Bishop Michael’s Presidential Address to Synod
26 November 2022

It’s an absolute joy to be here with you this morning and to having finally, lockstock and barrel arrived as Bishop of Bath & Wells. As I’ve said to a number of you before, getting to this point has taken quite a lot of stages – being asked to have my name go forward to the CNC, applying for the role, being shortlisted and interviewed, offered the role and then needing to be elected by canons of the cathedral, having that election confirmed by the Archbishop of Canterbury and his vicar general, paying homage to the Queen (I’m her last one) before being installed at Wells Cathedral earlier this month. So nobody can say that I have come to you lightly, inadvisably or for want of careful thought and a considerable deal of administration. The installation on the 12 November was the most extraordinary occasion. Thank you to everyone that was able to come, to all that prayed for me, for everyone who worked so hard to make the service such a success.

It left me feeling well and truly signed, sealed delivered to you all.

All that despite the fact that actually, I’ve been at work here in the diocese since the 1 of September. I’ve been getting inducted, learning about the role and the story of our diocese, visiting parishes and worshipping alongside congregations, taking part in a range of meetings and generally getting my feet under the table. It’s been a time to take things in, form impressions, start to get a sense of the main issues that together we need to think about as we face the future.

Most significant during this period has been having the opportunity to spend time with our clergy and lay church leaders. For clergy, I’ve been spending days out with our deanery chapters which have often also included Lay Deans and Readers.

I’ve been to 13 of the 19 so far – from Exmoor to Frome, Portishead to Chard and many stops in between. I’ve also been privileged to be part of two of the Zoom finance consultations that have built on the work of the finance comms group and that have happened during the last couple of weeks. These have been attended by about 400 people from around our diocese in total. And it’s about some of the insights gained from these two activities, the deanery visits and the finance meetings, that I’d like to think with you today and that we’ll be working on together during our agenda as this morning continues.

At each of the deanery chapters I’ve been to see we’ve started with a time of Bible study. We’ve been looking at the story of the feeding of the five thousand in John Chapter 6 that happens in the hills above Galilee.

It’s a narrative that everyone here will know really well and the insights and learning we’ve gained from looking at it together have been amazing. At the heart of the story is a resource issue. As he looks at the crowd that stands before him, Jesus says to the disciples ‘Where are we to buy bread for these people to eat?’ And his question evokes a variety of responses. Philip goes straight to the financial realities of the situation ‘Six months’ wages would not buy enough bread for each of them to get a little.’ He says. In contrast, the apostle Andrew starts not with what Jesus’s followers don’t have, but with what they do. ‘There is a boy here,’ he says ‘who has five barley loaves and two fish’. Even Andrew’s not sure what’s to be accomplished by making this offering. ‘But what are they among so many people?’ he asks.

Only to see Jesus take the little that is given, a poor toddler’s lunch box, and turn it into an abundance that no one present (apart from Jesus) could possibly imagine or contemplate. As we’ve studied this text, it has been a profound challenge to us all, making us ask how we see the world and whether we see it through the eyes of faith or everyday calculation. Do we see ourselves defined by what we’ve not got – that we’re skint, declining, uncertain. Or do we see it through the lens of what we’ve got, understand ourselves as people chosen by God, full of ingenuity and creativity, trusted by the communities in which we’re found, blessed with resources of wonderful people, beautiful buildings and a rich history?

The image of the feeding of the five thousand has been matched by another from the lake of Galilee gained through taking part in the finance conversations.

At those, people from parishes around our diocese have been frank and candid about the different challenges we face. There’s been a consistent story of aging and shrinking congregations, digging into reserves, worry that our clergy are being spread too thin and too far to do all that’s traditionally been expected of them. The image that all this has evoked has been of being on the lake of Galilee in the eye of the storm. We’ve heard from the diocesan finance team about how the diocesan budget that we’ll be looking at later has been shaped in order to give us a temporary respite from the waves (in a very non first century way perhaps by the image of buying some cans of petrol to put into the outboard motor). But they’ve been clear that the current budget is really only buying us a bit more time to decide what to do as we continue in the storm.

Will we stay in the boat with the almost total certainty that at some point it will get inundated by the waves and go under?

Well it’s not for that that I’ve come to live, worship, pray and serve alongside you. The alternative to staying in the boat and sinking is to step out in faith, trusting that our hands will be grabbed by the Jesus who walks over the waters towards us to save us. This is risky, uncertain, it will demand of us that we do things we’ve never done before (I’ve never walked on water), we’ll have moments of doubt and failure, and probably swallow quite a lot of water on the way. But its offer is to life, a future, faith, adventure and an experience of the Lord that will set our hearts ablaze.

So what do I ask of us all? It’s to take the risk of stepping out of the boat to live and walk, tell and talk the story of Jesus that’s the vision of this diocese and to which we’re called.

At heart, this is a task of the imagination. To imagine taking the risk. To imagine putting aside our long used, but not it must be said, very successful strategies of self-preservation in order to try doing things differently. To imagine how we might approach living out our faith in unexpected ways. To imagine that we can, using what we have, not what we’ve not, find out what it means to live the life of faith in a world we’ve never encountered before. To expect to encounter the saviour Jesus, reaching out to us with his strong, powerful arms to grab onto us and lead us to life.

It’s to this task of imagination that I call and urge you all. It’s a big ask I know and I’d like us to start the journey today. And if it would help, let me tell you a little something of my own experience in this area.

Three years ago I spent a week at a retreat centre in Wales called St Beuno’s. It’s a place you go to experience the Jesuit way of praying which is largely about imagining yourself into different stories in the Bible. Every day my prayer guide, an Irish lay woman who’d definitely have been a particularly terrifying nun in a previous generation, gave me the same Bible passage to reflect on: the story of the disciples caught in their boat in the storm on Lake Galilee. Not only did she do this, but there was nothing else to do at St Beuno’s. They removed your phone, your tablet, any light reading you might have brought with you. It was torture for extroverts. All that was offered was a seemingly endless encounter with the same Biblical text. On day four I met with my guide and she asked me how I was doing. I said, ‘I’d kill to watch an episode of Casualty’. She replied, ‘I wasn’t expecting you to say that.’

Eventually on day six of this torture I managed in my mind’s eye to get my imaginary foot over the side of the boat and stepped into the waves only to sink, be swamped and dragged down, an admission I felt of failure, inadequacy and faithlessness. I reported all this to my tormentor on day 7. ‘Don’t feel too bad about yourself,’ she said, ‘Most times we don’t get out at all.’

Today, as your new bishop, I am asking you to come with me. Take my hand. And let’s step out of the boat into a world of faith and trust. A world where we reach out to Jesus, confident that he has more than enough strength and resource to meet our every need. Where he’s not asking us to venture what we don’t have, but to risk the little that we do. To find in him new ways of being, of walking, of living. Offered by him an abundance that we can scarcely imagine or contemplate.