

Presidential Address

Diocesan Synod March 11th 2024

God loved us with so much love that he was generous with his mercy: when we were dead through our sins, he brought us to life with Christ - it is through grace that you have been saved - and raised us up with him and gave us a place with him in heaven, in Christ Jesus.

This was to show for all ages to come, through his goodness towards us in Christ Jesus, how infinitely rich he is in grace. Because it is by grace that you have been saved, through faith; not by anything of your own, but by a gift from God; not by anything that you have done, so that nobody can claim the credit. We are God's work of art, created in Christ Jesus to live the good life as from the beginning he had meant us to live it. (Ephesians 2, 4-10)

Why do we bother?

There is just so much going on across the parishes, schools and chaplaincies of this Diocese. Richard Chartres used to say the Church of England is incredible notionally but credible locally. At a time when national church politics are febrile and toxic, the vitality of local Church life in Lancashire is inspiring.

What about our strategic vision? In this Synod our focus will be on Vision 2026, a chance to take stock of all that our Vision has made possible and reflect on where we go next. The coherence and positivity that our Vision has brought to all traditions was much remarked upon when the Diocese was in vacancy.

Or what about our application to SMMI? Last week we took some major strides in an application that could see more than £25 million invested in mission projects in our Diocese.

Then we have seen some really exciting initiatives crop up in recent years, for example our amazing discipleship app, Fruitful and the Parish Renewal Programme which is having such an impact on those parishes who are part of it. Perhaps most remarkably, the number of New Local Congregations is now over the 200 mark.

Between 2022 and 2023 we again saw growth, both in the size of our Sunday attendances but also in the level of share receipts which might soon top that symbolically important £8m mark.

All of this is to say nothing of the day by day hard work going on in our schools and parishes where the Gospel is being proclaimed, the hungry are being fed, the grief-stricken are finding comfort and the young are being educated in a context of love and faith.

This is all down to the commitment of people like you – passionate clergy and lay leaders. But why do we bother? Why all this energy and activity? That is a key question to ask as we look at our Vision tonight because often the church gets so stuck on techniques and strategies that we forget why we are doing all this in the first place.

The answer is not institutional survival. It's not to pay stipends or guarantee the security of our housing or pensions. Nor is it a nostalgia trip to keep alive a church that makes us feel secure. No. We do it because of grace. It is the love of Christ that compels us. We act because of the miracle of our salvation, something that we long with all our hearts for others to know.

In that powerful paragraph from his Letter to the Ephesians, Paul says not just once but twice, 'It is through grace that you have been saved.' Some people think that God's love is something we need to earn through our own actions or decisions. But the Gospel is much better news than that. The joy of the Christian life is that all is undeserved free gift. In the most outrageous act of gratuitous love, the Father has sent the Son to die the death we deserve and so free us from death's power. There was no need for him to do that. He just did. Because he loves us so much he wants to be with us for ever. That's grace. As a Diocese, all our actions, all our worship, our whole common life is a response to the grace of God in Jesus Christ. No other motivation will do.

That grace is the source of our joy. Even against a backdrop of a divided church and economically threatened communities, our longing is to be a joyful church. And we can do that, not through some cringey self-generated cheeriness, but through the assurance that by grace we have been saved.

That grace is the heart of our proclamation. The love of Christ compels us to declare that love to others. Our evangelism is not a recruiting strategy. We long for others to know Jesus as a friend simply because his grace is the only things that can rescue human life and set us free in Christ for ever.

That grace inspires us to love our communities. We love because God has first loved us. We reach out in love and service to our communities because we long for people to experience some glimpse of the self-giving love of God revealed on the cross.

As we launch now into an update of our Vision and reflect on what will come afterwards, remember the gift we have to share with Lancashire. Let our every act and decision be driven by grace and our desire to share that grace with all.

As Christians we are about to enter into Passiontide, the business end of Lent as our thoughts turn more and more towards Calvary and the saving work of God in Jesus Christ. In our study and our worship, we are called to very heart of greatest of all miracles, the miracle of grace.

Inspired and refreshed by this holy season, let's hold the cross high over Lancashire. That's our job. That's what our vision is about, what our ministry is about, what our whole common life is about. Let's hold the cross up high. That in that sign, all might find life and salvation.