

## Monmouth Diocesan Conference 2020

### The Right Reverend Cherry Vann

Centuries ago, the people of God were in exile having been taken from their home in Jerusalem to the foreign lands of Babylon by King Nebuchadnezzar. They were dislocated from the land, the promised land, that God had given to them; they'd been taken from their holy city of Zion, and they'd been separated from the Temple, the house of God that was the focus of their worship and life. You'll no doubt be familiar with the words of the psalmist that describe how they felt. 'By the waters of Babylon, there we sat down and there we wept when we remembered Zion...How can we sing the Lord's song in a foreign land?'

And yet, far from telling them to wait and to long for the time when they can go back, God tells them to build houses to live in, plant gardens in which to grow food, get married and have children, multiply. Because this time of exile was going to last for generations. In other words, those who left Jerusalem in captivity would not be going back. Those who would be going back were the ones who had no knowledge or experience of life as the people of God had known it. And the words that God speaks to them through the prophet Jeremiah are these: 'For surely, I know the plans I have for you, says the Lord, plans for your welfare and not for harm, to give you a future with hope.' (Jeremiah 29:11) Despite losing everything that was familiar and dear and being separated from the very foundations of their life and faith, God was promising them a future with hope.

It's not difficult to see the parallels between the people of God in exile all those centuries ago and the circumstances in which we find ourselves today. We may not have been exiled to a foreign country but we are living in unfamiliar territory. We may not be separated from our homes, but we are separated from family and friends; socially distanced even when we are able to physically meet with other people. The experience of not being able to go to church, not being able to gather for worship, to sing songs of praise, to receive the sacrament has been a terrible loss and a bereavement. Even when services in church have been possible and people have felt confident and safe enough to go, it's felt to many like a poor substitute to what church life and worship was only 7 months ago. We're living in strange times, navigating our way as best we can in unfamiliar territory.

And just like the people of God who were exiled to Babylon, we don't know when we'll be going back, how long this is going to last, or what we'll find when the exile is over. How can we sing the Lord's song in this strange land in which we find ourselves?

It's because of the uncertainty of it all and the unpredictability of what's going on that God's words to his people in Babylon hold an important message for us today. Rather than long for how things were and yearn to go back to how it was, God invites us to build, plant and nourish ourselves; to get on with living and praying not just for ourselves but for the welfare of the world around us; and, above all, to trust him for our future. 'For I know the plans I have for you, says the Lord, plans for your welfare and not for harm, to give you a future with hope.'

It's against that backcloth that I want to talk about our life together as a diocese and to touch on just a couple of things that I see as being among our priorities for the coming year or so. First to update you briefly on where we've got to on our Ministry Area proposals. I was extremely grateful to all those who took part in the consultation event a couple of weeks ago and to those who've e mailed in since. There was a lot of energy and engagement on the day and a sense of hope and excitement

in the direction we're going, which was encouraging and heartening. So thank you again to those who were there.

As I said on that occasion, establishing Ministry Areas is something that this diocese has been doing for some years and it's important now to complete that work so that every church community and every lay and ordained minister knows where they fit and who they are working with. For those who are still unsure what a MA is, it is quite simply a group of churches coming together to share their life of faith and worship, and their resources in mission and service. The churches and communities in the MA are served by a team of ordained and lay ministers who work collaboratively across the MA, sharing their gifts and skills with the churches in their care.

The Bishop's Staff Team has taken the feedback from the consultation day and used it to help us outline what we believe the MAs should be in the light of our financial projections and ministerial resources. We're hopeful of having a final set of proposals by the end of our meeting next week and will be looking to hold meetings in November, with the stipendiary clergy in the first instance and then more widely with others in each of the proposed MAs.

This will give us the framework within which we can develop and invest in our life and work, our mission and ministry, our witness and service.

In all of this, I'd like to reflect with you on two aspects of our Christian life that I believe are foundational to the hopeful future that God promises us. The first is to remember who we are; that is discipleship. The second is to remember that all that we are and all that we have belongs to God; that is stewardship.

In all the business and busyness that makes up church life it can be extraordinarily easy to forget who we are. We put a lot of energy and attention into what we think we should be doing, but perhaps far less energy and attention into being and becoming the people God is calling us to be, both as individuals and as a church community. This can be as true for those of us who are ordained as it is for the laos, the people of God. Just think for a minute about the things that you are or were involved in – all the things that you do or did before the pandemic struck; all the activities that were part and parcel of church life; all the plans that you'd made and perhaps those that you're making now in the light what's been described as the new normal.

Nothing wrong with that on one level, except that all the doing can come at the expense of us being and growing as children of God, as followers of Jesus and as communities of disciples. If we have anything at all to offer the world that's distinctive and that sets us apart from all the other wonderful community groups, service providers and charitable organisations that are around, it's our faith, our relationship with God and our experience of being caught up in God's love for us and for his world. That is what defines us. That is what shapes us. That is what motivates us. That is what we're called to share. If we allow ourselves to get so caught up in activity that we cease to pay sufficient attention both to who we are and whose we are, then we're not being true to our calling as the people of God.

So I'd like to encourage us over the next months and years to focus on our discipleship and on growing as disciples of Jesus Christ, as well as drawing into following Jesus. It's an area of church life that we've not been very good at on the whole, which on one level is a bit surprising. Many secular groups and clubs have in-built ways of helping their members to improve or get better or become more skilled in whatever interest they're pursuing. And whilst that's perhaps not the language that we'd want to use of Christian discipleship, there is a need for us to provide ways for one another to grow in our understanding, to mature in our faith and to explore what it means to be a follower of

Jesus in today's world; so that we're built up and equipped and confident to live the life God invites us into and thereby share with those who are seeking and searching not just the story of God's love for his world but our story (your story, my story) of God's love for us.

Some of this is happening already. Of course, it is. But through our Continuing Ministerial Development work and some work that I'd like us to do on developing resources for discipleship, I want to encourage us all to pay attention to our calling be disciples of Jesus so that together, as the people of God in this diocese, we'll be able to discover afresh and find renewed confidence in who we are and whose we are.

The other aspect of our Christian life that I'd like us to focus on is stewardship. That is, first and foremost, recognising that all we have including our very lives is not ours, but belongs to God. It's gifted and entrusted to us by God to care for, to enjoy and to use well and wisely. That's what a steward does; she or he manages and looks after something on behalf of someone else. The someone else in our case is God.

The concept of stewardship, of course, has been used almost exclusively in the church to talk about money, and money is not unimportant. Jesus has quite a bit to say about our relationship with the money and possessions entrusted to us. He warns against storing up wealth and possessions for ourselves, knowing how tempting it is for us to look to them for our sense of security rather than looking to God. The first disciples Jesus calls left everything to follow him; their homes, their livelihoods and their families. The new Christians in the early church shared everything they had with one another, pooling their resources to support one another and to share what they had with any in need. Whilst we may like to think that such ways of going on are unrealistic in today's world, it surely isn't unrealistic to allow God to draw us into a security that is based wholly and solely on his love. To help us establish a good relationship with our money, the church has for centuries taught the principle of tithing; of giving a tenth of what we have away to support God's work and mission through the life of the church. That may sound quite radical, but it does have the potential to release us from viewing money just as a means to pay the bills and the ministry share and it might actually enable us to engage in more exciting initiatives in God's service.

But let's not just get caught up on money. Stewardship is about much more than that. We can apply it to Ministry Areas, for example. The principles behind the idea of MAs are about harnessing and utilizing the resources that God has given to us so that the whole church may flourish and be better equipped to share in the work God has invited us to be part of in the communities of our diocese. At its best, this will see ordained and lay ministers working as a team across an area, each playing to their strengths and, as importantly, each supporting one another to flourish as together they seek to serve the churches and communities in their care. It will also see churches and congregation members sharing what they have, being willing to give and to receive as they learn to become the body of Christ. The reading we heard in our worship at the very beginning of this morning's business warns us against assuming that we don't need the other parts of the body and that we can function well enough on our own. Each has a part to play. Each is complimented and enhanced through working together. All are the poorer and disabled in some way if one part is prevented from fulfilling its role, however small and insignificant that may seem to be. God invites us to use everything we have well and wisely in his service. That's good stewardship.

And one more example, amongst many I could give, is the responsibility that God has given to us to care for creation; to be good stewards of the earth and its resources and to share what it provides in a way that all can benefit. As we are learning, almost too late, the state of the planet is a consequence of our poor stewardship, our lack of care for the forms of life with which we share this

extraordinary world, and our unwillingness to recognise, until very recently, how each of the parts fit together in an inter-dependent way. Just like a body.

I hope that over the coming year we'll be able to do some work together on stewardship, as part of our growth in discipleship, so that the resources entrusted to us across this diocese can be used to best effect in our common life and witness, for the glory of God.

It is the case that the future is uncertain. It is the case that we have lost much, at least temporarily, of what we hold dear and many of the ways of being church that we've hitherto taken for granted. But it is also the case that God is with us and continues to be at work, both in the church and in the world, in our lives and in the lives of those amongst whom we live and work. And that in the end is all that matters. 'For surely, I know the plans I have for you, says the Lord, plans for your welfare and not for harm, to give you a future with hope.'