The Diocese of Southwark

Diocesan Synod Presidential Address 13th December 2025

My brothers and sisters, as I wrote in my Advent letter I have had the greatest possible privilege of serving this Diocese for over twenty years in two episcopal roles, and of sharing the cure of souls with the many excellent clergy who hold my licence. I know how generously and sacrificially people in our parishes across Southwark - and the members of this Synod - give and work for the benefit of the Gospel. I thank God for you daily.

One reason for which I give thanks to God is the glorious diversity of this Diocese. I also give thanks that Southwark genuinely aspires to be a safe diocese for all God's people and will be taking steps to ensure this remains so. I make no apology for saying again that I consider our diversity to be God's gift and blessing, something given within creation. But like many gifts in the spiritual life it comes at some cost. It can be costly to recognise Christ in those who differ from us because Christ calls from us a depth of love and mutual understanding, a depth of tolerance, that is always going to push people to the limits of their compassion. But we need our compassion to be pushed. It is how the seed of love grows within us. This is not always a pleasant process, as the seed sprouts and something decays within so that something else can grow – but it is, to borrow Simone Weil's words, 'the pain that makes the beauty of the world penetrate to the human being's very core' (*The Need for Roots*). Nevertheless, this is how it is for us, it is our God-given reality, and we need to continue to be bold and courageous in what we are asking – that is to say, our asking that we recognise God's love for all God's children. I have received letters about the House of Bishops' recent decision concerning the Prayers of Love and Faith. The apology made by the House of Bishops in January 2023 cannot be taken back. It

concluded with these words: 'As we have listened, we have been told time and time again how we have failed LGBTQI+ people. We have not loved you as God loves you, and that is profoundly wrong'. I affirm publicly and unequivocally what that document said, that 'LGBTQI+ people are welcomed and valued: we are all children of God'. As we prepare to celebrate the Incarnation of our Lord, the very Word made flesh, we must remember that the Christian faith rests on more than words. Equally, this apology must be more than words – and there is work still to be done. The pastoral response from the Bishops in 2023 takes us to the hard realities of tolerance and diversity as we face our differences. The Bishops themselves represent the Church more widely in all its difference and the range of diverse convictions about sexuality and marriage.

But we do have not the right simply to look within the life of the Church. Today Stephen Yaxley-Lennon is gathering people in this city to 'Put Christ back into Christmas', following on from his 'Unite the Kingdom' rally. There will be a counter protest on the steps of St Martin-in-the-Fields. Anglicans, Quakers and others will offer a different voice. The Church of England has spoken clearly, and in Southwark my episcopal colleagues and I have said clearly that 'the heart of the Christian faith is the belief that God has created all people - and that he loves everyone … Any co-opting or corrupting of the Christian faith to exclude others is unacceptable, and we are gravely concerned'.

Elsewhere during this holy season, the land called holy - the cradle of the Jewish and Christian faiths - is a crucible and the cradle of our faith bears reflection at this time.

In doing so, it is worth looking at the circumstances in our nativity stories from a certain angle: we have a census – for all the reasons a census may be useful (tax and control), the forced requirements of that particular process – ancestral place

of registration – and the difficulties this imposes in transport and accommodation. We have Magi crossing borders either via or avoiding key border posts between the area under Roman control and that of Persia. And there is the use of state resources by Herod eliminate what he saw as an existential threat to his regime which led the Holy Family to seek temporary asylum in imperial Egypt before later returning home to an area of mixed ethnicity, and beliefs. So before we return to contemporary concerns, we have from the very first, some familiar instances of administrative law, upheaval, migration, fear, and state violence.

I mention this not to sideline the Incarnation and the birth of a saviour, or at Epiphany the strange acknowledgement and worship of Magi from outside the covenant. But I just wanted to emphasise the entirely human, intelligible and difficult circumstances described in Matthew and Luke which bring vivid historicity to what we read and suggest that the precarious things that happened then in a time of comparative peace do not vouchsafe us a more tranquil life now at a time of greater complexity and conflict.

Indeed, some of the events around the nativity which we seek to celebrate in the place where they happened are relevant today. I do not want to suggest that the circumstances that I describe in Israel and in Palestine are uniquely challenging or indeed amongst the worst faced by Christians around the world. They are not. The territories of the Holy Land do not figure amongst the areas regularly listed as the most dangerous for Christians by organisations such as *Open Doors* or *Aid to the Church in Need*, whose Red Wednesday commemoration I attended at St George's Cathedral last month. It does not match the circumstances of North Korea, Eritrea, Somalia, Yemen, Libya, Sudan or many other countries.

Nonetheless, there are distinct problems some of which I will outline. We read in Luke chapter 2 of Joseph and Mary travelling from Nazareth to Bethlehem where Joseph will register and Mary will give birth. It was precarious then for a woman in pregnancy. It has become so again as both the separation barrier and military checkpoints and settler activity require women to make considerably longer journeys than would otherwise be the case at the risk of their health and that of their unborn child. This is similar for those needing acute care. Indeed, the separation barrier which now hedges in Bethlehem on three sides also cuts across farmers' land and is a barrier to those seeking employment, both Muslims and Christians. The great expansion of settlements, authorised and otherwise, and the encroachment of settlers on Palestinian farmland have seen their attacks on places such as Taybeh, the last remaining wholly Christian village on the West Bank, increase.

The linking up of settlements now threatens to bifurcate the Palestinian territory entirely. Following a meeting at Umm al-Khair last month with members of the local Women Development Programme, which is supported by the East Jerusalem YMCA, the Archbishop of York found his vehicle blocked by armed settlers. The intention is to secure the demolition of Palestinian homes in Umm al-Khair. At the request of the military, the settlers moved away. But they largely act with impunity and this adds to the pressure on Christians to emigrate from the West Bank as it leads to a wider sense of despair on west of the River Jordan. I look forward once again to joining the Vatican mandated Holy Land Coordination in January which builds relationships with the Christian churches and communities. When it concludes I will be joined by the Bishops of Chelmsford, Gloucester, and Norwich for a further pilgrimage of solidarity, and I am very glad that Bishop Martin recently visited St George's Cathedral and College strengthening our links with the Diocese of Jerusalem.

You may know about Layan Nasir, who is a lay member of St Andrew's Ramallah and was taken into administrative detention for being a member at college of an organisation which was later proscribed after she left. She was released, summoned to court, informed that the trial was postponed and then tried *in absentia* on the original date and re-arrested. It is very hard to trust in the rule of law under these circumstances. One may argue that her Christian faith plays little or no part in her prosecution. Less so are the repeated attacks on Christians and on Church buildings in Israel and in Palestine.

For example, the Israeli newspaper, Haaretz reported on 24 September 2017 some 53 cases of attacks on Christian and Muslim sites in the past nine years in which instance only eight cases were under investigation and 45 closed. These included the attack – one of several – on the Beit Jamal Monastery and the firebombing of the Church of the Multiplication of the Loaves and Fishes in Tabgha which destroyed the roof. Arrests are comparatively rare. More than 30 graves at the Mount Zion Protestant Cemetery were vandalised in January 2023. In May 2023 far-right Israeli protestors attacked an Evangelical prayer rally at the Davidson Centre in Jerusalem. In December that year, the Israeli military entered the compound of the Church of the Holy Family in Gaza and according to Vatican News, shot those leaving the church, including one woman who went to rescue her mother. Both died. The IDF claimed that there was a missile launcher in the parish. This followed an air strike on the Greek Orthodox Church of Saint Porphyrius that October in which 18 were killed. The Anglican Al-Alhi hospital in Gaza has been hit multiple times, including once, it is suspected by a misfire by Islamic Jihad. Israeli Christians claim routine abuse, including spitting.

This Easter for the first time, Israeli police severely restricted access to participants of the Holy Fire ceremony at the Church of the Holy Sepulchre – a ceremony

which dates from at least the eighth century. The key-holder to the Holy Sepulchre claims that there were more police than pilgrims.

As I have said, the situation in Israel and Palestine – and I am talking more widely than the relentless destruction of Gaza and displacement of her people – impacts significantly and continuously on the Christian minority but does not compare with the scale of persecution elsewhere in the world. However, we tend to regard Israel much as we regard Sweden or France. It is worth reflecting that while *we* regard Herod as the slaughterer of innocents, history still allows him the title of Herod the Great because of the territory he ruled, his political success and the monumental scale of his building projects. But the veneer of civilisation could run very thin then as it does now. The treaties and protocols that were constructed on the experience of the horrors of two appalling world conflicts and were meant to regulate warfare and the Universal Declaration of Human Rights of 1948 - which was meant to guarantee basic freedoms - now look thread-bare in the light of repeated flouting. As Jesus tells us, a servant is not greater than his master (John 13:16) and so trouble may come our way, but that does not mean that we should look for it, or endorse it, especially when it is served out to others – abroad, or at home. My friends, surely we ought to pray, in the Prayer Book version of the Advent Collect, that God would himself put upon us the armour of light, now in the time of this mortal life, in which thy Son Jesus Christ came to visit us in great humility; that in the last day, when he shall come again in his glorious Majesty, to judge both the quick and the dead, we may rise to the life immortal; through him who liveth and reigneth with thee and the Holy Ghost, now and ever. Amen.