

Bishop Nigel's Farewell Sermon

St Pauls Cathedral Dundee 25 June 2017

Bookends

Thank you for coming to this Diocesan Celebration at which we mark my retirement as the 54th Bishop of Brechin.

The Diocese of Brechin has provided the bookends of my 41 years of ordained ministry since 1976 and for that I shall always be proud and grateful. God knows us better than we know ourselves. Like Jeremiah the reluctant prophet, we all run out of excuses in the end, and we go where we are sent and needed. Dundee was very formative experience for me as a young priest, and just as exciting second time around as Bishop.

Not so long ago on a visit to a Dundee primary school, the children of Primary 7 were interviewing me about my job as Bishop. I explained a bit to them about ordained ministry in the Church, and about serving the wider community. I told them about my beginnings in Dundee back in 1976

"so you've done this job a very long time", they concluded at which point a young girl looked at me pityingly

"oh dear, could you not find anything else to do ...?"

I feel very blessed that my priestly vocation has encompassed such a rich and varied ministry over the years. Along the way I have enjoyed relationships with so many good and interesting people. Being Bishop here has been a privilege and fun, challenging and rewarding in equal measure.

Bishop in Mission and Ministry

The city, county and coast, our region is historically deeply Episcopalian, full of interest and beauty, opportunity and challenge. Our diocesan mission and values proclaim to be: 'Faithful Christians, Serving Others, Transforming Lives'. We are a Christ-centred people rooted in God and ambitious for our neighbours. At our best we flourish in worship and discipleship, engaging with people and issues, resourceful and imaginative in how we do things – we want to make a difference.

The model church described in Ephesians does not just use the varied gifts available in a common purpose, highly desirable though that is. Much more than a managerial exercise, it is about values and the inner life of Christians who strive for a unity and maturity that matches nothing less than the full stature of Jesus Christ.

Bishops balance two clear missionary roles: firstly, oversight of the inner life of the diocese, exercising pastoral care and hospitality, drawing new people into a deeper faith in Jesus Christ.

Secondly, embassy - reaching out in loving service to those beyond our walls speaking truth to power and serving the poor and life's casualties.

I have endeavoured to fulfil the traditional roles rightly expected of an episcopal leader, while introducing some fresh things in the diocese and building relationships with our partners across this city and region.

I have particularly valued finding a voice in the public square and the opportunity to contribute faith's perspectives in over fifty Bishop's Columns for the Courier newspaper which sells 40k copies daily and communicates worldwide online.

Working with Abertay University, St Margaret's Residential Home and Dundee City Council; with local schools, politicians and businesses and other charities has been so enriching. Promoting quality family life, sustainable jobs, good education and prospects for the young, dignity and care for the elderly – these things are really important, and we've a way to go in this part of Scotland.

Partnerships

Beyond these shores Brechin Diocese has longstanding links with Iowa in the United States and Swaziland in southern Africa which we have furthered with exchange visits, most recently a contemporary Scottish cultural pilgrimage for fifteen young adults. Bishop Alan and Bishop Ellinah have been fine colleagues and friends in recent years.

The collection at this afternoon's service will be given to the Diocese of Swaziland - for their locally sustainable horticultural projects and to urgently feed orphaned children. Severe drought and continuing HIV Aids leave many devastated lives. It's heart-breaking, but our diocese does have the means to deliver aid direct to recipients, so please be generous.

Ecumenical relationships with the Roman Catholic Diocese of Dunkeld and the Church of Scotland have grown at a number of levels, including numerous local shared projects, pulpit exchanges with the Steeple Church, St Andrews Cathedral and most recently Brechin Cathedral.

Christian ministry in the 21st century certainly has its challenges, and as a progressive, thoughtful Christian denomination, the Scottish Episcopal Church values its membership and its partnerships very highly indeed. So thank you for all that you give us in this diocese.

Bishopping

Many people in recent months have asked me how I feel about all my years in ministry and about retiring – some kindly express congratulations, others surprise, disappointment and (much to my wife's annoyance) flattery about my not looking old enough yet ... those who will be glad to see the back of me and are praying for a better bishop next time are keeping their heads down. Don't worry, I'm sure she will be lovely.

You will recall the Father Ted TV episode where he finally wins the Priest of the Year Award which he craves so much – and then proceeds at length in his acceptance speech to character assassinate every other priest he has ever known So where shall I begin ...?

Forgive me for not mentioning particular names, ordained or lay, this afternoon – the truth is so many of you in a huge variety of settings within and beyond the Church have been a pleasure to know and brilliant to work with.

It is for others to say what my achievements as Bishop have been since 2011. I have tried to add value to the culture and life of the diocese and its outreach with mature, entrusting and leadership, enjoying being hands on in a team of many talents. My default is to smile and encourage, to keep things do-able.

Whilst the Church is a charitable and voluntary organisation, I believe that in the eyes of the public we must be much better than amateur. The right people, lean structures and creativity are paramount. Like you I am sad when things don't go so well, but I am sanguine and we move on, because as a Christian I 'stick with God' and am ever hopeful for the future.

I apologise for those hopefully few occasions where my 'bishopping' has upset or fallen short. I guess every job looks easy when you are not the one doing it.

So I encourage you to rise to the challenge during the episcopal vacancy so that my successor whoever he or she is, joins a diocese which is both realistic and optimistic and, above all, in good heart looking to the future together.

Retirement

The reporter at the Courier asked me last week, as I retire, what will I miss? Simply everything really, well maybe not quite everything.

Anne and I are retiring next month to a large village close to the City of Lincoln, nearer family and to Nottinghamshire where we spent 26 years' of our family life. Emily is now a Senior Educational Psychologist in West Berkshire and Tutor at University College London; Mark is Head of Student Progress at the Church of England Academy in Newark.

Ordained ministry is not a job but a way of life - built on lasting promises and commitments which will continue into my retirement. Indeed it seems God is never quite finished with us. Following some time off, I hope to serve as an Assistant Bishop in the Diocese of Lincoln.

I will continue with writing and research projects and I anticipate taking up some completely new activities. Maybe I will buy a bike? Mind you, Lincolnshire is not nearly as flat as people believe. For sure, I have already purchased my season ticket and can be counted upon to encourage Nottingham Forest Football Club to do much better than in recent seasons.

Bearing Fruit

In John's Gospel Jesus uses the image of the vine: "I am the vine you are the branches; you are called to abide in me and bear fruit". Abiding in Christ is about deep-rootedness in the person and the reason for our faith in action. "You did not choose me but I chose you to go and bear fruit that will last".

Yesterday I spoke with the 50th Bishop of Brechin, Ted Luscombe, now in his 93rd year, who ordained me in this Cathedral and who conducted our wedding in Invergowrie. We reminded each other that we always follow, and are followed by others. I am greatly encouraged by younger people who have the imagination and ability to address tomorrow's problems – we need to make way for them.

This Farewell Service is not really about me. It's a celebration of the life and witness of the Diocese. As the Brechin episcopal tree is pruned and I lay down my Bishop's pastoral staff, it's actually about you and God and your calling, to be faithful, to use your gifts and to serve others in so many ways.

Faith really matters. Faith is life and pilgrimage and progress. My prayer is that, under God, you continue to flourish in all that you do.

AMEN

A handwritten signature in black ink, starting with a small cross symbol followed by the letters 'Ngi' in a cursive style.