

THE BISHOP OF ST ALBANS' PRESIDENTIAL ADDRESS

DIOCESAN SYNOD

12 MARCH 2022

As we emerge from the COVID pandemic there is much for which we can give thanks. Our church schools have managed to keep going despite enormous odds. Many of our chaplaincies have been on the forefront of caring and supporting others; and many of our parishes have either supplied or run food banks, organised visiting rotas, held online services and are now fully open for business again.

Nevertheless, we are facing some challenges as a diocese. Some of our church schools have had periods of very high levels of COVID and have not been able to operate fully. The picture is also mixed in our churches. Whilst the majority are reporting that they have 80%- 85% of people back in church, a few are reporting that they have grown and are now larger than pre-pandemic. Our diocesan finances have taken a hit. We had to spend nearly £1 million worth of reserves to get us through the lockdowns and we are now facing a shortfall of nearly half a million pounds before the end of this year.

The challenge we are facing is how to build or rebuild our congregations so that we have the resources to reach out and serve our communities and also to get on top of the financial challenges as we cannot continue to spend reserves.

It is important to remember that the fundamental challenges we face are not primarily financial but rather spiritual. Throughout the history of Christianity there have been many times when the people of God have faced seemingly insurmountable challenges. At that point believers have been faced with a choice: do we focus our attention outwards on the problems, which then start to define us and sometimes even defeat us? Or do we refocus our energies on seeking God afresh and deepening and renewing our faith?

It is for that reason I want to do something fairly unusual in this Presidential Address. I want to set the scene for today's Synod by spending a few minutes doing a Bible study with you from Hebrews 11.32 - 12.2.

The whole of chapter 11 of Hebrews is a list of the saints who have faced profound challenges:

1. Abraham was called by God to go to a foreign country which was occupied by hostile tribes and establish a new nation;
2. Moses, who had been abandoned at birth, chose to identify with the sufferings of his people who are in slavery and led them out into the promised land;
3. Gideon was commanded to overcome his enemies. He had access to an army of 32,000 soldiers but God ordered him to winnow down his army to just 300 men who defeated the much stronger Midianites;

4. David, Israel's second and greatest king, who confronted and killed the massive Goliath against overwhelming odds.

By way of a summary, the letter of the writer to the Hebrews continues in verse 35:

Women received their dead by resurrection. Others were tortured, refusing to accept release, in order to obtain a better resurrection. Others suffered mocking and flogging, and even chains on imprisonment. They were stoned to death, they were sawn in two, they were killed by the sword; They went about in skins of sheep and goats, destitute, persecuted, tormented - of whom the world was not worthy. They wandered in deserts and mountains, and in caves and holes in the ground.

This chapter is a vivid reminder that the norm for the vast majority of Christians is to be in a minority, to face huge challenges, and in many cases, to live under persecution.

When we look back to these great saints for inspiration, we note that they did not spend all their time focusing on the enemy or on their problems. Instead, they attended to their own spiritual lives. This is what the writer to the letter of Hebrews says:

Therefore, since we are surrounded by so greater cloud of witnesses, let us lay aside every weight and the sin that clings so closely and let us run with perseverance the race that is set before us, looking to Jesus the pioneer and perfecter of our faith, who for the sake of the joy that was set before him endured the cross, disregarding its shame, and just taken his seat at the right hand of the throne of God.

What does this tell us about the situation we are in and the challenges we face?

1. That in a time of crisis, we have to consciously reflect on the lives and on the Christian witness of those who preceded us: 'since we are surrounded by so greater cloud of witnesses'. The word here for witnesses is the Greek word for martyr. A martyr is someone who has seen or experienced something and is therefore qualified to give testimony. These witnesses, these heroes of the faith, have experienced God's faithfulness in terrifying situations and they are qualified to bear witness to that faithfulness. So, we are invited to ponder on their inspiring examples. But we're not just to think of them as far removed from us, sitting remotely in the heavenly realms. We are to picture them like supporters, like cheerleaders, like those who line the route for those running the London Marathon, cheering them on to reach the finishing post. We are not alone in all we are experiencing. It is something that has been very familiar to our forebears.
2. Secondly, we need to go back to basics and remember the things that really matter.: 'We are to lay aside every weight'. One of the things you notice about marathon runners is that they are not carrying anything that is not absolutely essential. Any excess weight simply slows you down. It's very easy in our journey through life to get caught up in all sorts of things that do not ultimately matter. But when the going is rough there is a need to let go of the non-essentials. As we are facing these challenges, we may need to let go of some cherished things in order to make more space for God.
3. Thirdly, we are not just to unburden ourselves of the extra baggage but are also to 'lay aside every sin which so easily entangles us'. There is a very real danger

in our spiritual life that we get so used to things that are wrong that we no longer take any notice of them and put up with them. When a crisis hits it may be God's invitation for us to re-examine ourselves and repent – a fitting theme in these early days of Lent.

4. Fourthly, we are to 'run with perseverance the race that is set before us looking to Jesus, the pioneer (Greek: *archegos*) and perfecter (Greek: *telotes*) of faith. The word *archegos* - pioneer- means one was the first to undergo something. Jesus is the one who was crucified, who descended into hell and has defeated the powers of evil. He is also the perfecter of our faith, the first one to complete the course. On the cross he cried out 'It is finished! It is accomplished!' Elsewhere Jesus says he is the Alpha and Omega, the first and the last, the beginning and the end. Although there are many heroes of the faith Jesus is the only one whose faith was perfect. He is our ultimate model. We are to run this race with perseverance (Greek: *upomone*). This is not a 100 metre sprint but a long haul marathon.
5. Fifthly, we are to keep 'looking to Jesus Christ who for the joy that was set before him endured the cross, despising its shame and sat down at the right hand of the throne of God'. We are reminded that we need to keep looking to Jesus. This is about ensuring that we are focused on the things that really matter - the core of our faith and Christian life, rooted in prayer, witness, worship and service. It's interesting that the pandemic has helped many of us reassess our priorities in life and that's what the writer of this letter is asking us to do. Sitting at the right hand of God was Jesus' reward for the completion of his mission, which was bringing salvation to the world. The right hand was the place of honour. For most people the right hand is the dominant hand, the strong hand, the hand that wields a sword, the fighting hand. As a result the right hand was a symbol of power and authority (Exodus 15. 6, 12; Nehemiah 4.23; Psalm 18.35; 20.6; 21.8). Kings wore the ring signifying their authority on their right hand. Fathers conferred their blessings on their firstborn son with their right hand. Sitting at the right hand as a mark of honour is still practised today. In military staff meetings the commander sits at the head of the table with their second in command at their right hand.
6. The entire passage is a powerful reminder that we are to live by faith. It begins with the statement: 'Now faith is the assurance of things hoped for, the conviction of things not seen. Indeed, by faith our ancestors received approval. By faith we understand that the worlds were prepared by the word of God, so that what is seen was made from things that are not visible. By faith ... Abraham, Moses, David and so on'. This is a passage about putting our complete and utter trust in God who promises to lead us step by step.

When we come to the later items on today's agenda, we are to go to share some practical steps with you which represent our thinking so far. This is work that has come from the Bishop's Staff, the Diocesan Board of Finance and the Bishop's Council. We will give you an opportunity to engage with it and we hope you will help us think through the issues. Indeed, we hope you will become an ambassador and help your own church think through the challenges and opportunities ahead and then feed back your ideas to us. This will then form the basis for some of the proposals, both mission priorities and financial matters that will come back to our June Synod on which we will debate and vote.

So to summarise the themes from our passage, we are not facing anything that our predecessors have not faced. The saints have been here before. This is not a crisis but God's opportunity to renew and deepen our faith in Him who promises to lead us into his future. Our most important task is to concentrate on the renewing and building up our faith, beginning with ourselves and as we do that respond to all the practical things that come our way.

+Alan St Albans