

Sermon: SCD 25th January 2025

Your Excellencies, honoured guests, friends, and partners in the Gospel:

May I extend my own welcome to you. It is a great joy to be with people who have been living stones¹ of the Diocese of Cyprus and the Gulf for many, if not all, of its 50 years; and with those who have a particular interest in the Middle East and the Christian presence in this region. Thank you to those who have come from great distances to celebrate our Jubilee with us.

We are honoured to be hosted by St Clement Danes today – a church which has a significant historical link with the Diocese. And so, may I express our gratitude to Padre Ashley Mitchell and the people of St Clement Danes, and to Archdeacon Giles Legood for his generous efforts to revitalise and strengthen the relationship between the Royal Air Force and the Diocese of Cyprus and the Gulf.

And thank you to all who have worked so hard behind the scenes to make this service possible.

With a territorial overlap in Cyprus and the Middle East, the Diocese and the RAF have an interwoven, mutually supportive history stretching back more than 80 years.

Examples of our cooperation include:

- Parish priests from Basra taking on duties at the nearby RAF Squadrons at Ma'qil and Shaibah.
- RAF chaplains being responsible for ministry at the Parish Church of Christ Church, Aden, which additionally became the Station Church of RAF Steamer Point.
- And Prayer Book Services held in Dubai when a RAF chaplain from Sharjah was available. In time the garrison church of St Martin in Sharjah became the Anglican Chaplaincy of Dubai and Shajah.
- Several priests of the Diocese have been former RAF chaplains – including the first provost of St Paul's Cathedral, Nicosia - and we pray that God may continue to bless us with clergy of this calibre.
- The RAF's influence and impress on our diocese is evident in terminology that has been used until very recent times: our parishes

¹ 1 Peter 2:4-5

were called “chaplaincies” and priests “chaplains”. It may be fair to say that the Diocese has some RAF DNA in it.

Our service booklet offers other details of our history, but what is particularly poignant about our service today is that it is almost 52 years to the day that Bishop Leonard Ashton was consecrated Bishop Designate of the Diocese of Cyprus and the Gulf in this very place. In honoured memory of his ministry to the Royal Air Force and as first bishop of the Diocese, Bishop Len’s crozier, pectoral cross, and episcopal ring have been loaned by the RAF museum for use in today’s service.

In this Jubilee year there will be rolling celebrations through the parishes of the Diocese to give thanks to God for his loving provision and protection over five decades. I can hardly mention our 50th Anniversary without acknowledging the presence here today of the Bishop of Hereford, the Rt Rev’d Richard Jackson, whose diocese is also celebrating an anniversary with a “fifty” in it. This year the Diocese of Hereford celebrates its 1350th anniversary... The only way I can think to pip Hereford is to remind +Richard that there were of course Arab Christians in Jerusalem on the Day of Pentecost! ²

From its inception, Cyprus and the Gulf was always a somewhat improbable diocese.

- It is the largest diocese in the Province of Jerusalem and the Middle East: 12 times larger than the Diocese of Jerusalem, and twice the size of the Diocese of Iran.
- It is the 2nd largest Anglican diocese in the world after the Diocese of Europe.
- In terms of landmass, it covers half of the Middle East and is 15 x times the size of the UK.

The Diocese is constituted of Anglican Churches in 10 countries or jurisdictions, 9 of which are Muslim-majority, and 8 which operate under Sharia law. In every country in which we are present we have no *right* to practice our faith - we are the guests of gracious, far-sighted and tolerant rulers, churches, or religious authorities. To be an Anglican Diocese in this complex, vast and politically volatile context seems improbable indeed.

²Acts 2.11

Improbable merges with the seemingly impossible because throughout its history the diocese has operated on a shoestring budget. It is served at any one time by about 23 stipendiary clergy, 3 diocesan office staff, 2 part time archdeacons and a bishop. And it seems that it has ever been thus:

There are interesting accounts of +Len running the diocesan office from his first episcopal car, which was a second-hand, purple Mini. He kept his old, borrowed typewriter in the boot so that he could handle the administrative affairs of the diocese on the move. These days it is laptop in the cabin of an Airbus, but it seems that not that much has changed in the course of five decades.

Very often our diocesan life evokes a sense of a David and Goliath struggle for survival - or offering a boy's lunch to feed a multitude. We suffer regular existential pangs. But here we are, and here we have been for 50 years, determined to embrace opportunities, remaining united in diversity, and driven and enriched by a common mission. Throughout our celebrations we will be expressing our deepest gratitude to God for bringing our improbable diocese through impossible circumstances "safe thus far".⁴

Today's second reading recounts how the first disciples were called by Jesus to "Come, follow me." What does it mean to follow Christ today as Anglicans in the Middle East? The motif of God's light, running through our readings and fulfilled in the person and ministry of Jesus Christ, is a useful way of thinking about our ministry and presence in this context.

Jesus is the light of the world,³ and he calls his followers to reflect his light in the world, so that people may see our good works and give glory to our Father in heaven.⁴ In the context of Cyprus and the Gulf where proselyting is prohibited, the conduct and activities of our churches become a window through which the light of God can shine out on the world.

Anglicanism with its moderate theology, and well-established governance is well received in the Middle East. We have the reputation of being respectful and committed interfaith and ecumenical interlocutors able to promote dialogue across boundaries and divisions.

³ John 8.12

⁴ Matthew 5.16

We are well known for our humanitarian outreach through St George's Clinic in Baghdad which is greatly supported by Mosaic Middle East; and through the Ras Morbat Eye Clinic in Aden. The Ras Morbat Clinic is one of those improbable and wonderful stories of this Diocese: an eye clinic run entirely by Muslim staff in a war-torn area as a ministry of an Anglican diocese. Here light is literally brought into the darkness of people's lives.

We offer Christian love and belonging to migrants drawn to the Middle East from all over the world. Currently 70% of our parishioners are from the Indian Subcontinent, 13% are from Southeast Asia, 7 % are from Africa, and 5% are from the West. For migrants experiencing culture shock, loneliness and the pains of separation from their families, our churches provide a spiritual "home from home", and a spiritual family.

These are just some of the ways in which we attempt to reflect the light of Christ to those around us.

I am particularly grateful to God and to generous Rulers who have provided us with fresh opportunities to have an Anglican presence in the region. It is a cause for celebration to have been granted land to build a new church in Muscat; and to be in discussions with the authorities to plant a new parish in Northern Iraq and other places.

As we follow Christ into the future, there will be a constant call to shine his light in dark places. On this occasion, let me share with you some of the "big picture" issues that I believe we, and every diocese, will need to contend with in the next few years.

The first of these is climate change. Kuwait is one of the countries in our Diocese, and it is currently listed as the hottest country in the world. This is driving migration and concerns about resources. We need to be planning how we as a Christian community can respond to the needs created by climate change throughout our region.

Secondly, there is a rapid reordering of the world order. All the pragmatic and ideological alignments that we have taken for granted are now being ruptured, and this makes an already volatile part of the world more unstable. We are told by military and political commentators that we are in a pre-war era and so we must also consider what an outbreak of global

conflict could mean for our diocese. This seems a good time to thoughtfully and deliberately build trusted partnerships and networks.

Finally, we need to consider the impact on the world and on the Church of “Large Language Models” - that is Artificial Intelligence. I think I have already heard my first ChatGPT sermon delivered by an anxious priest trying to sound more prepared than he was, but more importantly we are rapidly entering an era where there is intelligence without soul or morality. We are beginning to see how the arc of the AI boom is bending towards domination and profit – not human welfare. The Church needs to speak truth to this power.

Today, at this Jubilee service, perhaps we can leave fighting the giants for just a moment, and simply pause in this hallowed space, and give thanks.

Give thanks:

- For the luminous witness of those who have gone before us
- For those who strive today to shine the light of Christ in the Middle East and in the UK
- For our Armed Forces, and particularly the Royal Air Force as they defend us, and watch the skies in uncertain times.

Now to him who by the power at work within us is able to accomplish abundantly far more than all we can ask or imagine, to him be glory in the church and in Christ Jesus to all generations, forever and ever. Amen.⁵

⁵ Ephesians 3.20