**Presidential Address September 25th 2021:**

I want to let you into a secret at the very start of this new Synod: unequivocally and unapologetically I believe in God! Jesus Christ is risen from the dead, so, as I said at my service of welcome, with God all things are possible. And they are. They really are.

This morning I want to share with you a vision of the Church in Cornwall. It’s a very timely thing to do at the start of a new Synod. And it’s a very timely thing to do because of where we are currently in our life together as a Diocese, for reasons I’ll explain later. It’s a vision firmly founded in my belief in God; in the risen reigning Lord Jesus Christ.

I want to be clear in sharing this vision that it *is* my vision for the Church in Cornwall, but it is not *only* my vision, and it is not in origin my vision at all. It’s also quite an old vision. The version I’m going to show you dates from 1980, although in truth the vision it expresses is centuries older than that.

And having, I hope, sufficiently whetted your appetite let me share that vision with you. It’s a vision that you’re probably already very familiar with. It’s John Miller’s painting "Cornubia, Land of the Saints", painted in 1980 to celebrate our Cathedral's centenary. Not only do we see heavenly light pouring down upon our Cathedral, but we see it pouring down and illuminating all our ancient parish churches: from Morwenstow to Sennen; from Scilly to Rame; from St. Michael’s Mount to Virginstow; from Fowey to Padstow and all points in between. Each and every church is a point of light, and a source of light therefore to the community to which it is called and which it is called to serve.

That is not just John Miller’s vision of the Church in Cornwall. That is my vision and my desire too: each of our churches both bathed in heavenly light and love and sharing that light and love with its community.

It’s because that is my vision that one of the five priorities in our diocesan vision document The Saints’ Way is that we should be ‘a Church that is confident in its calling’. That perhaps needs some unpacking, but it is a priority wholly in keeping with this image. Like all the five priorities in TSW this priority goes back to the day in June 2018 when I was interviewed to be Bishop of Truro, and this is what I said that day:

*I want to see every church in the Diocese flourish. I believe in the ministry of the parish church, I’ve devoted many years of my life to it, and I want to see each and every one renewed and revitalised in discipleship, evangelism, growth, service, confidence, hope and love – because it’s just wonderful when that happens.*

And I repeat every one of those words to you today.

So just to unpack that a little further, when I talk about us being ‘a Church that is confident in its calling’, yes, of course I mean us as a diocese, and I also mean deaneries, but in particular I mean our parish churches: those beacons of light and love in John Miller’s picture. This is about our churches knowing just how they can be those beacons of light and love; knowing just what they are called to be and to do – which also incidentally liberates them from what they are *not* called to be and to do. It’s about knowing what their particular calling is for them in their place, in their parish – whether that’s to focus on families, or the elderly, or schools, or to embrace in all its fulness one tradition or another; or to serve the poor and those on the margins; or to plant new worshipping communities – or any combination of the above. It’s about not looking enviously or with superiority at the church down the road, but knowing God’s calling for you in *this* place, in *this* parish, and responding to it faithfully and joyfully.

We’re used to talking about vocation and calling in a personal sense, but I think there’s no reason at all why we shouldn’t talk about those same things in a plural sense. Indeed I think there’s every reason why we *should*. Again to quote what I said at interview:

*Fundamentally this is all about churches ‘noticing’ - noticing who we are, where we are, who we are amongst, what God is doing here, and then discerning what part he is calling us to play – that’s to say it’s a process of paying attention, and of paying attention to our God above all. So it must be a fundamentally prayerful process.*

Well of course I said all that some time ago, and before the pandemic hit. But I don’t think that as a consequence this imperative for churches to discern their God-given calling, and for us to do so together, has become any less urgent. Quite the opposite in fact. It’s become far more so. It’s become far more so because I think the parish church today is under real threat. The key threats it faces are these – and these will be very familiar to you: an aging demographic (and this diocese has the oldest average congregations of any diocese in the C of E); declining congregations; the burden of maintaining buildings; the struggle to engage with missing generations, and declining income (and this diocese experienced a sharper fall in income during the pandemic than any other diocese in the C of E). Those are real and serious threats which require real and serious responses. They are real and serious threats which threaten this vision of the land of the saints.

But as soon as I’ve said that I do want to say that I’m certainly not blaming anyone for this sate of affairs. This is really no one’s fault. The forces that have led to this state of affairs have been in play for at least 150 years. This is nothing new even if the pandemic has exacerbated the issues. So I really do not want any of us to feel guilty or anxious about any of this. These are real challenges we must take very seriously. But we are not to blame for them. We really aren’t. We live in difficult and challenging times, but it’s no one’s fault that we do so. It’s not my fault and it’s certainly not yours.

Now some of you will be aware of the ‘Save the Parish’ movement which was launched in August. It was launched to counter what its organisers perceive to be a centralised plan to do away with the parish system. Bishop Hugh and I wrote to the clergy of the Diocese about it at the time and this is what we said: *We want to assure you that there is no central plan to undermine the parish system or to side-line the ministry of clergy. (And even if there were nationally, there would not be in this diocese!)* And nor is there any such plan.

But my concern with the ‘Save the Parish’ movement is not principally that it is reacting to what I believe to be a non-existing threat; I’m much more concerned that it might distract us from those very real threats that I mentioned just now. And we just cannot afford to be so distracted. By contrast the ‘On the Way’ process we’ve been rolling out across the Diocese – coming soon to a deanery near you if it hasn’t already – is a genuine attempt to help deaneries and their churches discern the call of God for this next season of their life together. It’s designed to help us do that ‘noticing’ I spoke of just now – which is why so much of the process is devoted to prayer and the study of scripture so that our discerning of our God-given call can be genuine; so we can both address those challenges we face and enter into the future our God has for us, a future that is both fruitful and sustainable – for it must be both if that vision is to become reality.

And that sustainability is really important. Yes, we must be visionary, and we must be realistic too, and that must include financial realism. We must live within our means and not beyond them. We have to face the fact that while some deaneries have done some significant hard work of matching resources to clergy numbers, for which they deserve real thanks, in many deaneries in this diocese pre-pandemic costs of ministry (the vast bulk of which is clergy housing and stipend) outstripped their MMF contributions by some way – in some cases by very large sums indeed. Again I don’t want to attribute blame - but equally we must recognise that that is simply not a sustainable situation. None of us would imagine that such a huge shortfall between income and expenditure would be acceptable in a business or in a family’s finances. None of us would see that as acceptable in the finances of a parish. Nor is it acceptable situation in the life of our diocese. And I would be failing in my duty if I did not ensure we addressed it. And of course in that context we are looking at central diocesan costs as well.

Let me make three further points about our being confident in the call of God.

First of all, a key test of whether our parish churches have truly discerned the call of God will be whether their mission and ministry is truly shaped by and for the context in which God has placed them – because that is what true parish ministry is all about. And I absolutely believe that mission and ministry in the Cornish context must be holistic: the church needs to be good news for individuals, communities, society, for Cornwall as a whole and for the planet. So we must address both environmental issues and the deep issues of deprivation and marginalisation Cornwall faces which, with the current housing crisis, are only getting sharper: our churches must be good news for the poor, or they will not be good news at all. That’s why we’re working hard to ensure that our Lowest Income Communities Funding grant really does go to supporting the poorest communities. Being properly shaped by and for our parish contexts is a vital part of that fruitfulness I spoke of earlier.

Secondly I think we need to avoid false binaries and not set things apart that properly belong together. The ‘Save the Parish’ movement has been quite critical of pioneering and the church-planting movement and initiatives such as Transforming Mission in this diocese. But I really don’t think we need or should put these things in opposition one to another. I am quite content that in this diocese we should have those twin commitments in The Saints Way *both* to having parish churches that are confident in their calling, *and* to unashamedly embracing an innovative, pioneering culture. These things can not only co-exist but enjoy a really fruitful relationship, and lead to real fruitfulness. There are plenty of parish churches across the diocese doing exciting innovative things; most pioneering takes place in the parish; our TM initiatives are all based in parish churches, and indeed, ultimately, all our parish churches were founded by pioneering people many of which are still named after them. We must certainly be wary of ever letting ‘parish’ become shorthand for ‘traditional’ and ‘unchanging’: that would be a travesty of the reality.

Thirdly if our parish churches are truly not only to discern but to be obedient to God’s calling on them that will require a particular model of ministry. We will not begin to be obedient to that call if we think that everything depends on the clergy and we look to them to do everything. If God’s calling on us is corporate then it requires the whole body of Christ in that place, in that parish, to respond to that calling. But that does not mean that priestly ministry somehow becomes less important. Quite the contrary in fact. A key priestly function is to help each member of the body of Christ discern their own calling and to enter into it. In that sense clergy are certainly not a ‘limiting factor’, to use a recent controversial phrase. Rather they are an essential *enabling* factor. I cannot envisage a fruitful sustainable ministry in our parish churches without our clergy exercising priestly ministry, as well as exercising oversight over the whole body, whilst also supporting and sustaining it from underneath. Such ordained ministry is essential if the whole Body of Christ in that place is to be obedient to its God-given calling, and fruitful in following it. Again this is not ‘either / or’: it must be ‘both / and’.

In the same way if I want to see more and more people enter into some form of recognised ministry in our churches - and I do and we are actively working on ways we can make that happen though a an innovative project called Sens Kernewek, or Cornish Saints which Hugh and wrote to clergy about this week: if I want to see more and more people enter into some form of recognised ministry in our churches it is not because I don’t value the ministry of those who are already exercising such ministry, such as our Readers or our Local Worship Leaders or indeed our clergy. Quite the contrary: it’s precisely because I *value* such ministry that I want to see more of it.

And in the same vein I haven’t changed our policy to allow Communion by Extension because I don’t value priestly ministry – I’ve done it so more people can *benefit* from that ministry.

I feel in some ways we stand at something of a crossroads. Those threats to the parish I mentioned earlier are very real. The post-pandemic world – if indeed we are post-pandemic – is a strange place which will take some getting used to. There is a real fragility and shakiness in the life of many of our churches. I said to someone back in the summer, ‘If I didn’t believe in God I’d be pretty pessimistic about the future of the Church’.

But as I said at the beginning: I do believe in God! Jesus Christ is risen from the dead, so, as I said at my service of welcome, with God all things are possible. And they are. They really are. So I do believe this vision can be our reality; that vision of each and all of our churches being fruitful and sustainable; both bathed in heavenly light and love and sharing that light and love with its community. That can indeed, under God, be our reality – indeed why should we not hope and pray to see many more such lights lit?