Rural Gems – keynote address.

Bishop of Leicester

Identity - who are we as a diocese? There are multiple layers.

Who are we as a diocese?

320 churches + 60FX + 97 schools + chaplaincies

Ask any one of our 17000 worshipping community + thousands more in schools, chaplaincies, baptisms, weddings, funerals and other events – you’ll get different answer.

Multiple layers to our identity.

Add in variety of contexts - hamlets and villages, former coal mining communities, market towns, university town.

Who are we - not an easy question to answer.

Today is all about a shift in our self-understanding.

The narrative given to me before I came here, was all about our multifaith work, football, rugby, King Richard III, Walkers crisps & Attenborough family. No mention of rural - beauty, rich traditions (bottle kicking in Hallerton!), its beers, wines, ciders, gins (sampled this last week) and its rare breeds - the Leicester Longwool sheep and the Leicestershire longhorn cattle (not to mention the lesser spotted clergy of Framland Deanery - thankfully now revived!)

We are predominantly a rural diocese - important part of identity - needs to be integral to our self-understanding, woven into all our structures and processes and procedures and central to decision making.

Emphasising one part of identity does not mean down downplaying another part. Rather this is about highlighting that we need each other - rural needs urban, suburban needs market town - we are one church and we need each other.

At a deeper level, who are we?

Psalm 23 - pslam of trust and dependence.

1. **We are a people who acknowledge God as the shepherd - the shepherd who leads us to green pastures.**

In the Old Testament, shepherd = king; we are not just about buildings or institution but about a people shaped by God, acknowledging God as shepherd and king.

A shepherd cares, protects, nurtures and provides.

I love the picture of green pastures in the Psalm - picked up by the Rural Commission: deep wells and green pastures - speaks of resources we all need for life, resources many people in society are hungry for - resources of spirituality / prayer.

Next year - start of 900th anniversary of Launde Abbey - incredible to think people have been praying and living a life of deep commitment on this site. If you haven't been for a retreat, or taken your church for a retreat, please go – this is one of the deep wells of our diocese.

Last week - group of churches did “St Wistan's pilgrimage” - ancient Mercian saint thought to have been martyred in Wistow church. Rediscovering the ancient practice of pilgrimage as a way to go deeper in discipleship.

So excited about the Community of the Tree of Life – a deep well for the whole diocese - heart of city but linking rural and urban.

These are just some of the green pastures and deep wells which God is leading us to - please draw on them for yourself and your church, and offer them to others in your communities.

1. **We are a people on a journey, a people who journey with God.**

Psalm of rest / trust but combined with movement - "Yea, though I walk through the valley of the shadow of death, I will fear no evil: for thou art with me, thy rod and staff they comfort me."

Change is hard, can make us fearful - but it is part of life and part of journeying with God.

Commission reminded us that shepherd in Middle East must move sheep to find new pasture (very different from our own green fields).

Intriguing phrase in psalm - shadow of death - shadows cannot hurt you - shadow is nothing but a reduction of light. Those who walk with God, walk in light - no fear.

Change in rural life does not mean closure of churches - very clear, no fear - but it does mean that we need to be creative in reimagining how churches work in rural areas.

Love examples on display today - true rural gems - from barefoot walks, to café church, to Messy Church, to new ways of celebrating the seasons and helping people celebrate special moments in their lives - lots of creativity on display.

This is the journey - God is equipping us (“his rod and staff, they comfort me”) and he is leading us.

1. **We are a people who have been generously welcomed by God, and therefore we offer generous welcome to others.**

You prepare a table before me

in the presence of my enemies.

You anoint my head with oil;

my cup overflows.

Surely your goodness and love will follow me

all the days of my life,

and I will dwell in the house of the Lord

forever.

We don't do these things for ourselves alone - yes, we need the resources God provides through prayer, worship, hearing God's word, receiving God's sacraments, and yes, we must be creative in adapting to the changes going on around us - but "From everyone who has been given much, much will be demanded". As God has been generous to us, so we must be generous to all around us.

Our buildings are not our own - they belong to the whole community and must be used for the good of the whole community.

Our finances are not our own - they belong to God and must be shared generously with those in need.

We are not our own - we belong to God, our Creator, Redeemer and Sustainer - and every baptised Christian is called to offer themselves in service to God and to others.

And when our churches are shaped by the generosity and hospitality of God, we can be sure that others will be attracted.

So who are we?

Yes, 380 churches, 97 church schools, chaplaincies - but these numbers only tell part of the story. We are diverse - it all sorts of ways.

But at our core, we are a people who acknowledge God as shepherd, we are a people on a journey, and we are a people who have been generously welcomed by God, and therefore we offer generous welcome to others.

Let's pray for our communities - bless them in Jesus' name - and pray that God our Shepherd would lead us on to pastures new.