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Bishop's Charge to the Diocesan Synod, 2022

Why do we have such a thing as a Diocesan Synod? Why do we have such a thing as a Diocese? The reason is the same reason that we have the Church at all. Christianity is a faith that brings people together. It challenges all the separations human beings create - between different generations, different cultures, different sexes, different religions, different ways of life. In Christ, we learn, all are one, because God is one. There is difference and variety, something to be celebrated not denied. But there is one human family.

Every congregation is different from all the others. Every member is different from all the others. Something to be celebrated, not denied. But being alone, in ourselves or in our congregations, is a kind of denial of difference, of what the Creed calls the catholicity of the Church (catholic doesn't mean high-church, but all-church). Being in one Church means having to go out of the comfort zone of those who are like us, to be with those who are different. That happens in the Anglican Communion across the world, in the Episcopal Church across our country, and in the Diocese across our zoom screens today. It happens even more in the ecumenical Church across the separations of history, practice, and belief. Being a Christian, being a Church, is inclusive, a shared work that includes everyone.

It is a shared life not just in theology but in practice. To all members of our Diocese, I want to say thank you for your commitment to our shared task, for your resourcefulness, and skills, and for the leadership of clergy and vestries, in each congregation. I want to give thanks to you as members of Synod, and to the conveners and members of the groups and committees who appear in the Synod Reports, some of whom give huge amounts of time and expertise for the work of the church; and I especially want to thank our Diocesan staff for their dedicated service, including the preparations for this Synod, at which we are discussing so many aspects of our shared life as a church.

The Lambeth Conference which we hope will gather bishops from all over the Anglican Communion in July, is addressing our call to be "God's Church for God's world." Everything we are discussing and deciding today is about how we can answer that call in our charges and our diocese. Challenging finance, thoughtful governance, hopeful post-Covid rebuilding, advancing climate change, exciting ecumenism, renewed liturgy and worship, and the wealth of activity reported in our Synod papers. These are all before us as a response to the calling to be "God's Church for God's world."

But we are meeting in a world sobered by distress and war, and have to remember that this is the reality for millions of people now, as we are meeting.

War has touched most of our families over the generations. Both of my grandfathers fought in WW1, my grandmother's brother was killed in its last year. My father and uncles served in WW2, and my mother told us stories of days and nights in the Liverpool blitz. In recent times, other soldiers, other families have suffered from wars in the middle east and the South Atlantic.

But I grew up thinking that in my lifetime we would not see another war in Europe. Yet it is happening today, just a short flight away in Ukraine.

Our prayers are for those caught up in the horror that war brings – bloodshed and loss, pain and suffering, trauma and fear. As Pope Francis says, “Every war leaves our world worse than it was before. It is a failure of politics and humanity, a shameful capitulation, a stinging defeat before the forces of evil.” This has to be declared, and acted on. Peacemaking is something to be done, not just something to be thought. Refugees are real people who have lost everything, and they need security and comfort, not a cold refusal and a visa form.

We must, of course, resist evil. We must also love our enemies. As followers of Jesus we have a vision for a new kind of world of justice and peace. Jesus called it the Kingdom of God, and against all appearances he said it was within us all, among us everywhere. You could reach out and almost touch it. This reaching out is called prayer.

I heard about Olena Symonenko, a Ukrainian mother fleeing with her child, finding refuge for the night in a stranger's house. Her 6 year son said you should always make a wish before sleeping in a house for the first time. ‘What will your wish be?’ she asked him. ‘For the war to stop, and the President of Russia to be a good person.’ The witness of a 6 year old refugee praying for his enemy.

Prayer is one response of faith to the war in Ukraine. So is action: we are being called to humanitarian support, an openness to refugees, a willingness to endure the cost of sanctions.

But we are also called to personal honesty. We must attend to all those little wars which make up our everyday lives, those micro-aggressions where we choose to put our own way of life before that of others, including those arguments and resentments that appear too often in the Church. It is the accumulation of those little wars that creates the large war. All of us bear some responsibility.

After 9/11, there was argument about how we could defeat terror. One person, I remember, listening to the talk of bombing this and destroying that and hitting at the heart of the other, reminded us: *the only way to defeat terror is to out-imagine it.*

That is our task in prayer, word and action, because ultimately war is a failure of imagination and a denial of the only thing that makes us truly human, which is love.

+Ian St Andrews