

## Diocesan Synod Presidential Address, 01.11.25

Dear brothers and sisters in Christ, this is a Synod meeting in which we are asked to receive the Diocesan Budget for 2026; we will be spending some time hearing an update on our six-year strategy 'Seeking the Kingdom'; and we have just completed an important piece of business in approving the appointment of a Deputy Chair for our Diocesan Board of Finance. I also draw your attention to the first two questions in our question time, and the answer which our Diocesan Secretary has provided, which deal with important matters of governance. So there is a clear focus today on the ordering of our internal life together as a diocese, which is of course entirely proper for a diocesan synod. But we also need to remember that this diocese is one of 42 which together constitute the Church of England; and there has been quite a lot happening in the Church of England nationally of late. I want to mention four things in particular, three of which I welcome warmly, and one which is complex.

First, and very welcome, the most recent mission statistics for the Church of England, published this week for 2024, confirm that the gradual upward trend in overall numbers of worshippers has continued, as has average weekly attendance. Of course, statistics are notoriously open to many different interpretations, and the figures vary from place to place across the country; here in Lichfield we have remained in much the same numerical place, with some increase in adult worshippers counterbalanced by some decrease in the number of children. Nevertheless, taken as a whole the figures do point to a different reality than the story of seemingly inexorable decline to which we have become accustomed, and which we have been in danger of internalising. All this chimes with the many reports that I hear of an undramatic but marked growth in interest from people enquiring about the things of the spirit, requesting Bibles to read, and seeking to be baptised, confirmed or to renew their faith. Our fourth and fifth questions today, from David Sims, in fact ask about what has been called a 'quiet revival'; maybe God is challenging us on how ready we are to respond to what is being done in our time.

Secondly, you may have noticed that our King Charles III paid a visit to our Cathedral this Monday. That was a wonderful event, and the enthusiastic welcome showed him by almost everybody was heartwarming indeed. But the week before he came to us His Majesty had been given a trial run for his visit to Lichfield by visiting Rome. There he and the Queen had shared with Pope Leo XIV in an ecumenical service in the Sistine Chapel. This was the first time that a British monarch had publicly prayed with a Pope since the Reformation; and I for one found it a profoundly moving event, filled with hope and encouragement. Beneath and beyond all the ecumenical politics and ecclesiastical pageantry, this was a picture of Christians of different traditions, for so long separated from one another by the forces of division, disregard and distrust, doing what Christians do best: praying together. It was a sign of the unity which the world rightly expects to see from those who follow Jesus Christ, and which we so often fail to show.

Thirdly – and this is the complicated one – the House of Bishops met in early October, to discuss the *Living in Love and Faith* process which has been a part of our life in the Church of England for the last eight years, and they issued a statement as a result. For personal reasons, I was not able to be at that meeting, so I cannot say much about the detailed background of the statement nor about what will happen next as the points it makes are developed. They are four in number: an affirmation that the *Prayers of Love and Faith* are commended for use in regularly scheduled services with same sex couples seeking God’s blessing; an agreement that use of the *PLF* in so-called ‘bespoke’ services of blessing should only be authorised through a full synodical process under Canon B2; a recognition that while further theological and legal work on clergy in same-sex marriages is explored the present guidelines should remain in place; and a conclusion that there is no need at present for further structural arrangements to be put in place to provide assurance to those with differing convictions, given that no substantial change has been agreed. I know that people in this diocese, and in this synod, will have different responses to the bishops’ statement; and I know from listening to people over the last two weeks that some of our brothers and sisters are feeling deeply hurt, disappointed, even angry. We need to hear all the voices speaking into this, and we need to commit to treat one another with kindness and respect as painful debate continues in the national church around these disputed questions, which touch so closely on people’s identity and core convictions. For myself, and for this diocese, I also want to repeat what I and my episcopal colleagues said in 2018 in a letter to our clergy and lay ministers: that all people need to know and feel that they are welcomed and honoured in our churches. I hope we can all commit to that principle.

Last, but by no means least, we now know who the 106<sup>th</sup> Archbishop of Canterbury will be. Bishop Sarah Mullally, currently Bishop of London, will be confirmed in her new post on 28<sup>th</sup> January next year, and enthroned in Canterbury on 25<sup>th</sup> March, the Feast of the Annunciation. I am encouraged by and hopeful about this appointment. Bishop Sarah is a kind, capable and wise bishop, with a deep and strong commitment to discipleship and a proven track record of leading, and winning respect across, the most complex and diverse diocese in the Church of England. Of course, not everybody will share all her views on every subject, but all will want to recognise the leadership and guidance she will bring to our Church, and I know we will all be praying for her as she prepares to take up this hugely exacting position. But we should not add to Bishop Sarah’s burdens by laying on her expectations which do not fit with her office as Archbishop of Canterbury. Bishop Sarah will not be an Anglican pope, nor the chief executive of a national corporation; she is first and foremost a bishop among bishops, with the primacy of honour and respect that her succession in the line of St Augustine confers on her. And no bishop is either an absolute ruler in his or her own diocese, or the managing director of a medium-sized business. We are, I am, the ordinal says, ordained ‘to be shepherds of Christ’s flock and guardians of the faith of the apostles, proclaiming the gospel of God’s kingdom and leading his people in mission’. Please pray for me, for my brother and sister bishops in this diocese, for Archbishop-designate Sarah, as we seek to fulfil that weighty responsibility; and be sure of my prayers for each one of you.