



**Pastoral Letter  
First Sunday of Advent  
27 November 2022  
On becoming a synodal diocese**

My dear brothers and sisters in Christ,

Today's Gospel speaks to us of things which lie in the future. And yet we are aware of them now. Here and now we experience a foretaste of these events. We were busy about our affairs when a world-wide pandemic came along which affected all our lives. The apostle Paul tells us today, being a follower of Christ means we 'must wake up now'. We must recognise the signs of the times and listen carefully to what the Lord is saying to us in these days. We may easily imagine, to use the Gospel words, that all will be 'swept away'. Perhaps we tell ourselves, we need to fix everything by our own effort. Or we look around for those who have the wherewithal to get us out of the mess we find ourselves in.

There is another way. The first part of the Advent Season is focused on the day when the 'master is coming'. We may sense a threatening tone in today's Gospel. But it doesn't have to be like that. Advent is a season for listening for the voice of the Lord. To do this effectively, we have to get rid of the clutter, the many other voices which shout at us and cause confusion. We also have to learn to look at things from a certain perspective. Being a disciple of Jesus is not about what we are doing. It is about seeking the Lord's will. It is about *his* action. Our thinking about all things needs a deeper conversion. As we reflect upon the signs of the times, we might even speak of a synodal conversion within our diocesan family.

You may have heard of the forthcoming Synod of Bishops next autumn. It is entitled, *For a synodal Church: communion, participation, mission*. Some generously took part in the conversations across the diocese, marked by gracious speaking and gracious listening. Your comments and reflections became part of a diocesan report. This, in turn fed into the national synthesis text, received by the bishops of England and Wales last June. The discussion has now moved on to the continental stage. We do not have to wait to see where this journey of the world-wide Church will take us. This is the moment we can embrace an authentic synodality in the way we live our diocesan life. We should take hold of those three words, communion, participation, mission, and apply them to every aspect of our parish and diocesan life and witness. To this end, a diocesan Office for Synodality is to be established. I am very grateful to the dedicated diocesan synodal team for their enthusiastic commitment to the synodal process over the past twelve months. Now it is

time to formalise all this, mindful that everything we do is marked by a gracious listening to the Holy Spirit.

This will not be easy. Discerning the inspiration of the Holy Spirit means we also need to become aware of the influence of the bad spirit. One of the titles of our ancient enemy is *diabolos*, the one who divides and separates. Despite this tempting voice we may proceed with the confidence of our faith in the Lord. Our Church finds itself in a new place with regard to evangelisation. We need to reach out to others and become a missionary diocese. We need to appreciate that the Holy Spirit is the soul of the evangelising Church.

The diocesan Office for Synodality, we pray, will assist and encourage good conversation across the diocese. So let me share with you a high-priority example of synodal conversation and decision-making within our diocesan family. Some Milton Keynes parishes are increasing in numbers. This is because of migration into the area from elsewhere. Unfortunately this is not the situation in every pastoral area. Every year, our number of priests decreases and we need to plan the best way to deploy our clergy. Mass attendance figures are also in steady decline. We need to look at our parishes, their properties and resources and discern where the future lies. This is a challenging exercise for many reasons. When a church is closed, a whole story of endeavour to build it, sacramental memory and community cohesion is lost or at least fractured. These decisions should not be taken lightly.

Well let's not finish on that note. The prophet Isaiah has an encouraging word for us today, 'In the days to come the mountain of the Temple of the Lord shall tower above the mountains... All the nations will stream to it'. Given what they were going through, I bet the people of God in his day found that hard to believe. Faith invites us to transcend our limited vision of what our Lord can do. Hope encourages us to look at what the Holy Spirit is doing. Love embraces the Father's will with bold trust.

Let us pray for each other in these beautiful days of the Advent Season.

Yours devotedly in Christ,

✠ David

Bishop of Northampton

Given at Northampton on the Feast of Our Lord Jesus Christ, Universal King,  
20th November 2022

and appointed to be read or distributed in all churches and chapels of the Diocese on the  
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