

THE BISHOP OF ST ALBANS' PRESIDENTIAL ADDRESS
DIOCESAN SYNOD
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The conflict between Israel and Gaza

We are all aware that fighting has again broken out in the Middle East between Hamas and Israeli forces. Many people have been killed on both sides, even more have been injured and a significant number of Jewish hostages are still being held and used as bargaining chips.

It is important at this time that we speak out against all violence and urge everyone to do everything they can to stop the fighting and instead work for peace. In particular it is important, not least against a backdrop of rising antisemitism in the country, that we attend to our local communities and ensure that all Palestinians and all Jews who live in our midst are protected. The scenes which are being played out in Gaza should not spill over into our communities here in the diocese. Please ensure that we pray for God's peace whenever we gather for worship.

Living in Love and Faith

You will have seen reports in the media about the implementation of the decisions that General Synod took at the meeting in February.

At Monday's meeting of the House of Bishops it was agreed that:

- The prayers and readings in *Prayers of Love and Faith* for use with same-sex couples will be commended by the House of Bishops for use in public worship.
- New draft Pastoral Guidance will be brought to next month's meeting of Synod, setting out how the system could operate. Further work is already in progress on the second part of the Pastoral Guidance which will look at matters in the life and work of clergy and lay ministers.
- Special standalone services set out in *Prayers of Love and Faith* should be brought to the General Synod to decide whether to authorise them under Canon B2, after consultation with dioceses. This process will not be completed until sometime in 2025.

- There is also further work under way to explore further forms of pastoral reassurance and formal structural pastoral provision to ensure the conscience of everyone is respected.

I know this announcement will feel very frustrating to many members of our diocese. There are those who had hoped that the Church of England would be able to offer a service of marriage to same-sex couples, who are now feeling let down.

There are those who are clear that even offering 'pastoral provision' in the form of optional prayer material is going too far, despite the fact that we are not changing our canons on marriage.

I want to underline that there is still quite some way to go before anything is going to change and I would urge everyone to have patience. Specifically, I and my fellow bishops in this diocese want to continue to listen and talk with as many people as possible as this process unfolds over the coming months.

Creation and the Net Zero Carbon Action Plan

In Nehemiah 9.6 we read:

You alone are the Lord.
 You have made the heavens,
 The heaven of heavens with all their host,
 The earth and all that is on it,
 The seas and all that is in them.
 You give life to all of them
 And the heavenly host bows down before You (Nehemiah 9.6)

As Christians we worship the God who is creator of all that is – the earth, the planets and the galaxies. Main-stream Christianity has never been a religion only interested in the spirit and the soul. Its core doctrines are rooted in the doctrine of the incarnation, of God entering into our physical world to redeem it. At the end of time we are promised that all creation will be taken up and transformed into a 'new heaven and a new earth' (Revelation 21.1).

A major theme of today's diocesan synod is a discussion about our Net Zero Carbon Action Plan, which touches on the environment and our responsibility to care for it and to pass it onto the next generation.

Back in 2015 world leaders met in Paris and signed a ground-breaking agreement to ensure that rises in global temperature did not exceed 2°C and ideally remained under 1.5°C. In less than a decade the average warming figure is now about 1.1°C – 1.2°C.

It is significant that there have been a series of eye-catching headlines in the media in recent days. For example, it was reported that 'On about a third of days in 2023, the average global temperature was at least 1.5°C higher than pre-industrial levels', that according to Dr Melissa Lazenby from the University of Sussex '2023 is "on track" to be the hottest year on record, and 2024 could be hotter'.

Other media stories argue that climate change played a major role in the recent devastating floods in Libya and that the Antarctic ice cap is melting at an alarming rate. It was President Museveni of Uganda who first described climate change as an act of aggression by the rich against the poor, when he said that 'climate change is a developed world problem for which the developing world is paying the price'.

A United Nations report has described how climate change is leading to large scale displacement of population which are affecting all parts of the world, not least Western Europe. The Internal Displacement Monitoring Centre examined data for four types of climate disaster and argued that it has led to the displacement of about 43.1m children, that's about 20,000 children each day.

The magnitude of this crisis means we cannot sit back and ask others to solve it, whether it is international bodies, nation governments or local authorities. We are only going to solve this by the concerted actions of all of us, individually, as churches and as dioceses.

The UK Climate Change Committee has estimated that over 60% of the work to get us to net zero will required changes in our behaviour in transport, heating and diet.

Each one of us will have to decide what we can do to play our part. For me, that involves a conscious effort to rethink the amount of travel I undertake and when I have to go places, how I can do it in the most ecologically-friendly way. So for example, some years ago I was flying several times a year, whereas I've not flown for the past three years. That's not to say that I will never take another flight, but I am clear it is going to have to be the exception rather than the rule.

As a diocese we have made some progress. We have been reviewing our pattern of meetings and trying to ensure that, where it is appropriate, some of our meetings can be online, to save transport. We are offering grants to help parishes work out what they can do to move towards reduced carbon outputs.

You may have heard that we have just been awarded the bronze Eco Diocese award by the charity *A Rocha*. It's a great achievement and an important statement on the church's commitment to creation care at a time when leadership in this area is needed more than ever. Congratulations to all who have worked on this especially Rachel Johnston, our Diocesan Environment Officer and David Lambert, vice chair of the Diocesan Environment Group.

This award is the culmination of years of hard work, encouraging local churches to become Eco Churches as well as working on diocesan structure, policies, practices. Their letter to us said:

We would like to highlight the particularly high standard of the bronze award application from St Albans, it showed a thorough and methodical approach with well presented evidence and record keeping. From all that I have read, there was a sense of great commitment and energy around creation care and the influence you are having across the diocese and beyond. The spread of events and activity demonstrates the processes and on-going work especially in the areas of training, collaboration and celebration.

Many of our parishes have individual Bronze Eco Awards and in addition, last month, our Cathedral was awarded the Silver Eco Award. We celebrate with them and congratulate them on their progress.

So today we are going to spend some more time reflecting on what we can do together:

You alone are the Lord.
You have made the heavens,
The heaven of heavens with all their host,
The earth and all that is on it,
The seas and all that is in them.
You give life to all of them
And the heavenly host bows down before You (Nehemiah 9.6)

+Alan St Albans