire* fame; Archbishop Robert Runcie, and most recently Jennifer Worth, the author of *Call the Midwife*.

But the passage from Ecclesiasticus doesn't just focus on Christian celebs; it embraces all of us:

But of others there is no memory;
they have perished as though they had never existed;
they have become as though they had never been born,
they and their children after them.
But these also were godly men,
whose righteous deeds have not been forgotten;
their wealth will remain with their descendants,
and their inheritance with their children's children.

Saints and Pilgrims tells the stories of some of these lesser-known Christians, most of whom are now almost totally forgotten and others who were only ever

known locally. This morning I want to tell you about three of them. They are from different periods, different parts of our Diocese, and from different church backgrounds, but are all inspiring examples of faithful Christian discipleship.

Augustus Orlebar could hardly have imagined that when he was instituted as Vicar of Willington in Bedfordshire in 1858 that he would die in office in the same parish fifty-four years later. But his faithfulness and stability bore rich fruit for God. Part of a well-known Bedfordshire family, Orlebar was born at Aspley Guise and confirmed in St Peter's, Sharnbrook. This man really was a child of the Diocese. He went to Rugby School where he became captain of the First XI cricket team. One of his contemporaries, Thomas Hughes, was author of the best-selling *Tom Brown's School Days*. In the book, the famous fight between Tom Brown and Slogger Williams was based on a real fight that took place between Orlebar and a bully called Bulkeley Jones.

During his time at Wadham College, Oxford, Orlebar played cricket for the University. He was ordained in 1847, served two curacies in other dioceses, and in 1852 was appointed Vicar of Farndish (now linked with the parish of Podington). During the next few years he went on to play cricket for Bedfordshire and Northamptonshire. He was the David Shepherd of his day. In 1858 he became Vicar of Willington and in the same year married Caroline Yarde Scobell. Orlebar was instrumental in the restoration of Willington church and helped establish the church school in Willington which opened in 1867.

Like countless other clergy who have served their parishes quietly and faithfully, Orlebar dedicated his whole life to God's service. Saying morning and evening prayer day by day in the church, Augustus Orlebar knew the parents, the grandparents and the children of his parish because over the decades he had baptized, married and buried most of them himself. He is a wonderful example of someone who throughout his life was *going deeper into God*. He is buried in the churchyard next to his wife.

Some of you will remember Clarissa Robinson, my second *Saint and Pilgrim*, because she only died in 2009 and who for many years was a member of this synod and on Bishop's Council. As a young woman Clarissa studied cello at the Royal College of Music. In 1955 she moved to Bedfordshire, was appointed Manager of the Carlton Approved School for Boys, and married James Robinson. She took on his two sons, and she and James went on to have three children of their own.

Clarissa had a lifelong interest in healthcare and served on the committee of the Friends of Bedford Hospital for many years. She became chair of the North Bedfordshire Community Health Council in 1970 and was one of the group who founded St John's Hospice at Moggerhanger. Her interest in the hospice movement came from the painful experience of nursing her husband through his

terminal cancer. James died in 1980 and Clarissa was determined that better end-of-life care should be available to the people of Bedfordshire. In the same year St John's Hospice opened and Clarissa became its first almoner. Drawing on her work with the North Bedfordshire Cruse Group and her diploma in counselling, she set up one of the first hospice bereavement support services in the country.

Clarissa's whole life was an outworking of her Christian faith. She served variously as churchwarden, Reader and for twenty years was choir mistress and organist of All Saints, Great Barford. As well as being a talented musician, she acquired a national reputation as an ecclesiastical embroiderer. More than forty-five pieces of her work are in use today, including copes, stoles, altar frontals, and the vestments she made for both Bishop Robert Runcie and Bishop John Taylor during their time as Bishops of St Albans. But above all, her passion for improving terminal care work is a wonderful example of *transforming communities*, which was inspired by her Christian faith.

My third example is a grandmother called Hannah Buxton. None of us know the full effect of our prayers. So it was for Hannah Buxton who in 1868 wrote to her grandson as they moved into Easneye Mansion near Ware that the house 'might ever be inhabited by faithful servants of God... that Christ might be honoured and served there... and that this place be a fountain of blessing to the church and to the world.' Little did she know that the house was later to become the home of All Nations Christian College, which for many years has been one of the most important ecumenical training colleges for Christian missionaries in the UK.

Hannah was born in 1783. Her brother was the well-known Quaker, Joseph John Gurney, and her sister was the prison reformer, Elizabeth Fry. Hannah married Thomas Fowell Buxton, the anti-slavery campaigner and they had twelve children whom they brought up in the Christian faith. Several of her descendents went onto be missionaries who are also featured in the book. The Buxton family were deeply committed to *making new disciples* and All Nations Christian College continues that work today.

As we approach 2014 there is a choice to be made. We can use our rich history as an excuse for nostalgia or naval gazing, lamenting that things are not like they used to be or we can use the lives and the examples of the people who have gone before to find fresh inspiration as we seek to follow the example of Jesus Christ in our generation. My hope and prayer is that, pondering on their lives we will be grasped with a renewed vision of what it is to *Live God's Love* and *go deeper into God, transform our communities* and *make new disciples*.