## Lichfield Diocesan Synod 30 Nov 2024

President’s Address by Rt Revd Dr Michael Ipgrave, Bishop of Lichfield

‘It was the best of times, it was the worst of times.’ Those are the famous opening words of Charles Dicken’s great novel *A Tale of Two Cities*. The two cities of the title are London and Paris; and yesterday’s headlines gave us another tale of those same two cities. In London, the House of Commons voted by a significant but not overwhelming majority in favour of the Second Reading of a private member’s bill to legalise assisted dying in certain circumstances. In Paris, the newly restored Cathedral of Notre Dame opened its doors for the first time to an official visit by President Emmanuel Macron. Between these two very different stories, I believe that we can see both the challenge and the opportunity which Christian faith faces in our contemporary societies. Before we plunge into the important business of our agenda, I want to say a bit more about both.

First, to the debate in Parliament yesterday. I need to begin by saying some positive things about this. The debate itself was conducted in a respectful, thoughtful and dignified manner, as befitted the seriousness of its subject. The Commons have at this stage voted simply for a ‘second reading,’ which allows the bill to proceed to further stages of scrutiny, amendment and reconsideration in both Houses of Parliament. There was evident in the debate a considerable level of concern about the adequacy of the safeguards proposed in the bill, and there is every possibility that these might be revised. It is also really important to acknowledge that those calling for this change are generally motivated by a sense of compassion, sometimes informed by having themselves witnessed the painful and protracted death of somebody they loved.

All that said, though, I am deeply disquieted by yesterday’s vote. Underlying so much of the argument have been the assumptions that life can only have dignity for as long as personal autonomy is in control; that pain and suffering can never have meaning which can be redemptive; and that some kinds of human life are no longer worth living. None of those assumptions can be reconciled with our faith, which is centred on one whose faithful obedience through a humiliating and anguished death won for us salvation. But, as has been repeatedly said, this is not just a concern for Christians: admitting the principle that medical science can be deliberately applied to kill – whatever the proposed safeguards around such an application – runs the risk of making the vulnerable more vulnerable, as those who feel themselves to be a waste of bed space or a financial burden may well sense a pressure to avail themselves of this way out. For us, ethics flow from the teaching and the example of the crucified Christ, and both of these put the weak and the powerless at the centre of our concern; and that ethical principle is very widely shared in our society, or it has been until now.

If, as I believe, the surest way to judge a society is to see how it treats those who are most in need of protection and care, yesterday’s vote highlights the challenges we face in our society. Please pray for all who will be involved in the continuing debates over this in the coming months, in both Houses of Parliament and beyond; pray for all in the medical professions who will be uneasy at what may lie ahead; most of all, pray for those who are suffering in great pain, and for those whom they love. And pray that amid all the challenges we face we may remain faithful, kind and true.

Meanwhile, on the other side of the English Channel, yesterday there was the first public opportunity to view the restored Cathedral of Notre Dame de Paris, in all its old glory and its new splendour. I am sure you can remember the distress which greeted the fire which gutted the building in the first part of Holy Week 2019; people suddenly realised what they had lost (or, at least come very close to losing) in this historic shrine which they had so long taken for granted. Across the world, but particularly in France, which usually takes such a pride in its secularism, the near-destruction of this very public sign of holiness triggered feelings of shock and bereavement which pointed to real if hidden desire for the things of the spirit – a desire whose intensity only became apparent for many when the Cathedral went up in flames: as if people had not realised how much they wanted the faith until it was taken from them.

Well, as of yesterday the Cathedral is set to be back in business – and not just as a much-admired piece of medieval architecture or a much-photographed tourist attraction, but as a living church where God’s people gather to worship and pray; and that seems to be warmly welcomed by very many, in France and beyond. So here is opportunity to set alongside the challenge: in England as in France, in Lichfield as in Paris, many, many people have a longing for God which is no less real for being inarticulate, and which can be brought to life in many ways through contact with the living Church of Jesus Christ. Sometimes indeed that can happen through coming into one of our historic church buildings. So often we see these as tiresome burdens on our energy, but they can also be powerful reminders to people of the enduring reality of the Christian faith, standing invitations to enter more fully into engagement with the life-giving gospel. And there are many other ways in which the people of Staffordshire, North Shropshire, and the Black Country can encounter the living God through contact with many parts of our diocese – through chaplaincies, schools and community projects, in friendships freely built, in service gladly offered. We can open for people a door to a new or renewed experience of the fulness of life which God gives us in Jesus Christ, a fresh readiness to explore a faith which they thought they did not need to bother about.

Still more remarkably, encounters like these open our own eyes too, to the riches which God has given us to serve his mission as his church today. We spend so much of our time anxiously worrying about numerical decline, diminishing resources, and an increasing burden of administration. But the story of Notre Dame encourages us to turn the telescope round the other way, and recognise how abundantly God has blessed us with the signs of his presence among us. We still have today so much more than Chad brought with him 1350 years ago, and he managed to evangelise the whole of Mercia.

So, here we are, in Aldridge, in the middle of a tale of two cities, but both stories are found in our own society: on the one hand, the challenge of a society drifting away from God; on the other hand, the opportunity of a society longing for God. As we engage with our agenda today, let us pray earnestly that God will give us wisdom, discernment and faith to tackle our challenges and to build on our opportunities so that God’s Kingdom may be built among us.