

A CHARGE
TO THE RIGHT REVEREND PHILIP NORTH CONFIRMED BISHOP OF BLACKBURN

Our well-beloved brother in Christ, Philip, now Bishop of Blackburn, recalling God's mission entrusted by Christ to His Church to proclaim God's Kingdom, to heal the sick and to make disciples of all nations, I share with you the tasks and ministries discerned by those called to serve on the Crown Nomination Commission for the See of Blackburn. I hope these will guide you as you take up your office and ministry.

In your episcopal oversight of the Diocese of Blackburn and in your wider ministry with fellow bishops caring for the life of the Church and Nation in their faithfulness to the Gospel of Jesus Christ, Bishop Philip you are called -

- To share in that ministry of the Gospel of Christ, proclaiming a narrative of Christian hope for all at a time of suffering in many communities;
- To exercise collegial leadership of the Church of England through the House and College of Bishops, promoting the unity of the church, leading it in its mission of witness and service and in living its vocation to bring the good news to life in contemporary society;
- To work with brother and sister bishops to nurture courage and confidence in the Gospel and in the Church and to lead the emerging Church into the new world which the recent pandemic has created;

As pastor and shepherd with a heart for Lancashire and the Diocese of Blackburn the **Beyond Vision 2026** is in the DNA of the Diocese.

As you begin this new chapter of your ministry, prayerful consideration will be needed to establish what comes next, building on the considerable work that has already taken place.

- **To maintain the courageous focus on growth**, emphasising the importance of parish ministry and growing disciples and healthy Christian communities.
- **To encourage the diocese in its desire for growing younger and more diverse.** 'The world is in Blackburn', but the Church – through its congregations, leadership and structures – is not always representative of the communities it seeks to serve.
- **To maintain unity in a theologically diverse diocese.** Rejoicing in the various church traditions - model and live out 'Mutual Flourishing', with a commitment to honouring the Five Guiding Principles and a desire to see all parishes and people flourish.
- To work with the Dean and the Cathedral as the 'Mother Church' of the Diocese.
- To lead and sustain a church that is safe, especially for children and vulnerable adults;
- To welcome those who are poor and wealthy, those whom society loves and those whom society despises;
- To play a significant role in the public square both in the diocese and the nation.
- To maintain and develop diocesan links within the Anglican Communion.

Philip, recognise and empower the gifts of those you serve. Encourage lay people and clergy so that in partnership with each other, we can all use our gifts in the service of the Lord and His Church.

And, Philip, as a disciple of our Lord yourself, you are also called to attend to the health and stability of your own spiritual life, your prayer and study, your personal learning and development.

In the gospel you have chosen to be read this evening we find a narrative to help us, for Peter stands before Jesus deeply broken by his failures. Promising he would never to let Jesus down, a few hours later Peter swore he never even knew him.

So, perhaps hardest of all, Jesus addresses him as Simon; uses the name he had before Jesus knew him and renamed him and redirected him. And even though Biblical commentators differ in the significance they place on the different Greek words for love that are used in the exchange that follows, I find it moving and challenging that when he asks 'Simon, son of John, do you love me more than these?' Jesus uses the word *agape*, the word to describe selfless, self-giving, holy love, and Peter replies using another word, the one that describes the love that is human friendship, and might be better translated as, 'Yes Lord, you know that I'm your friend.'

So, Jesus asks again and slightly changes the question, not 'Do you love me more than these?', but 'Do you love me?' and again Peter repeats that he is the Lord's friend.

Jesus then asks a painful third time, his three questions poignantly mirroring Peter's three denials, but this time uses Peter's word, not quite asking him, 'Do you love me with that same love that is the love of God, but do you love me as a friend?' And this third question, put in this particular way, cuts to the quick. 'Lord,' Peter replies, 'You know everything, you know that I love you.'

Though perhaps a better translation would be you see everything, you see to the heart of me, you see my failures, my petulance, my pride, my fear, and now also my shame and desperation, and my longing for your friendship, because in this I might, at last become the person I am called to be, the rock you declared me to be.

Philip, dear friend, you need this too. As I do. As all of us do.

In order to be the Bishop of Blackburn, first of all you need to be Philip, standing before Jesus and letting Jesus see you and minister to you.

And I know in my vocation, with all the fancy titles I have accrued - the Most Reverend this, and the Right Honourable that, Your Grace, and My Lord - I need somewhere each day where I am just Stephen before God: a place of penitence, but also a place of profound and joyful replenishing, because if the gospel is not about sins forgiven, then I don't know what it is.

But then a commissioning. For each of Simon Peter's answers there are three evolving and developing commissions.

Jesus sees to the heart of who Peter is, and who he can become, and so he says to him, 'Feed my lambs', which must mean tending to the little ones of the flock.

Then 'Tend the sheep', which means giving the flock the guidance it needs as its Good Shepherd.

And finally, 'Feed my sheep', become the one who will supply the needs of my people and be again the rock on which I build my church.

Philip, dear brother, this is you're calling. You are to be that rock and also the Shepherd and Pastor of the church and diocese of Blackburn, serving Lancashire in all its diversity and with all its need and opportunity.

You already have a great heart for the little ones, for children and young people, for schools, and particularly for the poor and excluded. Your voice and your witness is needed, not only in Lancashire, but in our nation. So be a voice for children, and be a voice for the poor, and do not let your vision be obscured. And teach the Christian faith, and disciple the people of God, "in season and out of season... with great patience and careful instruction", for as Paul put it to Timothy we live in age of itching ears. (2 Timothy 4.2)

And finally, as a Shepherd, be among the flock you serve, know them and let them know you. Give of your heart and at the same time guard your heart, knowing it is to Christ alone that you must give an account, and therefore be able to resist the temptations and desires to play to the gallery, please a constituency, gain a favourable review.

Being a Shepherd can be lonely. It will be costly. You will have to make hard and difficult decisions. Sometimes you will be unpopular. Sometimes doing the right thing means pleasing virtually no one.

But our church – and our world – need leaders who know how to be led, who come to Jesus and stand before and hear him say to them, ‘Yes, when you were younger you could do your own thing and go where you wished, but now is the time when you will stretch out your hands and someone else will fasten a belt around you, and you will have to do things and say things that you would rather not. This, for you, Philip, is the call of Episcopal ministry.

And as a Bishop within the Church of England you share in the ministry of the Gospel of Christ, proclaiming His promise of hope and eternal life in this world of death and despair. And it is in precisely this broken and confused world that God calls you to the servant leadership which guards the flock of Christ, exercising the ministry of a shepherd, upholding of the unity of the Church, and guiding the people and churches you serve in witness and service. In the uncertainty of the world, may Jesus Christ strengthen you to confidently live out the vocation to which God has called you.

There is only one way of undertaking this ministry. What Jesus said to Peter, he says to us, he says to you, Philip: ‘Follow me.’

It is in our following, remembering it is Christ’s church not ours, and ever replenished by his grace, that we fulfil this ministry. And despite our manifold and all too evident shortcomings, because leadership is horribly visible and exposing, become, to borrow Bishop Jill’s powerful analogy, beacons lit for Christ and for the gospel.

So may the Lord of heaven, who gives you the will to undertake these things, give you also the strength to perform them, and by his divine providence may his holy angels succour and defend you on earth, may Mary the Mother of God, our Lady of Walsingham, intercede for you; and may his God’s Grace and Blessing be with you always. Amen.

25th April 2023

+STEPHEN EBOR: