

## **Bishop Stephen's Address (Diocesan Synod 28/09/24)**

I'm very conscious that the inauguration of this new Synod begins in the party conference season. We could draw all sorts of parallels between what's happening here today, and what's taking place all around the country in our political life.

We are gathering, not in a political fashion, but nonetheless in a spirit of discussion, deliberation and decision. It's serious business, because Diocesan Synod is, in structural terms, the accountable body for our diocesan life – our mission, our ministry, our financial health, and our spiritual health.

I want to set this in the context of one of the other aspects of my role as the Bishop of Lincoln. I take part regularly in the business of the House of Lords.

Before all the speeches, the debates, the committees and even the votes begin, the House begins first in prayer.

I recently received congratulations for my delivery of the prayers at the beginning of business in the House of Lords. I hoped it was in recognition of my being transparently holy. It was actually because I was sonorous, and most importantly, swift.

It strikes me that just as the business of Parliament is daily wrapped in prayer, so too our business as Diocesan Synod is wrapped and rooted in prayer. Today we have inaugurated this new Synod firstly by breaking bread together around God's table. When we meet as Synod over the next three years, we will begin each meeting by Dwelling in the Word – breaking open the Scriptures with each other, listening to what the Spirit is saying to the churches. And we end each meeting with a prayer, placing our business into God's hands and praying for his blessing. Our work is wrapped in prayer.

In the context of that prayer, the work of Synod continues as we listen to one another, receive reports, share insights into life in the diverse corners of our diocese, scrutinise our inner workings and make important decisions about our future.

I see there a further comparison with the House of Lords and the role of the Lords Spiritual. Tolerated by many (but by no means all), Bishops are still seen as reliable regional non-partisan voices, who genuinely bring local examples and concerns into chamber – especially in the age of a more metropolitan House.

You couldn't invent this today... but while we have it, it is a huge resource. We're entirely independent, unwhipped voices, speaking towards the moral compass and wellbeing of our country from a position of faith.

It has been my honour over years to speak on such themes as education, mental health and disability. It is a privilege now to also be a voice for Greater Lincolnshire, particularly sharing those aspects of our common life that might otherwise go unheard.

For example, I have already been able to speak about our growing relationship with the Diocese of Polynesia and our shared concerns around inundation and will soon be meeting with officials from the Environment Agency about the management of water in our region. When I was first announced as the substantive Bishop of Lincoln last year, I visited many places across Greater Lincolnshire, met with farmers to hear their strengths and challenges from both ends of the diocese, workers and managers in the fishing industry in Grimsby, and those both invested in, and concerned about, tourism in our coastal resorts and villages.

I take it to heart that the Bishops in the House of Lords might have the lowest turnout, but the highest speech quotient. We can't be there full-time, but we can make our voices and yours heard.

As members of this Synod, you have a voice too, and I want you to use it. There is an old joke about Synods of every kind – that the definition of a Synod is a group of people waiting to go home!

Let it not be like that for us, but let us speak, listen, learn and share together for the good of our Diocese, the people of Greater Lincolnshire, and ultimately God's kingdom.

The voice that we have collectively is prophetic. By that, I don't mean that we're predicting the future... But to be prophetic in the sense that we see throughout the Old Testament. Perhaps not quite like Isaiah running around naked and barefoot preaching to the people of Jerusalem! But perhaps like Nathan speaking softly to King David, or Amos from the wilderness calling for justice.

Let me return to where I started: wrapped in prayer. Today and for the next three years of this Synod: let the words of all our mouths, and the meditations of all our hearts, be acceptable in the sight of the Lord, our strength and our redeemer.

Amen.