

February 2017

Dear Friends and Colleagues

When I wrote to you 3 years ago to let you know I had been diagnosed with multiple myeloma, I said at the time that it was treatable but not curable. I have been overwhelmed and humbled by your support, prayers and care which have enabled me to continue my ministry among you both through some very difficult times as well as many moments of great joy and delight. Let me be very clear that it has been my choice to continue as Bishop of Bradwell during that time and that ministry has been for me both very fulfilling and a time of growth and formation.

However, in discussion with my consultant, it is clear that we have now reached the end of options to actively treat the myeloma. There is much that can still be done in terms of symptom control and pain relief, but little to keep the myeloma itself under control. In myself I feel well - and perhaps with the end of active chemotherapy will actually feel better, at least for a time. But this is palliative care and not treatment.

I certainly do not intend to step down as Bishop of Bradwell in the immediate future. Over the coming months, in consultation with Bishop Stephen, Archdeacon Elizabeth, Archdeacon-designate Mike, I will be managing the responsibilities I carry in the Diocese and nationally and taking a more active control of diary engagements. I will continue to carry out as many of my existing commitments as possible, and indeed continue to welcome new invitations. Please direct all enquiries and questions and new invitations to my Office at Horndon and Amanda will be able to respond swiftly. My intention is to work full time at least up to and including Easter, then more lightly until the Petertide Ordinations and perhaps through into the autumn, health permitting.

Over the last five years there have been significant changes in both the Diocese of Chelmsford and in the Church of England, most of which I welcome and which it has certainly been a privilege to play a small part in.

Transforming Presence is not a strategy but a calling us back to our roots in discipleship, mission and evangelism focused in the local. As we recapture that vision we are seeing new growth, new signs of life and a renewed confidence and trust in our calling under God. Working together in mission is opening new opportunities that we never believed possible, even building new church communities to serve areas of new housing, as well as communities long overlooked. It has been fantastic to see this renewed confidence lead to such an upturn in vocations to such a huge variety of ministries offered by people from ever widening backgrounds.

The first of the two biggest challenges we face is in discipleship - to learn to live out the presence of Christ both as individuals and as communities in the world. How do we build a culture in which we can flourish as followers of Jesus in our congregations and in our local communities? This must be deeply rooted in prayer in which Jesus is shaped and formed in us, creative attentiveness to the Scriptures in which we are challenged and transformed, and a radical welcome in which in each person we meet is a meeting not with a stranger but with Christ himself. Hospitality lies at the heart of our calling as Christians.

The second is very simply our engagement with young people and young adults. These generations have so much to give in the life of the Church and so much to gain in discovering the deep love and care God has for each one of them as they discover their gifts, their passions and who they truly are as children of God. But equally we lose so much in not recognising all they have to give. Young people long to be included, to be part of, and there is a richness in relationships that span the generations.

These two are very closely linked and must be high priorities for us in East London and Essex.

Nationally, it has been a joy to welcome women as Bishops. Their presence is already making a real difference in the Church both collectively and as individuals. I know this has been painful for some and I have sought to work closely in support and care of those, but I am firmly convinced for myself that this is of God, firmly grounded in Scripture. Far from being contrary to the tradition of the Church, I see the ministry and mission of the Church hugely enriched and deepened.

At the very heart of God, the very nature of the Divine Trinity, is hospitality and relationship. For me Rublev's Icon of Abraham's Three Visitors opens up wonderful insights into the life of the Trinity which we are drawn to and called to live out. The changes to attitude over the last 50 years towards those who do not fall into traditional binary categories of heterosexual relationships has only been for the good.

However, the current debate in the Church, which has become almost totally focused on same sex marriage, means we have not championed the fundamental and core values of commitment, fidelity, openness, trust, intimacy and indeed faithfulness, both within the Church and more widely in society. This has severely weakened our contribution to the life of the nation and those conversations have suffered through the lack of our voice.

There are very differing views on this within the Church of England and across the Anglican Communion, but there is much more we hold in common. Unity in Christ is a fact, a command, a promise; not simply something we can opt in and out of as we pick and choose. We need to live with our differences, not simply listening to those who see differently but offering true attentiveness. That was the value of the Shared Conversations, but not clearly reflected in the

Report from the House of Bishops as reflected in the Synod Vote.

I have no desire to criticise my fellow Bishops and recognise the reflection, prayer and care that has been given to offering leadership and teaching in this. However, there is still a lack of pastoral understanding and care shown in public pronouncements and a lack of venturesome and creative theological reflection on the nature of relationships and the place of marriage within that.

More time does need to be given to a well-founded theology of relationship, friendship and marriage which I hope will lead in time to a full acceptance of same sex marriages in the Church of England. That will take time. However, that should not hold us back in the immediate from proper recognition through prayers, blessing, celebration and affirmation of all that is good and wholesome in a wide variety of relationships including stable, faithful, committed and God given same sex relationships.

Easter and ordinations are very much about new beginnings, born out of journeys which are often very challenging but ultimately held under God. I pray for a Church rediscovering its calling under God as herald and first fruits of God's Kingdom lived out in that pilgrimage through the challenges of Holy Week, the defeat and desolation of Good Friday and the renewed joy and hope of resurrection we celebrate week by week, which is founded on Jesus rising to new life that first Easter Sunday.

With love and prayers.

Yours sincerely

A handwritten signature consisting of a plus sign followed by the name "John". The signature is written in a cursive style and is positioned below the text "Yours sincerely".