

THE BISHOP OF ST ALBANS' PRESIDENTIAL ADDRESS

DIOCESAN SYNOD

MARCH 2025

Much water has flowed under London Bridge since I became the 10th Bishop of St Albans in 2009. Given that this is my last Diocesan Synod and my 40th Presidential Address, I hope you will indulge me if I offer a more personal reflection today and look forward in hope to all that the Lord has in store for you as God's pilgrim people, as we seek to Live God's Love in generosity and joy, imagination and courage.

It goes without saying that it has been an enormous privilege to serve you as your Bishop and I record my sincere thanks to all of you for what you have taught me about God and his love for us in Jesus Christ. It is not easy being a Christian today but travelling round the diocese, whether in Luton or Barnet, rural Bedfordshire or leafy Hertfordshire, I have been consistently impressed by people's commitment, resilience and utter faithfulness. I have valued a real sense of partnership in the Gospel for which I give thanks to God. There is much for which I give thanks, but I also need to ask your forgiveness for the times I have made mistakes.

Building trust and community should be at the heart of what we want to be as a society and, in this endeavour, the Church has a significant role to play, even in these so-called secular days. In the face of political and economic uncertainty, strong community holds individuals and families together in difficult times. To build community requires us to understand that we have more in common than what divides us. There are powerful forces in Britain today that seek to undermine and fragment, and we need to resist them, confident in the call of God.

The international financier and philanthropist George Soros says that 'fear is a bad adviser'. What is needed at the present time, he argues, is 'a sense of reality tempered by hope'. And that is what I pray will characterise not only today's Synod, but also your discussions as you go forward in the vacancy. I have always thought that hope is the undervalued part of St Paul's trio of faith, hope and love. In my experience, Christian hope goes deeper than cheerful optimism in the face of difficulty because it is grounded in the complete and utter faithfulness of God.

Safeguarding

You do not need me to tell you that the last six months have been a turbulent time in the life of the Church of England. Safeguarding is once again at the forefront of public consciousness, including our failure as a National Church to put our own house in good order. At February's meeting of the General Synod, an important step forward was made in the safeguarding journey, though there is still more work to be done in securing a lasting change of culture and ensuring that there is total transparency about our safeguarding processes.

Unfortunately, the reporting in the media of the decision made at last month's General Synod has been inaccurate, so let me put on record that General Synod voted for an independent scrutiny body to be established immediately, probably on a

statutory basis and commissioned work to explore the legal and practical challenges of moving to complete independence in the future.

In the meantime, do remember that we already receive independent scrutiny by the Diocesan Safeguarding Advisory Panel, the Local Authority Designated Officers (LADOs), and, in serious cases, the Charity Commission.

At the end of the printed version of this address, which will be available to you afterwards, I've printed out an independent assessment of the progress that we've made as a church, which makes encouraging reading.

It is vital that we keep people safe and embody best practice in our parishes, schools and chaplaincies. By operating within legislative requirements and following the best professional guidance available, we can ensure that everyone is given the safety and the security which is their right. As a diocese and as a Church, we are committed to putting our support of victims and survivors centre stage, apologising for the wrongs of the past. Still today some have felt ignored, let down or simply not responded to as well as they deserve. So let me record my own apology for those times when I have let people down. 'We walk by faith, not by sight,' says St Paul (2 Cor. 5.7). Sometimes we stumble, sometimes we fall, but we get up and by the grace of God keep on walking, one step at a time, and in so doing discover how to be Church at this challenging time.

The Council of Nicaea

The year 314 is etched into the corporate memory of this Diocese because it is reputedly the year in which a soldier by the name of Alban, swapped clothes with a terrified Christian priest fleeing persecution by the Roman authorities. Alban was arrested, tried and executed, and his words have been an inspiration to generations of Christians: 'My name is Alban, and I worship and adore the true and living God who created all things.' Alban was not the first English martyr: he was the first British martyr. The English were a wave of immigrants who had yet to cross the Channel in small boats and make these islands their home.

The year 325 is less well known but it should be because it was the date of the Council of Nicaea, in modern-day Turkey, when the famous Creed that we recite Sunday by Sunday at the Eucharist was endorsed. This year marks the 17th centenary of the council. Conferences and Symposia are taking place in various parts of the Christian world. Whether any British bishops travelled across Europe to Nicaea in obedience to the summons of the Emperor Constantine we do not know. But the impact of that Council and its Creed has shaped Christian discipleship ever since. Along with Alban, 'We believe in one God'.

I am convinced that there can be no renewal of the Church in this land that is not spiritual, that is not rooted in prayer, that is not shaped by the Gospel, that is not founded in the faith of God the blessed Trinity. In times of challenge and insecurity, it is tempting to look for short-cuts, to seek a rationale for our existence as a provider of social services and become either an adjunct of the state or a branch of the National Trust. In Bonhoeffer's famous phrase, it is the temptation of

'cheap grace' but it is not the way of Jesus Christ to which Alban bore witness with his life. And this leads me to a thought about the future.

Moving into a new season

In the Book of Ecclesiastes, in a passage that is often read at funerals, the preacher says, 'There is a time and season for everything under heaven' (Ecclesiastes 3.1). It is a text that I often have in mind when reflecting with clergy or a parish going into vacancy, as they think about priorities for the months ahead and the shape of their mission and ministry.

Is this parish in its springtime, open to new possibilities with a plethora of new shoots appearing that need nurturing and directing? Is it in summer, burgeoning with life and energy, clear about its priorities and dynamic in its witness to Christ, and needing leadership that is informed and confident? Is this parish entering autumn? The harvest is gathered, the summer is over, and there is a sense of tiredness mingled with nostalgia that the best is past. Perhaps this parish is in the depths of a spiritual winter, requiring an injection of light, hope and warmth to prise open frozen hearts? As my fellow gardeners will know, winter is the season to prune out diseased and dead wood to stimulate new growth.

It is easier to use such a template to discern the season of a parish than to discern the season of a diocese because, in truth, a diocese is made up of a large family of churches, chaplaincies, schools and fresh expressions; and each one is different. Nevertheless, this is the task that lies before you as I lay down my pastoral staff and you consider under God the sort of episcopal leadership you need for a new season. All I can say is that I sincerely hope you get a better one next time round.

As the elected representatives of clergy and laity of the Diocesan Synod, it is always important to bring to the table, as best you can, your varied experiences and insights. They won't be the same, but together these different pieces of the diocesan family jigsaw build up a picture of the life of God's Church in this part of the Lord's vineyard.

Going forward, I pray that you will make informed decisions about your direction of travel as together you continue to live out God's love in the various communities where the Lord has placed you. I pray that you may do so strong in the faith that God the Holy Trinity is Lord of all times and seasons: spring, summer, autumn, winter. In the words of the poet, John Donne: 'All occasions invite God's mercies, and all times are his seasons'. Whatever our age or experience, as I know myself, there are always lessons to be learned, opportunities to be grasped and wisdom to be distilled. May God grant us all grace to rejoice in that.

As I leave, please pray for me, as I pray for you.

+Alan St Albans

Appendix: Opinion from Jim Gamble

Safeguarding in the Church of England: An Independent Perspective

A year and a half ago, my team and I began our independent audits of safeguarding in the Church of England. Like many external observers, I was initially deeply cynical about the Church's capacity to learn from past failures. However, as we gathered evidence and listened to those within the Church—from worshippers and staff to some victims and survivors—we observed a positive and improving trend and the potential for real change.

We examined over 4,000 safeguarding documents and engaged with over 5,500 individuals. In doing so we found that the vast majority of those worshipping or working in Church environments feel safe and respected; safeguarding is becoming embedded, and a growing number feel the culture is improving, with many now feeling empowered to challenge authority.

This progress is largely thanks to the blended Diocesan Safeguarding Teams who bring valuable experience and networks from statutory safeguarding backgrounds, along with the dedicated work of Parish Safeguarding Officers and cathedral volunteers. Supported by the National Safeguarding Team, they are the professionals now driving safeguarding activity. While the Church has historically been criticised for ignoring safeguarding advice, the irony is that now, with a unique opportunity for progress, some—perhaps only a few, but a few too many—may disregard the advice of those who have driven this improvement: the Diocesan Safeguarding Officers.

So, what next? The Church of yesterday is not the Church of today. Moral outrage and public exposure have driven significant change. This does not mean that non-recent cases will not surface—indeed, we must hope that they do. Nor does it mean that offending in a contemporary sense will cease entirely. But it does mean that, when it does occur, it is now more likely to be challenged and addressed with the victim and survivor's best interests at the forefront.

I know it's tempting to impose solutions on the Church, but for it to work and become safer, safeguarding must be embedded in its DNA; safeguarding must be done by the Church, not to it. I believe this can be achieved via a consolidated and operationally independent internal safeguarding directorate led by a Director of Safeguarding.

This Director would have ultimate authority on all safeguarding matters, while existing governing bodies and their trustees, supported by credible external scrutiny, would ensure accountability at all levels. Oddly, the Audit team was not asked for an opinion or to give evidence to inform the thinking of those tasked with deciding next steps. It is almost as if there is an inevitability that, whether right or wrong, something needs to be seen to be done to the Church. I get that, but from someone who has seen what has been and is being done, and for what it's worth, here is my opinion: don't tamper too much with what is actually working now, based on what didn't work before.