



The Bishop of Exeter

The Feast of Christ the King: Sunday 23rd November 2008

A letter to be read at all services in the Diocese of Exeter

I do not cease to give thanks for you as I remember you in my prayers. I pray that the God of our Lord Jesus Christ, the Father of glory, may give you a spirit of wisdom and revelation as you come to know him. (Ephesians Ch 1 v16-17)

The Feast of Christ the King ends the church year on a high as we remember how the life of Christ, crucified, leads to resurrection and his reigning in glory at the right hand of the Father. Next Sunday sees the beginning of the new church year as we move into Advent and then celebrate the gift of God himself to us in the birth of the Christ-child. One week the story ends and the next it begins again. But the new church year is also the year in which we celebrate the 1100th anniversary of the founding of our diocese, a year which will be marked by major celebrations - some of which we shall be sharing with our ecumenical partners - a year in which we want to issue you all with a challenge.

It is now some six years since we set out on the journey which we call Moving On in Mission and Ministry and we are beginning to see the fruits of our endeavours, with Mission Communities emerging all over the diocese and local churches working together as they reach out and minister to those around them. Many people have caught the vision and we have now reached the point where we can begin both to see the effects of all this hard work and also the key challenge to which we now need to respond.

On Saturday 11th October, Diocesan Synod - a body made up largely of representatives from our Mission Communities and parishes through Devon - voted to adopt a policy that, together, we should be 'Moving on in Growth'. As part of that decision and in response to Christ's Great Commission to make disciples of all nations, we have committed ourselves to praying and working for an average increase in church participation across the diocese of twenty-five percent over the next five years.

We speak of average growth because, for a number of reasons, not all congregations will be able to grow at the same rate. Of course, growth is also not just about numbers, it is also about our own personal growth as worshipping, serving, faith-sharing Christians, about the growth of our corporate communal life as a church, and about helping others to grow both as Christian disciples and as the human beings that God wishes them to be. A growing church which prays together about the things which really matter is usually a healthy church. "I make it my ambition to proclaim the good news", wrote St Paul to the Church in Rome, and in praying that we may be able to say the same as St Paul, we need to reaffirm our commitment to grow in our faith and to encourage others around us to do the same.

During September, at our conference in Tremough, the Bishops, Priests and Deacons of this diocese were asked a question by one of the visiting speakers. It is a haunting question and has stuck with us ever since.

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Who are those others? They are those who have not yet heard the Word of God, those others to whom we have not listened and to whom therefore we have not known how to speak. Faced by this question we can see ourselves as the goats to which Jesus refers in his parable and of which we heard in today's gospel. Stopping, listening, re-engaging with the Word of God, reconnecting with our traditions, and being renewed in our common life through Thanksgiving, are all parts of growth and they are all part of what we are to be about in the coming year of celebration. They are themes you should hear a great deal during the coming months.

In bringing the challenge of mission and growth to you today, we also invite you to respond to another challenge concerning vocations to Priestly, Diaconal and Reader Ministries in this Diocese. In order that the community of believers may grow, it requires leaders to nourish and support it. So, we are asking you all to call out, across the diocese as a whole, one hundred and fifty new licensed ministers for this Diocese during the coming two years. Some of these may become licensed Readers, some may become priests and some will be deacons. Some of the priests may be paid stipendiary parish priests, but most of these new ministers will be self-supporting. As we go around the parishes of the diocese, we often have a sense that there are many people who have such a calling - people who are called by God to be licensed ministers in His Church - but who have not recognised His calling to them. We invite and challenge you all to look around and to consider whom God is calling within your Mission Community, whatever the stage which it may have reached. These new ministers are vital to our future as a church and, more importantly, they are vital to God's Mission in the world. There will be many others whom you will recognise as having vocations to other, non-licensed ministries, those with potential gifts as pastors or evangelists, those who are able to serve the church in traditional lay ministries such as that of Church Warden. We also want you to call out and affirm them, at the same time as we encourage you to call out those who are going to lead our worship and our Mission Communities in the future.

In order to help us all focus on this challenge to call out new ministers, we ask you to do three things. Firstly, pray about it. What is your role and who should you and your local church be calling out? Take these questions to God, both as individuals and as a Church. Secondly, pray about it. Between now and Lent, which begins on 25th February, we ask you all to plan for a time of prayer and fasting early in that season, which should fit whatever is the right pattern for you as a local church, and then to do it: put the plans into effect and pray about who to call out. Thirdly, yes, pray again, but this time turn your prayers into actions and, unless you have already done so, call out those who could have a vocation to be self-supporting priests, deacons and Readers within your local community as well as those who have a clear calling to a stipendiary vocation. In each deanery, the programme for the Bishops in Mission visits will have built into it a time when one of us can meet with these people who have been called out and begin to explore the nature of their vocation with them as well as the way in which this calling can be developed.

As you listen to this letter today, you may be tempted to look around and jump straight in because it is so obvious to you whom God is calling, or you may be feeling a complete scepticism and think that we are wasting your time and that we ought to live in the 'real

church'. In both cases, we say to you: 'pause'. Consider your response to Christ the King, ponder the offering that you might make before the Christ-child given to us that first Christmas. We have seen quite remarkable things happen when people pray, mean what they pray and are prepared to become part of the answer. So, yes, you may have immediately identified a person who you believe has a clear calling, but pray on, for there may be someone less obvious but who has gifts which, when nurtured in the right way, could be just what is needed in your place. The needs of each local church will differ and so too will the gifts with which God has equipped those whom he has sent to meet those needs - but you need to call them out because you are the people who know them.

As we have said, quite remarkable things happen when people pray, mean what they pray and are prepared to become part of the answer. We must now ask for your prayer for another matter which has become a very real and pressing concern, and could represent a real stumbling block to the growth for which we all pray. There is a real financial cost to all for which we are striving. It is a cost that together we share. The common purse that funds our common task we call our Common Fund. This Fund provides 70% of the income for the annual budget; a budget where around 80% of expenditure is used to pay for parochial ministry. Every parish is asked to contribute an assessed sum to the Common Fund and, historically, nearly 100% of parishes contribute 100% of what is requested. But since the summer there has developed an unprecedented shortfall which we hope and pray is temporary, because if it is unchecked it will cause us very real problems as we pray and plan for Moving on in Growth. We all live in challenging times, and whilst all the reasons for this shortfall are not clear, the economic climate is clearly a significant factor.

In the light of this we ask your prayers for the whole Diocese as together we seek to ensure that we are in the right place, spiritually and financially, so that - under God - we are able to make the most of all the opportunities of next year. We ask you to prayerfully consider the response of your own church, parish or Mission Community. The use of our money has been described as the sacrament of our seriousness. It speaks of the seriousness and generosity with which we respond to the seriousness and generosity of God's boundless love for us.

Our 1100th anniversary year provides us with an opportunity to thank God for his faithfulness to us and to be renewed in our faithfulness to him. In this context, we believe that responding to the current financial situation, as challenging and difficult as it may be, can, alongside responding to a call to service, also be a part of our growth in faith, part of our growth as the body of Christ.

(PAUSE)

In the coming months you will hear a great deal about growth - personal, corporate and numerical - and you will hear a great deal about vocations. It is a theme which all of us who come to parishes to preach, Bishops, Archdeacons and others, will want to develop as we explore the scriptures and attempt to discern the vision which God has for the Mission of His Church in the place where you live and where you are the church. We are all called to move forwards in our service of God's Mission and Ministry in the power of the Holy Spirit, a growing people of God who call people to join us and call out our members to exercise their vocation in His service. And then when we do finally stand before the Lord, those who are with us will be a host, impossible for us to count and far greater in number than we might have dared to imagine or think.

+ Bishop Exar: + Robert Crockett

+ Amblyment