

**The Bishop of Coventry's Visitation Charge  
Delivered in the Cathedral of St Michael  
on 4<sup>th</sup> June 2009**

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## Introduction

May I begin with some words of thanks?

- Thanks to the whole Diocese for the warmth of the welcome that Charlotte and I and our family have received since my installation seven months ago; and for your patience with me as I've tried to listen out for what God is doing in the Diocese of Coventry.
- Thanks to you all for being here today as I move from listening to speaking, and thanks especially to Archdeacon Ian Watson for his determination to be here today despite the ordeal he has been through over recent weeks.
- And thanks – deep thanks – to our Church Wardens for taking on the great and historic duties that you are assuming today – whether it is for the first time or one of many. Your clergy, your bishops, your parishioners appreciate you enormously!

As you may have read in my Introduction to the Order of Service, there is a little 'something I prepared earlier' for you to take away with you – *My Signposts for the Future* Document. What I want to do now is to introduce it to you and extract a few of its key points.

The first thing to say is that it is a diverse document.

- It has some propositions – a few top down statements of what I plan to do here and there.
- It has some invitations – some ideas I've thrown out for us to think about and for you to contribute to some reviews of different parts of our life and ministry.
- It has some of my own theological thinking – especially about the ministry of Bishops and the place of Deaneries in the life of the Church.

- It has some proposals – some serious suggestions of significant directions that we might take together and that need to be fully thought and talked through together – beginning at the July Diocesan Synod.
- And it has some small print – some footnotes – with a bit more of the detail.

The second thing to say is that it is in two parts.

- The first part is about *apostolicity* – which is about stepping into the stream of God's sending (that what's apostolicity means – sending) that began with the first Apostles. This part of the document tries to think about how the Lord's sending of us can be liberated, set free – for the Son is the one who sets us free indeed.
- The second part is about catholicity – which is about stepping into the connectedness or togetherness that began with Jesus' first disciples. This part of the document tries to think about how our life together can be nourished for we are baptized by the one Spirit into Christ.

As we say, Sunday by Sunday, 'we believe in one, holy, *catholic*, and *apostolic* Church.

## **1 Readings** (Joshua 4.1-5.1 and Luke 9.51-end)

Before saying anything more about the document, I'd like to spend a few minutes with the Readings which the Lord has thrown up for us in the Lectionary.

- The story from Joshua is about a journey with the presence of God to the promised land through the immovable obstruction of the river Jordan.

- The story from Luke is the story of Jesus as the presence of God journeying towards the kingdom of God through the immovable obstruction of rejection and death.
- Also in our reading from Luke is the story of the disciples journeying with the presence of God in Jesus through the *removable* obstruction of their – of our – reluctance and resistance, failure and fallibility, to proclaim the kingdom of God.
- The purpose of all three stories of the journey towards the future of the land which the Lord has promised to his people is summed up in the last verse of the Joshua reading: - 'so that all the peoples of the earth may know that the hand of the Lord is mighty, and so that you may fear the Lord your God for ever'.

My dear brothers and sisters that is the big backdrop to what we are doing as members of the people of God in this place.

And there is a great fitness in our gathering together on an Election Day which will deliver a verdict on the failures of the 'money god' and the 'power god' to live up to their promises.

- This year we have learnt again that financial systems are not as mighty as we once thought.
- And that long traditions of the world's oldest Parliament are not as mighty as they were once thought to be.

We gather on a day when peoples of this land – of this earth – need to know as much as ever, that there is only one hand that is truly mighty, only one promise that can be counted on, only one future that can be relied upon – the mighty hand of God that has promised to save the world from itself through Jesus Christ the Lord.

And this land – this world – needs a people of God, a Church that fears the Lord, that grows into the Lord and that serves the Lord.

A Church that in the words of our Purpose Statement:

- Worships God
- Makes new disciples
- Transforms communities.

You will find that my Signposts Document affirms this Three-Fold Statement as an accurate description of how the Diocese of Coventry sees itself. It then calls us to:

- First, to press on to deepen our worship God, increase our making of new disciples and extend our transformation of communities.
- Secondly, it calls us to apply these diocesan commitments locally. It is not for me to prescribe how you are to do it but to encourage you to do it, and to do it better.

## **2 Apostolicity**

And now some words about *apostolicity* – our being sent for this mission of worship, evangelism and transformation.

Members of Diocesan Synod and Bishop's Council will know that I am inspired by the words of the Archbishop's Charge to me to: 'Release the missionary energies of the Diocese of Coventry'.

Not to create the missionary energies but to release them.

- They are here already because we are followers of The Missionary – of Jesus, the Messiah, sent redeem the world and to bring the kingdom.
- Jesus is full of missionary energies – and so are we because we are his body.
- And in my travels I have seen those energies at work.

- My apostolic task - our apostolic task as bishops – is to say to you as the Apostle Paul said to the Corinthians: ‘Everything we do, beloved, is for the sake of building you up’ (2 Corinthians 12.19).

But how?

How can I release your missionary energies?

Well here the Document has quite a lot to say about the ministry of Bishops but in particular it proposes one significant strategic direction for the Diocese. This direction, I believe, was already set in 2004 by Bishop’s Council and is articulated in what has become known as the Glenfall Statement.

Basically, the Glenfall Statement says that the life, the motivations, the energies of the Church are to be found on the ground – on your ground – in your backyard – in the life of local communities of faith and in the life of ordinary Christians following Christ faithfully.

Therefore, I want to begin a process of supporting and nourishing that ground by one particular adjustment – and that is the place of Deaneries in the structures of the Diocese.

In short, I’d like us to consider having fewer Deaneries and resourcing their leadership better so that over a period of time we can move to having one Archdeacon working with say 6 to 8 Deans with enhanced responsibility and support.

In other words, I want us to see whether we can shape and structure Deaneries for the furtherance of local communities of faith.

After a 25 year lapse I’ve taken up vegetable gardening again.

I’m loving it.

I’ve enjoyed working the soil and I’ve enjoyed sowing the seed and I’ve loved seeing life emerge from the energy of the soil and seed.

But I've discovered that I cannot tend the whole plot well.  
If I stand in the middle, or stand at the edge, or stand in any one part of it, I can't reach it all.  
Next year, I want to divide it into sections with paths in between, so that each section can be worked and weeded, sown, planted and harvested without treading on the precious earth and damaging the precious growth.

That's a bit of an attempt to picture the sort of shift I'm encouraging.

But if we are to move to one Archdeacon and enhanced Rural/Area Deans it will take us some time.

That is why in the meantime I propose to appoint a successor to Michael Paget Wilkes who, with Ian Watson and Simon Lloyd, will help us to transition from where we are now to where God may be leading us.

When that work is done – and it needs to be done expeditiously – the new Archdeacon will move on to other responsibilities in this Diocese or beyond.

Together with Bishop's Staff and Council I have thought hard about whether to appoint an Implementation Officer rather than an Archdeacon to help us with this move. My reasons for deciding that we need another Archdeacon at this point are summarized in note 12 on page 11 of the Signposts Document.

### **3 Catholicity**

And now for some words on *catholicity* – our being together in Christ.

As well as being charged with ‘releasing the missionary energies of the Diocese’, I have also been charged with ‘supporting and encouraging the strong bonds of mutuality that exist [for] this is a precious gift to cherish’.

The Document has two themes here about ‘supporting and encouraging our strong bonds of mutuality’.

The first is about improving our communication on a number of different levels. Without communication there can be no communion. Indeed, communication is communion.

The second, concerns handling the precious and fragile of gift of mutuality in times when it could be easily damaged and broken. I refer especially to the way we handle differences of view over the propriety of the ordination of women to the presbyterate and the episcopate; but there are other matters that will test our ‘bonds of mutuality’. The Document says that we will need to show a determination to understand the other person’s view and a commitment – in the words of 1 Peter 4.8 – ‘to maintain constant love for one another’ (1 Peter 4.8).

### **Conclusion**

My Signposts for the future ends with a reminder of the past. The glorious past which this great Cathedral symbolizes to the whole world.

The past in which the ministry of reconciliation entrusted – as Paul says – to the whole of Christ’s body (1 Corinthians 5.19), was, in the devastation of wartime, entrusted in a very special way to this Diocese.

On Pentecost morning – sharing with other Christians from across the Church traditions in a Methodist Communion Service in Earlsdon – I heard the story of Marjorie Milne who came to Coventry in 1958 believing that God had sent her to the city to wait in prayer because he was about to do a new work.

Half a century later, a few years from the 50<sup>th</sup> Anniversary of the Cathedral, may God do a new thing in our midst. And may God raise up people to pray that – as the disciples asked Jesus – fire will indeed come down from heaven. Not the fire of destruction as the disciples sought and as once happened here – but the fire of God’s Holy Spirit consuming this Diocese with the almighty love of God: the transforming power of the Divine Presence. The fire that sets us alight to signal to the world in word and deed that ‘in Christ God was reconciling the world to himself’.

My friends this is the only hope for the world – Jesus Christ crucified, risen, and ascended, present in the church and coming in glory. Pray God that this hope within us will be liberated and that having put our hand to the plough we will not look back but keep our eyes fixed on the kingdom of God (Luke 9.62)