**Bishop Martyn’s Presidential Address at Diocesan Synod 15/3/23**

*Hebrews 6:19-20 We have this hope, a sure and steadfast anchor of the soul, a hope that enters the inner shrine behind the curtain,****20****where Jesus, a forerunner on our behalf, has entered, having become a high priest forever according to the order of Melchizedek.*

During the last few months I have felt the weight of this office more than at any other time during my nearly ten years as a bishop. More so even than during the ravages of the Pandemic, and more so than when I was Bishop of Tewkesbury and found myself with less than 24 hours’ notice made Acting Bishop of Gloucester. In both these instances, there was a strong sense of a diocese pulling together to face common challenges. The last few months, it’s felt like we’re being pulled apart.

Yet I want to be clear that I am not laying the blame for this at the feet of any one person or group of people. The *Living in Love and Faith* process has in fact revealed deep fault lines which existed already - fault lines around our interpretation of Scripture, fault lines around the place of experience in theological reflection, fault lines around anthropology – our understanding of what it means to be human, and fault lines around our ecclesiology, and what it means to be church (and I could add the role of bishops within the church). All these fault lines have been around for a very long time, but LLF has brought them to the surface, and left many of us, myself included, wrestling with deep, personal, vocational questions.

However, it is important for us all to recognise that this is not going to change anytime soon. Whatever is decided about the Prayers of Love and Faith which are currently being redrafted, and whatever is included in the Pastoral Guidance, which will be written ahead of the July General Synod, the fault lines will still exist. I say this, because the question of same-sex blessings and marriage is simply the presenting issue. Fast on its heals will come questions about Artificial Intelligence – what does it mean to be human when Chatbot GPT can write your sermons for you, and your smart TV is listening to every word you say? What emphasis do we give to experience when we see our elderly relative suffering and saying to us ‘I just want to die’. And how do we interpret scripture when we go on destroying the planet, or exploiting the economically poor in direct contravention of the, seemingly, clear teaching of scripture. And alongside all of these complex questions, is the practical one: are we as a church to fragment into ever smaller units as we disagree on each of these issues?

*Yet we have this hope, a sure and steadfast anchor of the soul.*

My friends, if our faith is in the church, we will of course feel let down – perhaps bitterly let down - by recent events. We are a human institution with all sorts of failings. We got it wrong over safeguarding, over women in leadership, over racial justice. Our efforts on climate change, or poverty, or discipleship among children and young people are frankly quite pitiful. And the list could go on. And we’ve been divided over all sorts of issues – as one person commented to me recently, it wasn’t all that long ago that we were burning each other at the stake. So if we are simply a human institution, there isn’t much hope for us.

*Yet we have this hope, a sure and steadfast anchor of the soul.*

The hope of which the writer to the Hebrews speaks, this anchor of the soul, is that Jesus entered the inner shrine behind the curtain… a forerunner on our behalf. This person Jesus, who got tired and hungry just as we do, this human, was also able to open the way for us into the holy of holies, the presence of God. In Him, the human and divine were brought together, so that we might have hope, a hope which anchors us in the storm, a hope which enables us to see beyond all the human failings of the church and believe that we are still the bride of Christ, the temple of God, the family of God. So just as we believe in the incarnation – the human and divine coming together in the person of Jesus Christ – so also we believe in the one, holy, catholic and apostolic church, made up of wheat and tares together, living as pilgrims in a foreign land but with the hope that we are citizens of heaven.

I may be naïve, as I said at General Synod, in thinking that it is possible to hold these all these things together. And while I am too weak to hold such tensions personally, I believe it is my calling as a bishop to continually hold this hope before you. Christ has opened the way for us into the holy of holies. Each one of us, with all our failings and weaknesses is invited into the holy of holies because of Christ’s death on the cross and his resurrection. So we do not lose hope. And we do not give up on the church, however weak and fragile she may be.

We debated long and hard whether to include *Living in Love and Faith* on today’s agenda. It was the major item at our last two meetings, should we really spend more time on it? And for anyone who sat through the eight-hour debate at General Synod, it really was quite depressing. And we know that feelings are running high - how can we possibly make this a safe space for people to speak freely after all we’ve been through?

The answer is that we have to commit to trying to make this a hope-filled conversation. Each one of us has to make the choice.We could spend the next hour recounting all that is wrong with the church and all that frustrates us and makes us fearful. Or we could decide to model what the church is called to be – a fellowship of grace where we seek to show the same humility that Christ had, recognising that there are no easy answers to our disagreements – if there were we would have found them a long time ago – but the challenge for us now is to decide how to live with difference.

So today we’d like to give you the opportunity of sharing your response to the General Synod vote in favour of continuing the Living in Love and Faith process. We’re not making any decisions today, and the aim of this discussion is simply for you to have your say and to feel heard. Bishop Saju and I, together with the Bishop’s Leadership Team and the Bishop’s Council need to hear your reflections as we consider the future of the diocese. We don’t yet know what all this will mean for the roll out of our Minster Community Framework, for the work of our five priority areas – new communities, intercultural, intergenerational, eco and reconciling communities. We don’t know what impact it will have on our finances, or our vocations work or our training and support work. I suspect that in some way, all these things will be affected, but for now, we want to listen and to pray, and to take our time before rushing to any conclusions.

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And may the God of hope, fill us with all joy and peace in believing.