

Diocesan Synod, Saturday 12th March 2022

You do not need me to tell you that we are meeting at a very bleak time for our world. The stories and images from Ukraine – hospitals bombed, civilians shot, people starving and freezing, millions of refugees displaced, families divided, and an ever increasing sense of anxiety that the worst may be yet to come – all these things, and many more, shock and shake us to the core. Never, in my experience, has the penitential mood of Lent felt more timely than now, as we witness the awful ravages that human sin can bring to our world. Our first response must always be to pray, it is this above all that as Christians we offer to our troubled times: a practice of prayer. Prayer changes everything. It changes us, as it aligns our wills to God's will. And prayer changes the world: through it we see more clearly the world's sin as God sees it, and we imagine more vividly the world's glory as God would have it be. So our prayer should be twofold: first, '*Lord, have mercy*'; and then, '*Your kingdom come*'. Have mercy on us all in the mess we have made of your world; and renew our hope to work for Jesus' kingdom of justice and peace. [I invite you now to keep a time of silent prayer for the people of Ukraine, for the nations around Ukraine, for the Russian people, for Ukrainians and Russians living in this country, for those working for peace, for those responding to the humanitarian crisis. ... Lord, have mercy; Lord, your kingdom come].

Prayer does not leave us unchanged. It shapes our responses to the challenges we face. Those will be many and pressing in the weeks and months ahead – among them, the challenge of welcoming refugees and displaced people; the challenge of enduring the increasing deprivations that the economic situation will bring; the challenge of not giving way to hatred or exclusion of people simply because of their nationality; the challenge of avoiding so-called 'compassion fatigue'. As we ask God's grace to face all this, we must always remember that the people of Ukraine – and, in a different way, the people of Russia too – are confronting far more urgent and serious challenges. Outstanding in his response is Volodymyr Zelensky, the Jewish comic actor who in 2019 was elected as their unexpected President. At his inauguration then, he made this memorable appeal to officials around the country: *I really don't want my photographs to be in your offices, please, not my portraits, because the president is not an icon, not an idol. [Instead of me ...] Hang the photos of your children in your offices and look into their eyes before making every decision.* What a powerful statement that is, asking the leaders of the community to think ahead in their planning, to prioritise the future, to think of those with no voice as yet, to focus on their children. It is a statement of hope, a statement of care, a statement of accountability.

I hope that those themes of hope, care and accountability will be at the forefront of our discussions this morning of our diocese's commitment to education. That is particularly expressed in more than 200 church schools and around 45,000 children and young people whom they serve. As our first motion points out, this is a great

missional resource for us – not simply in the sense that we can hope that some of those 45,000 will encounter the Christian faith with such joy and conviction that they make the wonderful decision to become disciples of Jesus Christ (though many do and will) but also in the sense that the wider ethos, values and spirituality which children and young people should be experiencing through a church school education will lay foundations on which they can build their lives.

If we believe, as I do, that in the Christian faith we have the surest sign of hope for our world and our society, then the prospect of introducing so many children and young people to that faith – not only as a subject to be learned but as a reality to be lived out in community – that prospect has to fill our hearts with hope.

Our investment in our church schools also shows the measure in which we care for our children and grandchildren. Ours is not an easy time to grow into adolescence and then adulthood, and young people need all the love and understanding they can find in order to be safe and to flourish in a confusing and pressurising world. We can all be immensely proud of the quality of care which so many boys, girls and young men and women receive through our church schools, and this morning's debate gives us an opportunity to affirm that.

But for the missional potential of our educational involvement to be fully unlocked, we have to acknowledge our accountability for this hugely important task – accountability in the first place to the children and young people whom we serve, and then also our accountability to one another. The structure of the educational system in modern Britain is complex in itself, and its relationship to the other aspects of our diocesan life adds another layer of complexity – or, to put it positively, more opportunities for working in partnership. So we will begin our business this morning by hearing from our Diocesan Board of Education, and from our two Multi-Academy Trusts, St Chad's and Three Spires. Then our first motion will emphasise the importance of cohesive working between schools and other forms of Christian presence: parishes, fresh expressions, chaplaincies – we could add in our Cathedral at this point too. Our second motion addresses the relationship between the Diocesan Board of Education and the Diocesan Board of Finance. That might seem a rather dry and technical question, but it is vitally important that we get this configured in the best possible way to ensure that we are all aligned together in this vital area of mission. As we are accountable to one another, we need to work hard at our relationships with one another.

We also have other important items on today's agenda. We will be hearing an update on the Shaping for Mission process which is such a crucial part of our response both to our financial challenges and to our missional opportunities. We have been brought a significant item from the West Bromwich Deanery, seeking to tighten criteria for eligibility to PCC or synod membership in terms of safeguarding checks. If we pass that

deanery motion today, it will be forwarded to General Synod for possible eventual consideration alongside motions from other Diocesan Synods. That might sound like being kicked into the long grass; but in fact it does sometimes lead to results, after a period of time. We will hear a great example of that in our General Synod report today, which will remind us that a motion from this Diocese, passed in this Synod five years ago, did eventually make it through the ecclesiastical sausage-machine to be debated at the last session of General Synod, where it was passed unanimously. That motion was about the widespread abuse of religious freedom around the world, and particularly the persecution of Christians in many countries. I am very glad that we in Lichfield have been able to bring this to people's attention. I hope that we will continue to focus our prayers and advocacy on the issue of persecution, particularly this July when the UK is scheduled to host a high-profile international Inter-Ministerial summit on Freedom of Religion or Belief.

So I look forward to our debates and discussions today, but let me first return to where I began, with the awful situation unfolding in Eastern Europe. The challenges we face are enormous, and we can feel helpless in face of such enormity. But let me share with you some words from Canon Malcolm Rogers, the Anglican Chaplain in Moscow. Four years ago, I led a group from this diocese on a pilgrimage to Russia, where we were hosted by Fr Malcolm and his congregation at St Andrew's Anglican Church, not far from the Kremlin. As you can imagine, the situation he, his people and their neighbours are facing now is extraordinarily difficult. But he sent a letter yesterday, which we hope to put soon on our diocesan website. It is a message of faith, hope and love, and it finishes with these words:

In our hubris we think that we are somebodies who can save the world – and we end up paralysed. But it is when we realise our powerlessness, that in the world's eyes we are 'nobodies', that we can begin to see the neighbour who God has given us and learn to serve them. Pray for us, for courage and wisdom and perseverance in faith and love. And we will pray for you.

Amen to that message from Moscow.