

Sunday 27 September 2015, Ely Cathedral

Bishop Stephen's sermon

We are here as one body in Christ. We are people who have participated in some way in the consultation about the strategy which we are launching today. The fact that we are all here demonstrates a readiness to be on a journey with and to Jesus our Lord. And where we are going to start this address is with those who have made a particularly lively contribution to the discussion, the children. On the theme of having the shoes for the journey, you have been given a cut-out sports shoe and flip flop. On the back of these you have written a promise to God in response what you have heard in our Bible readings.

You are taking a lead for all of us as the first members of the Body of Christ to make themselves accountable to us and each other in relation to the strategy. You have also said some great things in your responses. One of you said that we nurture healthy church by teaching people about Jesus, which I am sure that we can all agree with. In relation to re-imagining our buildings, you raised the very interesting point that only people who get asked to sit on the floor would think of advising the use of under-floor heating. Very relevant to you, too, is the insight that all ministers need to be trained to be fluent and comfortable when they talk to you and to older young people. Your teachers and parents are working hard with you to make your schools good places to learn how to believe that being the best you can be at maths, the kindest you are to other people, the fastest you can run or swim and the most attention you pay to your prayers is all one thing – it's being fully alive.

You can take big steps and have great journeys of life ahead of you; but together we are all on the greatest journey: the eighteen inches between mind and heart. The Bible tells us that the heart is the centre of all our hopes and longings.

Today we are pledging ourselves to a journey into the heart of the love and peace of Jesus.

Like the seventy sent out by Jesus in our reading from Luke 10, we are being sent out together to proclaim God's peace to those who will hear. We can only do that if we are on the way to becoming people who embody that peace in ourselves. We have to face the fact that we are caught up in extraordinary and uniquely speedy cultural change as an ageing and smaller church. We face challenges like the deployment of a diminishing resource of stipendiary clergy and how best to use the resource of our buildings and all that they represent for the people who live around them. The Emmaus Road encounter with the Risen Jesus teaches us that there is a great future, but that this will not come unless we are ready to see not only ourselves, but our communities and structures transformed in the service of the gospel.

In *Imagining the Future*, I shared the well-known adage that culture eats strategy for breakfast: reaching towards a strategy of any kind first involves reflecting on what our culture is and what our vision might be. We have so much to celebrate in where we have come from and who we already are. The external review of our fresh expressions by the Church Army revealed a vibrant pattern across the diocese and in all traditions of the Church of new ways of introducing people to the good news of Jesus. Many parishes have developed their buildings in imaginative ways to enhance hospitality and multiple community use. It is because so many of our schools take their Christian ethos so seriously that it was possible to engage so many children in the consultation about the draft strategy. It is out of who we were already that we could articulate the vision to pray to be generous and visible people of Jesus Christ. We always discover who we are in context, where we are. The consultation around the strategy has made it resoundingly clear that people want to see change, sometimes radical, but they do not want a revolution in which treasure is carelessly swept away. I agree with this

entirely. I am so thankful to God for all that you are already doing to proclaim God's kingdom.

Building on what has gone before and full of hope for the future: this is where our confidence lies. As the strategy document reminds us, we do not have to create our own identity or overcome an identity crisis: God has established us as the people of Jesus. The most important words in our vision are 'Jesus Christ' and the word, 'we'. We belong to Christ and to one another, and nothing can take that away. Everything concerns 'us', rather than 'you' or 'them'. Having a strategy is not an end in itself and neither is growth. What we are about is neither box-ticking nor hubris about numbers. It is about providing an enabling framework and measureable outcomes to make us even better prepared for God's transformation of the Church and the world. Our imperatives to engage, grow and deepen are indicators of that transformation which is happening in our midst, so that we can say with both conviction *and* evidence that the kingdom of God is very near. Shaping a strategy is not about putting up fences and patrolling them, but about sinking wells around which life gathers and flourishes. That is why 'we pray to be' generous and visible servants of the One who is the head of all. Everything is possible because God is Lord of all and sent his Son to die for us that we might live through him. The strategy is permission, not prison. It is intended to give us space and a timetable out of an understanding that God created time and space to be filled by the full wonder of creation. There are no limits to God's creative and redeeming love and no limits on what God can and will do with us and for us. In the light of this generosity, we are releasing the resources for an Ely 2025 strategic mission fund with £350,000 in it which will support new endeavours in mission and evangelism which the Synod endorses.

The resource that God seeks to use fully is us. We are faced with the profound and costly spiritual challenge to all of us to respond afresh to God's earnest call upon us as members

together in the Body of Christ. At the beginning of the strategy document we are reminded of the encounter with the Risen Jesus of Simon Peter and the other disciples on the beach in John 21. The disciples faced a choice to remain with the familiar or join anew in the adventure of faith. The invitation of Jesus is stark: do you love me and will you follow me even to the point of death? This strategy is a tool to help us avoid cheap grace and easy answers.

I have been re-reading Dietrich Bonhoeffer's book, *The Cost of Discipleship*. In the context of the fear and depravity of the culture fostered by Nazism, we see him working out the reality of true obedience to Christ, even to the point of martyrdom. He wrote: 'All those who submit themselves completely to Jesus Christ will, indeed must, bear his image. They become sons and daughters of God; they stand next to Christ, their invisible brother, who bears the same form as they do, the image of God.' We are called to live out our baptism identified with the Crucified One so that we catch the vision of the new creation. To quote the late Archbishop of Canterbury, Robert Runcie, key to our purpose is 'forming people who, however academically and technically skilful, are not reduced to inarticulate embarrassment by the great questions of life and death, meaning and truth.' We are invited to listen more deeply to God in prayer and in the reading of the Bible so that in all our churches and networks, we are living communities of the Word. However often we celebrate the Eucharist, we are changed to be God's bread for the world, blessed broken and given out. Like the seventy we are being sent out of our places of safety and to take risks for the gospel, sent by the Saviour under His sovereign purpose.

The five levers of change detailed in the strategy are there to help us take more risks and move with greater confidence and energy. We definitely need the opportunity to re-imagine our buildings and to target support where there is the greatest need and the greatest opportunity. This is very important for our stewardship and mutual care. Most of all, however, my

prayer is that the levers focus our minds on bringing people to Christ and our being formed together in his character for the roles of service and leadership, whatever our age or background. We shall be equipped to work for a blended economy of traditional parish, fresh expressions and inventive mission within new communities as our population continues to grow. As the Church of England, we have a special calling to serve the common good in every community of our region in partnership with sister churches, other faith communities and all people of good will. That good will is real and the initiative does not always have to come from us. We can be guests as well as hosts and join in wherever we see God at work.

The enacting of the strategy starts straightaway. A couple of copies of a Resource Manual for parishes will be ready for the next round of deanery gatherings with the Archdeacons. The outgoing Bishop's Council will agree an outline timeline for 2016 in early December. Also in December, work will begin on the budget for 2017 which will underpin our service. The 'why' and 'what' of the strategy are only part of the story, however. How we behave will be just as important. This whole process began with my thinking out loud about our culture. I pray that the strategy will help us to transform our culture so that we accept a new mutual accountability at every level, within parishes and deaneries, between them and support services in Ely and, not least, between Bishop David and me and all of you. I pray that this accountability will be rooted in a deep desire for each other's flourishing as disciples, families and communities, as clergy and lay colleagues. The strategy should equip us to make choices and decisions which will involve starting new things, and deliberately stopping things which have had their day. The budget process will help us be rigorous in our choices, but should also reflect the scale of our ambition under God to serve significant change and growth across the diocese.

We are called daily to respond positively with our whole heart to that question aimed at Simon Peter by Jesus: 'Do you love me?' Every day we need to hear Jesus say, 'Follow me'. We also need to be reminded that Jesus calls us to abide, to continue in his love to the very end. Ely 2025 is only one decade in whatever glorious future God has planned for His Church. But this is our time, here with Him.

Notes to Editors:

1. For further information, please contact the Diocesan Communications Manager on 01353 652728 or 07957 522178, or sarah.williams@elydiocese.org