

Bearers of Life



By the Bishop of Coventry

The purpose of the Church has been the same for 2000 years. In the Diocese of Coventry, we put like this – since well before I arrived – we are called to:

- Worship God
- Make new disciples, and
- Transform communities

That's why we exist – that's why we have always existed.

But what does that mean for us now in the third decade of the twenty-first century?

Over these last many months, Covid has taken its damaging toll on the life of the Church.

Throughout it we've been valiantly serving communities, severely disrupted, dislocated by Covid in a world that's been devastated by the virus and is coming to terms at the same time with the effects of climate change and environmental damage, and all the economic effects that they bring in their wake.

So now, what is God calling us to be and to do now?

What is our vision for the life of the Church, for our life together in the Diocese now?

Life

For some time now, I've been captivated by one word: 'Life'.

God is the God of life – God loves all things into existence: Life is God's gift to us.

God comes to us in Jesus to bring us into fulness of life.

The Holy Spirit is the Spirit of life, and through the life of the Spirit Jesus is raised from the dead. And through the life-giving, birth-giving power of the Spirit we are made alive in Jesus Christ.

Therefore, in the midst of disease, damage, dislocation, destruction, death I want to encourage us all – over the next five years or so – to focus on 'life'.

I am writing a book at the moment on Mary, Jesus' mother. It's called *Mary: Bearer of life*. And that's my overarching vision for the Diocese of Coventry, that we will be – together – bearers of life.

We begin by worshipping the God of Life

God is the giver of life.

We are here because God chose to bring this unimaginably vast, complex creation into being and for it to include each one of us. 'God chose us in Christ before the foundation of the world' (Ephesians 1.4).

One of the first things Mary did was to worship: 'Her soul magnified the Lord'.

We make new disciples by inviting them to receive the gift of life

God wants each human being and each community to live abundantly, to enjoy a fulness of life, to step into the reality of the new creation and be fully alive in Christ's life, the life of God, lifted up by the Spirit of life.

Mary – bearing the life of Jesus within her – went to see her relative Elizabeth, literally carrying the good news to her family – and Elizabeth with her own unborn child rejoiced that God had come near to them. The kingdom was coming.

We transform communities by being agents of the life of the kingdom of God

God loved the world so much that he sent his Son so that each person may have life with Jesus in the kingdom of God, where everyone together in society may have life in the kingdom of God where God's will is done on earth just like it is in heaven.

That's what Mary sang about: a transformed world where the beaten down are raised up, the hungry are filled with good things and all God's promises are fulfilled in the kingdom that will have no end.

Therefore, as we worship God, make new disciples and transform communities, we are bearers of life, bringers of life, agents of God's life in the world.

So let me paint a picture of what that might look like over the next five years.

Restored health

First, I hope and pray for restored health.

Life is why we talk about health so much in the diocese. We've seen the power of death in our world, in our nation, in our communities over the last many months. We're still doing battle through the long Covid months, against the bearer of death that has caused such disruption and damage to millions of people. We look to God to heal our world, to bring us back into life.

We've risen to the challenge of Covid in remarkable ways. We've worshipped the God of life through the pandemic. We've made new disciples through the pandemic. We've brought the transformative love of God to the lonely, the housebound, the fearful, through these many Covid months.

We've played our part in beating back death. But, as I've said, Covid has taken its toll on the life of the Church. Everything that makes for healthy church life has been disrupted – every essential quality. We have been deprived of many things.

It will take us some time to heal. We'll need to allow God time to restore our health and regrow our life. Everything that we've said in the past about growing healthy church communities remains. God has called us into fulness of life. And God has given to us all the energies, resources and capacities that we need to – as scripture says – take hold of 'the life that truly is life'. (1 Timothy 6.19)

We are the bearers of the life of God's Son. We are the bearers of the life of God's Spirit. We are bearers of the life of the kingdom of God.

New growth

Second, I hope and pray for new growth.

Life is why we trust God to grow the life of the church – to grow the quality of our life and the quantity of people who experience the life of God that God makes possible in the life of Church. The life of Jesus,

the life of the Spirit, the life of the kingdom of God through all the gifts of life that have been at work in the Church from its beginnings: bible-reading, preaching, baptism, healing, common life, fellowship, prayer, the apostles' teaching and the breaking of bread, great adventures of discipleship.

And now, I believe God is calling us to grow something new. My hope is that, by 2030, every parish or benefice will have grown from its own life a new worshipping community that will be reaching out to people who are missing at the moment. Some of those will be small, some of them will be bigger. Most of them will be new congregations of some sort. Some – not many but some – will be whole new churches, perhaps in areas of new housing.

I appointed Barry Dugmore as Archdeacon Missioner to take this initiative forward, and to build on the good work done by Morris Rodham to nurture the health of the church.

There was a point when we were really up against it as church, as a diocese, buffeted this way and then that by the storms of Covid. Barry said to me, "Look, do you want me to hold back on this strategy and let the storm pass?" I thought and prayed and decided, no in a storm you don't drop anchor, you keep moving. So I said, "No, we'll keep going in the course, the direction, that God has set for us."

Renewed relationships

Third, I hope and pray for renewed relationships.

The gift of life, lived with others in relationships, is why we pay so much attention to reconciliation in the Diocese of Coventry.

We know – our Cathedral sets it before us – that death is at work in the world, dividing person from person, nation from nation, disrupting our relationships, damaging the fabric of common life, depriving us of love, destroying all that's good, robbing us of life itself.

But the Cathedral also tells us that God's life is stronger than the world's death. God's love has come to us in the shape of the cross – up, across, and down. God's amazing grace is here to reconcile us to God (to put us right with God), to reconcile us with each other (to put us right with each other), to reconcile us to the earth (to put us right with the earth that we have damaged for so long).

I long for the day when the whole diocese seeks life-giving growth for everyone: for every person whatever their colour and ethnic background, whatever the life chances they've had, poor and rich, however they define their identity, gender and sexuality, wherever they live, city scape or countryside, whatever their age, young or old, whatever their politics, preferences and perspectives, whatever their education and whatever their successes and failures in life.

And all of this will mean hunting out our biases, especially when we're not aware of them, and bringing them into the light of the deep and true and abiding identity of the Church 'where there is no longer Jew or Greek, no longer slave or free person, no longer male or female, for all of us are one in Jesus Christ'. (Galatians 3.28)

Summary

The purpose of the Diocese of Coventry hasn't changed. We're here to worship God, make new disciples and transform communities.

My vision is that, as we do this together, we will rejoice in being bearers of life, bringers of life, agents of life with restored health, new growth and renewed relationships.

That we would be a family of parishes and church communities, some ancient some more recent, schools, chaplaincies, charities and Cathedral that are life-bearing, life-bringing, agents of God's purposes of life in the world. Partners-together, reaching every part of society, with the good news of God's energising, empowering, life-giving love.

The heart of the Church of England's calling is:

- To serve the people and communities of this land
- To serve them by being there for everyone, working for the common good of all;
- To serve them with our church services, sacraments and accessible ways to worship God
- To serve them with the call of the gospel to become followers of Jesus Christ, the way to life and the truth of life, extending to all God's invitation to eternal life;
- To serve them by being embodiments of the kingdom of God in our church life and activators of the kingdom in wider society.

Ministry means service. My ministry is to serve you, as you serve the people of your communities – and that's the work of the diocesan team to serve you and to help me and Bishop John to serve you better.

Like those who have gone before us in the Diocese of Coventry, our calling is to serve the people of this place in the name of Jesus Christ, the Servant of all who laid down his life so that we might have life in his name. Until our work is done and we hear God saying to us, "Well done, good and faithful servant, receive the crown of life." (Matthew 25.23 and Revelation 2.10)

The Right Reverend Dr Christopher Cocksworth
Bishop of Coventry