



Rt Rev Stephen Wright

Bishop of Hexham & Newcastle

Pastoral Letter for the 27th Sunday of the Year

Dear Sisters and Brothers in Christ,

In our Second Reading today St. Paul writes:

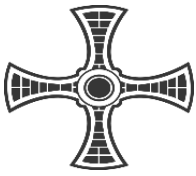
Keep doing all the things that you learnt from me and have been taught by me and have heard or seen that I do. Then the God of peace will be with you. (Philippians 4:9)

His words to the Church in Philippi ring true through the ages to our Church in Hexham and Newcastle. St. Paul was confident his way was the Lord's way. We may fall short of St. Paul's confidence, but the mark of any Christian is that their way is the Lord's way. St Paul advises us to pray for our needs with thanksgiving, filling our minds with all that is true, noble, good and pure. We should be full of all that we love and honour, what is virtuous and worthy of praise. Then the gift of the Lord's peace will be with us. Our First Reading and the Gospel give us stark imagery of what happens when our way is not the Lord's way. The Lord's vineyard, His Church, no longer produces good fruit. The peace of God is not present.

It is just over two months since my Installation Mass. In my Homily I shared my prayer that the peace of the Lord would be with us all. I preached that we are all agents of that peace. We can choose or not choose to accept and live out the true peace that only God can offer us. "Peace be with you" remains my prayer. For that peace to be present our minds and hearts and our words and actions must be like Christ's. I also explained that I wanted to get out and about and visit all our parishes, schools and communities. I asked for invitations. I am very grateful that I have received so many. It has been my joy to begin to visit and get to know the parishes, schools and communities that make up our vibrant and diverse diocesan family. It will take me months to visit everywhere but that is my intention. I have much to learn but I am learning very quickly of your welcome and hospitality, your humour and faithfulness. I am seeing how the Lord is very much alive in you all. The vineyard that is our Diocese is producing so much good fruit.

My appointment came when Archbishop Malcolm had initiated several listening exercises across the Diocese. These have involved the lay faithful, priests and deacons and curial employees. I wish to update you about those. They have not been forgotten. Indeed, they have been graced moments for many who have shared their hurt about past events and used the sessions constructively to reflect on life in our Diocese. Not all the listening exercises have been completed yet. I have asked that they are all completed by the end of October so that a comprehensive summary may be provided to me. Then working with those who arranged the exercises, I will respond to what has been listened to and share that response with you all. I will seek the advice of those who organised the exercises on both the methodology and the content of the response. I have respected the processes set up for each listening exercise and their differing confidentiality. I will continue to do so.

Alongside these listening exercises, there was a Questionnaire sent out for the preparation of the Dicastery for Bishops' Report. Archbishop Malcolm stated that a summary of the Questionnaire Responses would be shared. I will respect that undertaking. I have asked to have that summary completed by the end of October so that it can be included in the reporting back to the whole Diocese. I am sorry these listening exercises arose out of hurt however they have been a graced



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time of accompaniment and listening. They will lead to discernment and will no doubt serve us well for the future life of the Diocese.

Archbishop Malcolm explained that after this first series of listening exercises there would be a second series focusing on the future life of the Diocese. He indicated they would begin in October. That timeline is no longer realistic. With others, I wish to reflect on the method, the content and the purpose of a second series of listening exercises, which I suggest would be in the New Year or Spring. My initial thoughts are guided by Pope Francis' invitation for us to reflect on our dreams for our parishes, schools and communities. Being very English, I used to recoil at the language of dreams, but it works. If we discern what is our dream for our parish it gives us a vision for the future. We must then reflect on how we can work towards that vision given the realities we face. My initial dream is joyful, vibrant, welcoming communities across our Diocese, inviting and allowing people to have encounters with the Lord. Communities that evangelise, that catechise, that form us all to be the Lord's Missionary Disciples, that care for our Common Home with pastoral care for those in need and care for the environment. My dream is communities seeking to grow and bringing that growth about. Communities that have a special care for outreach to families, in all their forms, and to the young present in our schools and beyond. We must never forget parishes exist to invite and welcome others to them. If parishes only ever look in on themselves then they will die out. We often speak about "running our parishes." A better and more challenging term is "growing our parishes." As all gardeners know, sometimes we have to prune to ensure healthy growth. Given resources now and for the future, pruning may have to be part of our discernment. I share my initial dreams or vision if you prefer. You will have your dreams and vision too. I want to discern them with you as part of the second listening exercises. There is evidently so much good going on already.

In Rome the Synod of Bishops on Synodality is taking place. We pray it will bear much fruit for the worldwide church. Pope Francis gave us all a simple image of the church being synodal. It means we walk with the Lord just as the disciples on the Road to Emmaus walked with the risen Lord. Synodality is about encountering the Lord, walking with Him, taking time and listening to Him. On the road to Emmaus the disciples were initially downcast, without hope. They felt let down by the Lord as they had witnessed His crucifixion. They were disbelieving about the rumours of His resurrection. They failed to recognise Jesus. Even so they poured out their hearts to Him. It was not until the end of the day when their eyes were finally opened as Jesus broke the bread. The Lord had been with them all day. "Did not our hearts burn as he explained the scriptures to us," the disciples say. Jesus leaves and the disciples return to Jerusalem now fit for mission. We may identify with the disciples. They move from hurt to being ready for mission. We may be at different stages on that journey. We all walk with the Lord at different paces. The reassurance is that the Lord never leaves us. Jesus says to us all:

Keep doing all the things that you learnt from me and have been taught by me and have heard or seen that I do. Then the God of peace will be with you. (Philippians 4:9)

That is my prayer, that is my dream for us all. I look forward to meeting you all.

Stephen

God bless,
+ Stephen