

Bishop Michael Presidential Address Diocesan Synod 16 March 2024

It's wonderful to be with you for our first Diocesan Synod of 2024.

Each year in our diocese we choose a passage of scripture that we draw on throughout the twelve months as a common thread that resources our prayer, our thinking, our discernment of all that God is calling us to be and do. The passage is often used as we 'dwell in the Word' at the beginning of meetings and discussions. And it can be used in services of worship and other formats too.

This year, our passage is the words of Mary contained in the first chapter of Luke's Gospel verses 46 to 55. These are commonly called the Magnificat and are of extraordinary significance in our Christian faith and tradition. They're words that are said every day at evening prayer. They have shaped Christian thought and social action down the centuries.

And they resonate strongly with us here in our Bath & Wells through our commitment to the Magnificat parishes of our diocese. Let's listen to them now:

46 And Mary said,
'My soul magnifies the Lord,
47 and my spirit rejoices in God my Saviour,
48 for he has looked with favour on the lowliness of his servant.
Surely, from now on all generations will call me blessed;
49 for the Mighty One has done great things for me,
and holy is his name.
50 His mercy is for those who fear him
from generation to generation.
51 He has shown strength with his arm;
he has scattered the proud in the thoughts of their hearts.
52 He has brought down the powerful from their thrones,
and lifted up the lowly;
53 he has filled the hungry with good things,
and sent the rich away empty.
54 He has helped his servant Israel,
in remembrance of his mercy,
55 according to the promise he made to our ancestors,
to Abraham and to his descendants for ever.'

As I've reflected on where we are at the beginning of 2024, and on all that we will discuss at today's meeting, I've been thinking about some of the things that the Magnificat might be saying to us today. I'd like to use my presidential address this morning to offer you some perspectives that might shape and frame our time together here at St Paul's this morning.

Firstly, what does the Magnificat tell us about God and our relationship with the Lord? I'm often privileged to spend time in discussion with sixth formers about questions of religion and philosophy. Sometimes in those discussions I'm presented with ideas that speak about God as being all powerful, everywhere present, all knowing.

Such thoughts are often accompanied by a sense that while such a God might have set the earth and the universe on their way – that's about it. A Greek philosopher's God doesn't need us or have much to do with us.

Mary's words turn such a sterile, cold idea of God on their head. She sings of a God who's powerfully involved in every detail of our lives. Mary's God positively invites Mary's contribution. 'My soul magnifies the Lord' she sings. Such words would make no sense if they related to a God who in infinity and perfection had no need of us. Our God is involved. Supremely in Jesus who through the cooperation of Mary became one of us. So I ask you as we meet together this morning. Are we expecting God to turn up here? To inform our conversation? Needing our contribution? Inviting us to bring about God's preferred future?

Lest we get overly cocky Mary's words are a very down to earth reminder that thankfully God's involvement and invitation to us don't rely on any especial qualities that we may or may not have. 'For he has regarded the lowliness of his handmaiden' sings Mary. Think about the girl who offers these words. She's probably about thirteen or fourteen. She may well be illiterate. Nothing is said about her particular brilliance or powers of thought, creativity or wisdom. She's a perfectly ordinary first century young woman living in an obscure village in an outpost of the Roman Empire. Lowliness isn't Mary being humble. It's objective description of fact. Yet within this girl God's comes to life and she brings to birth the one who will change the world and the universe forever. And how does Mary enable this? She says 'Yes' and then spends the rest of her days living into that affirmation.

What will our word be to God today as we consider all that's coming up at our meeting. Will it be a 'yes' to God? Or will offer words of uncertainty, fear, doubt, anxiety, prevarication, - all the things that Mary might have spoken?

For what's so immensely striking in Mary's song is the tense she uses and the faith she has. Listen to the words of the Magnificat once again. 'For the mighty one **has** done great things for me.' Past tense. Not he might, or he will, or it's probable that he will do great things for me. Mary sings of God that he has done great things for me. And this is before her baby is born in a world where colossal percentages of women died in childbirth and where so many children didn't make it to the age of five. Mary has so much faith in the God of whom she sings that she accounts his future actions as being already in the bag.

Will we bring such faith to our discussions today? The past tense forward looking faith that can say in advance of any of this happening that racial justice has flowed in our churches like rivers making us houses of prayer for all nations. That we have grown and flourished so that we have gone out from our churches and transformed the communities in which we live. That we have found within ourselves deep wells of generosity and creativity that have put our diocese onto a sustainable footing, able to carry the precious message of the Gospel to generations to come.

The final challenge of Mary's words that I'd like to share today concerns who we think we are, and what our future might be. The culture in which we currently live invites all of us consistently to claim ourselves as hard done to, on the receiving end, got at by forces and interests which don't have our good in mind.

In her song, Mary names quite a number of different groups of people – the proud, the mighty, the humble and meek, the hung, the rich. With which of these do we identify? Who do we think we are? Do we always see ourselves as among the good guys -those that Mary says will be lifted up? Or do we recognise that there are times when we need to understand ourselves as being among the others that Mary mentions. Whichever way we look at it what Mary tells us to expect is disturbance that leads to change, discomfort, alteration – the radical inbreaking of the life of God's kingdom into our lives and into the world we inhabit.

Are we ready for God's disturbance today – be we the humble and meek, or the mighty in our seats? Or are we strapped into our harnesses, wired into our chairs, determined that nothing and no one is going to shift us from what we think and where we are?

I hope that all of us will be ready for the wave of God's spirit to lift us, turn us upside down, fling us into receiving the promises of God that Mary tells us will be ours.

It's great to be with you. We've lots to discuss and think about together. Let's crack on with the day.

Bishop Michael