**Monmouth Diocese**

**2021 Conference**

# Diocesan Conference Address 2021

It is said that life can feel its worst in the middle of the night; those times in the early hours of the morning when we wake and can’t get back to sleep. However hard we try, the things that we’re worried about start to prey on our mind and we lie there tossing and turning, going over and over whatever it is that’s causing us to worry.

One of the verses I turn to when that happens to me is the one from the 12th chapter of Isaiah: ‘Surely God is my salvation, I will trust and will not be afraid, for the Lord God is my strength and my might, he has become my salvation.’

I will trust and will not be afraid.

Well, never mind those times in the middle of the night, we’ve had a lot of practice over the past year in learning to trust that God is at work, even in the midst of a continuing pandemic; and of resting in God’s strength and his might. The uncertainties and the unpredictabilities that we were living with this time last year don’t feel a lot different now and, although the vaccination programme has made an enormous difference in protecting us and allowing a degree of normality to return, we still don’t know what the winter is going to bring. Some churches remain closed. If we sing our hymns and songs at all, it’s with masks on. We can still only receive the sacrament in one kind.

In all of this, I want to use this opportunity to pay tribute to the extraordinary ways in which you, the people of God, have continued to live out the good news through your worship and prayer (be that in a church building or at home), through your care for one another and your service to the communities of the diocese, and through all that you’ve done to ensure the ongoing life and witness of the local church.

I also want particularly to acknowledge the faithful ministry of the clergy and lay leaders of the diocese (and that includes out diocesan staff) who have risen so wonderfully to the many challenges we’ve faced and have gone the extra mile over and again, often to the detriment of their own well-being. It is testimony to your commitment and to the seriousness with which you take your ministry and work – and I recognize that and thank you for it.

In that short verse I’ve just quoted, Isaiah holds out a truth for us to grasp in these troubling times. ‘I will trust and will not be afraid, for the Lord God is my strength and my might.’ Trust in God forms the bedrock of our Christian faith. We learn day by day that the more we can let go and trust God, the more we are able to experience and rest in his strength and might. Even when what he asks of us seems impossible, even when what lies before us seems like a mountain to climb, even when we’re weary and feel like we’re running on empty, God remains faithful, holding us in his love and care and using us nonetheless, often in surprising and unexpected ways. For it’s his work that we’re about. We simply have to do our best and trust - and not be afraid.

One of the gospel passages I’ve been reflecting on recently demonstrates this well. It’s the story in Luke’s gospel (10: 1 – 20) of Jesus sending out 72 of his followers to the towns and villages that he intends to go to. They are sent to be heralds of the Kingdom of God, living alongside the local people, curing the sick and telling them the good news that the Kingdom of God has come near to them. The harvest is plentiful, Jesus tells them, but the labourers are few. Nevertheless they are sent, like lambs in the midst of wolves, to do as Jesus commands them. And they go.

We might imagine ourselves to be amongst those early followers, for we too have been sent; into the villages and hamlets of Monmouthshire, into the towns and communities set in the valleys, into the city of Newport and the urban and suburban sprawls along the M4 corridor. We’re sent to prepare the ground for Jesus to be welcomed. We’re called to go and to live alongside the local people, curing the sick and telling them the good news in all that we say and do: preparing the way so that those we live alongside might be ready and open to receive Jesus into their lives when the time comes. That is our task. That is our calling.

But there’s more. Carry no purse, no bag, no sandals, Jesus tells them, and don’t allow yourselves to be distracted as you go. As one observer has remarked, this is more than travelling light. This is feels like being stripped bare. They’re to take nothing with them. No resources whatsoever. Rather, they are to depend on the resources that God provides, the hospitality and gifts of others.

It’s hard to feel resourceless and not to have with us the things we think we need. It’s tempting to feel that we could do so much more if only we had more resources – more money, more clergy, more in our congregations. And perhaps we could. But Jesus sent the 72 out with nothing except, that is, for their faith and trust in him, to proclaim and share with those amongst whom they’d been sent. It’s interesting to note that later in the passage, we read of the 72 returning to Jesus with joy saying, ‘Lord, in your name, even the demons submit to us!’ God had blessed them in their work. Even without any resources, the Kingdom of God had come near.

But Jesus himself was well aware that his disciples wouldn’t find a welcome everywhere they go, and he prepares them for this. ‘Whenever you enter a town’, he tells them, ‘and they do not welcome you, go out into the streets and say, “Even the dust of your town that clings to our feet, we wipe off in protest against you.” And then comes the important bit: ‘Yet know this; the Kingdom of God has come near.’ It’s not dependent on what we might see as success.

God is at work even when it seems that the message we bring of the good news of Jesus has been rejected. God is at work in our towns and cities, our villages and hamlets, even though the number meeting faithfully for worship is small. God is able to work with us and through us even though, in human terms at least, we have so few resources. ‘Yet know this; the Kingdom of God has come near.’ Our task is simply to be faithful in preparing the way and allow God to use us as he will.

Later this morning, we’re going to be discussing five themes that lie at the heart of our Christian faith and which will help shape a vision for our life together as a diocesan family. They map quite well onto the five marks of mission that the Church in Wales along with the rest of the world-wide Anglican Communion is committed to and which reflect the Communion’s understanding of God’s mission to the world. They’re about **t**elling the Good News, **t**eaching the faith, **t**ending to human need, **t**ransforming society and **t**reasuring creation.

Hopefully, our discussions today will explore possibilities and generate ideas around how we focus our work and the resources we have, at local and diocesan level, to respond to the needs of the church and the world in the coming years. I’m not going to pre-empt those discussions by exploring them now, but I do trust that everyone will feel able to contribute enthusiastically and share your thoughts and ideas, your hopes and dreams. We need to hear everyone’s voice.

In this group work that’s going to take place after the break, I invite you to have, as a backcloth, the words and the image that are behind me here. It’s the image that’s on all the conference paperwork and the image that’s going to frame our life over the coming years. It’s simple and yet it says some fundamental things about what the Church as the people of God, and therefore we as the Diocese of Monmouth, are about.

The words, Faith in our Future, proclaim that fundamental trust in the grace and mercy of God. Christians are called to have faith, not because of ourselves or anything we can do, but because of God and all that God has already done for us. We have faith because of God’s faithfulness to us, demonstrated from the beginning of time when God spoke and all that is came into being, and on through God’s saving work as recorded in our scriptures. God’s faithfulness is proclaimed endlessly from the earliest chapters of the bible and has been taken up in hymns and songs, prayers and liturgies ever since. At its heart is the death and resurrection of Jesus, picked up in our image in the two t’s that are there as crosses. The cross stands as the pivotal moment of our salvation history and so has, for centuries, been the central symbol of the Christian faith.

We have faith in our future because of God’s faithfulness through time and eternity, both of which he holds in his hands. In the poverty of our nature, we discover the riches of his grace. In our weakness and inadequacies, we find his strength made perfect. In our sorrow and despair, our pain and anguish, we’re held in his love and can, in his mercy find peace; even joy and hope.

The tree and its multicoloured fruits might also remind us of a number of the rich images that we find in our scriptures. We might think of the words of the psalmist in the first of the psalms, describing those who delight in the law of the Lord as being ‘like trees planted by streams of water which yield their fruit in its season and their leaves do not wither.’ (Psalm 1:1-3) Encouraging us to root ourselves deeply in the water of life and find ourselves sustained, even in the hardest of times.

We might remember Jesus’s parable of the mustard seed which, ‘when it is sown on the ground is the smallest of all the seeds on earth, yet when it is sown it grows up and becomes the greatest of all shrubs and puts forth large branches so that the birds of the air can make nests in its shade.’ (Mark 4:30 – 32) A reminder of what God can do with us even when our faith is small.

Or we might think of the cross itself – the tree on which Jesus died and the fruits of salvation that we enjoy as a result.

The fruits on the tree themselves also reflect a number of key themes running through our faith story. There are the fruits of the spirit that are listed in Pauls’ letter to the Galatians: love, joy, peace, patience, kindness, generosity, faithfulness, gentleness and self-control. All those fruits that we demonstrate in our lives as we live in the spirit of Christ.

The different colours and sizes of the fruits might suggest to us the diversity of God’s creation. Perhaps a recognition that humanity is made up of people of all sorts of shapes and sizes and colours, and that we seek to be a church that reflects all that diversity.

You’ll perhaps have noticed that the colours are the colours of the rainbow, reminding us of that wonderful story in the 9th chapter of Genesis (9: 8-17) after the great flood had subsided. Then, God said to Noah, ‘This is the sign of the covenant that I make between me and you and every living creature that is with you for all future generations. I have set my bow in the clouds and it shall be a sign of the covenant between me and the earth.’

All this, and perhaps more, can be seen in the image in front of you and it provides a rich back-cloth against which to pray and to plan, to worship and to work, to witness and to serve. You will be seeing a lot of it from now on and I commend it to you as a resource for prayer as well as discussion.

It is highly likely that we have another challenging year ahead of us. But the pandemic has brought with it opportunities as well as challenges; opportunities to do things differently, as we’ve proved we can do; to lay aside the things that no longer give life or bear fruit; to take stock and not go back unthinkingly to how it was, but to listen and discern what God is asking of us in this season. But whatever the year holds for us, as individuals, as congregations, as a diocesan family, let us hold on to the faith that says,

‘Surely, God is my salvation; I will trust and will not be afraid, for the Lord God is my strength and my might; he has become my salvation.’