An avowedly secular UK media largely refused to cover it. But the recent visit of Pope Leo to France was a really staggering event and one that we must reflect on in the UK. France is an avowedly secular country with a long tradition of anti-clericalism and recently had amongst the lowest churchgoing rates in the country. And yet 800,000 attended Mass in the Place de la Concorde and nearly a quarter of a million at Lourdes. The numbers attending every event were vast.

What was so bold about the visit was the unashamed claiming back of France's history from a secular and materialistic agenda that has been shown to be bankrupt. Mass was celebrated where once the Guillotine was used to execute priests and Bishops. The Pope visited the shrine of the Martyrs of the Revolution. And 80,000 young people crowded out the Stade de France for a tableau of the French Saints which reclaimed their national history for Jesus and his Church. What's more, this visit was not a one off. So far this year in France, over 21,000 adults have sought and been offered the sacrament of Baptism.

For 150 years the story of Western Christianity has been one of decline and withdrawal. Even as Christians we have come to inhabit that narrative ourselves. We have leadenly accepted those who have told us that the only way is down and have mocked those who speak the language of renewal and growth. But every two hundred years, the French crop up and remind us that the fire of the Gospel is inextinguishable. Joan of Arc led the way in the fifteenth century, Vincent de Paul in the seventeenth, John Vianney and Teresa of Lisieux in the nineteenth, and now in the twenty first, it is a generation of teenagers and young adults who are heralding a time of change. They are seeking a deeper and more authentic truth than the consumer agenda can offer. And they are finding it in Jesus. The Holy Spirit is moving. Pope Leo on the way home from France described it as a Rebirth.

There is plenty of evidence that the wind is changing here also. Many of you are telling me about new families and especially young adults simply turning up in your churches, often starting with online exploration of the Gospel. A few Sundays ago I went to two churches where every year they have presented ten to fifteen Year 6 children for Confirmation. This time they were joined by ten adults in each church, passionate in their newfound Gospel faith. And that story is an increasingly common one across the county. There is a rebirth.

Which poses a challenge for an institutional church. Do we believe it? And are we ready for it? In northern Europe we have become so inured to the language and methodologies of decline that our imaginations have become dulled. Many congregations simply cannot picture their churches being thriving and full of people. A mindset of scarcity and anxiety has gripped them. That's why we waste so much of our time arguing over money rather than storing up treasure in heaven. If in the Church of

England we cannot believe in a rebirth, then the Spirit will simply find other vehicles for renewal.

But I think that in the Diocese of Blackburn, we do believe and are increasingly ready for what the Spirit is doing in our nation. Just four weeks ago we had the most mind-blowingly fabulous weekend of mission. Almost every parish and benefice across the Diocese planned a weekend of events with the unashamed intention of inviting people in to hear the Gospel. Our Centenary events, from a crazy Big Day Out in Blackpool, to the wonderful Diocesan Conference, to our plans for the Centenary Eucharist on November 12th, have had levels of engagement that reveal profound faithfulness and purpose amongst clergy and lay leaders.

And that has zeal has been demonstrated over the past two years as we have discerned God's will for our new Diocesan vision, Joyful Followers of Jesus. The next time this group of people meets we will be launching that vision at St Michael's School in Chorley. Behind the words, there lies a deep-seated desire to lead people to faith in Jesus Christ. In the language of the Vision, we want people to know Jesus. That's the motivation for loving our neighbour and sharing our faith. That's why we want to inspire children and young people with the Gospel and, solely in order to proclaim it, form Christ-like leaders. As a diocese we have a longstanding commitment to saving the parish and sustaining or growing clergy numbers. But our motivation for that is not mere maintenance. It is because the parish, along with our precious chaplaincies, is the way we declare the Gospel.

So friends, as we launch this new vision, let's be ambitious for the Gospel of Jesus Christ. Let's have a rich ambition for the kingdom. Our task as Christians is not to tinker about and leave everything roughly the same. It is not to apply a thin veneer of ill-defined spirituality to a fundamentally secular nation. When Jesus returned to his home town, he caused total chaos. When he crossed to the land of the Gadarenes, he wrought such utter disorder that they begged him to leave. When he went into the Temple, he smashed the place up. When he descended to hell, he harrowed it and brought to life the souls of the saints. Jesus does not tinker. He does not leave things the same. He transforms. He purifies. He destroys evil. He changes lives with the hope of salvation.

And for us also, our task is to change lives and fill communities with hope. We cannot rest until every single boy and girl, woman and man in Lancashire has heard the Good News and been invited to respond. We cannot rest until every knee bows at the holy name of Jesus. We will not stop until every soul in our care has received an invitation to be a joyful follower of Jesus.

But we cannot do that alone or through our own strength, which is why Joyful Followers of Jesus is founded on the basis of prayer and is soaked with prayer in every paragraph.

Instead of Vision Champions, the invitation to our parishes is to appoint Prayer Enablers who will support clergy and PCCs in growing levels of prayer in their church and ensuring that our new vision is implemented not through our own strength and our own efforts but through His.

Friends, I urge you to be bold as you imagine what the Lord can do amongst us here in Lancashire. There are so many aspects of our common life that could drag us down. Sins and mistakes in the church. Divisions and disagreements. Cynicism and scepticism. A scarcity mindset. The tired old lies about the inevitability of decline. These are the devil in our midst. But the devil is cast down to hell by the merest whisper of the Lord, and the Lord is for us and will never let us go. We have a Gospel to proclaim that Lancashire needs to hear. The words we speak are words of life. So may Joyful Followers of Jesus presage for us an ever greater boldness in service and proclamation. In faithfulness and trust, let's prepare for the time of Rebirth.

+Philip Blackburn