

The Rt Revd Vivienne Faull's Farewell Sermon - Bristol Cathedral 30 August 2025.

Sometime in 2002 I received a message from a lay woman in the Diocese of Bristol asking if I would be prepared for my name to be considered in the appointment of its next bishop.

It was a message sent with humour. It would be another dozen years before it would be legal for a woman to hold the office of bishop in the Church of England. But a seed was sown and 16 years later I was enthroned and came home.

My mother's family were Bristolians, my mother was born here and the voluntary work of my grandparents during the second world war is depicted in the North Aisle. My mother's family was bombed out twice and it was years before they again had a permanent home. I therefore hold dear to my heart those currently suffering from the impact of total war in Ukraine, Sudan and Gaza.

Bristol Diocese was created because its citizens had a fierce pride for their city, petitioning Henry VIII to become one of the 6 new Dioceses created in the 1530s and 40s. This church was formerly the Augustinian's Abbey church, the Abbot living in the precincts in winter and in the summer at Abbot's Leigh, known to many from the hymn tune by CV Taylor which we sang earlier. Bristolians got their cathedral, but the Diocese was given no endowment. It also had no fixed boundary beyond the city, so has at times been annexed to Gloucester, and for a while to the County of Dorset. I doubt that any Bishop of Bristol visited Dorset, and I am sure that County is much better served by the Bishop of Salisbury who is here amongst several bishops from the South West.

In the 19th century South Gloucestershire and North Wiltshire became our northern boundary making in my view the perfectly if peculiarly formed diocese I have served, alongside 4 Lord Lieutenants (if you include Abbots Leigh and therefore Somerset. Representatives of three Lieutenancies are here today). The Diocese thus created embraces a multiplicity of cultures and contexts and remains one whole not because of geographical logic (it defies that) but because God in Christ calls and holds us together.

That by way of background to those who have come from far and wide to Bristol to join us today.

The Biblical readings we have heard take us into deep waters of faith. These are readings chosen by the church for this day and they don't give me an easy time. But they do give me the reason to begin with some of the most demanding parts of the role of a Bishop in the church.

So, we heard first of Jeremiah, the prophet, sent by the Lord to give the people a reprimand (I could have used a colloquial term)...and a warning of the dire consequences of their disregard of righteousness, justice and mercy. In my briefing from the Archbishop of Canterbury in 2018 there was mention of racism and there was mention of safeguarding. But they were then peripheral. But then I started to encounter witnesses to stories of the diocese had not been in the Diocesan profile and I began to discover easy it is to stray from righteousness, justice and mercy.

If you will excuse me for being explicitly theological for the moment (and it does go with the role).

Christians believe that every person is made in the image of God. But we Christians are so prone to the sort of sibling rivalry which insists that some human beings have been made more in God's image and likeness and are inherently superior and should be invested with privilege and power while others are treated as lesser beings. That is a sin with tragic consequences.

Core to my calling as Bishop has been to listen to those who have experienced the consequences of that sin: those who have witnessed to the abuse of privilege and power, an experience which has, spiritually, psychologically, economically, demeaned and even destroyed them 3 of 6 Children, women and girls, any regarded as lesser beings have witnessed to the incidence and impact of abuse, physical, spiritual sexual by clergy and lay leaders.

And alongside them those from Afrikan and Caribbean nations have witnessed to the impact of chattel slavery on their forbears and ancestors, (and continuing to have an impact on them) a trade led by powerful Anglicans which enriched our church while displacing and impoverishing and killing so many across the globe.

Listening to these witnesses has taken me to the foot of the cross of Christ who let go of power, who was himself despised and abused, and in whose name, I have sought to serve. It is at the foot of the cross I have been called to confess the sin of the church and have prayed that those who have experienced such harm will know the companionship of the wounded and risen Christ.

Having heard that witness I know there will be long years of determined investment in healing, repair and justice ahead for the church. May this diocese have the grace and courage for that task. I do know there are prophets in our own day in Bristol who will hold you to account.

And on the journey ahead may you continue to sing the song that all are welcome.

The second reading allows us to move into a very different mood. Here is a church described by Paul as transformed by the inclusion of gentile foreigners and displaying the glorious and mysterious wisdom of God in its rich variety. This is a cosmic vision to

be communicated not just on earth but to the rulers and authorities in the heavenly places. this diocese we have grasped something of that cosmic vision of humanity reconciled and creation restored as it has been made real in the parishes and schools, communities and chaplaincies.

The enormous privilege of a Bishop is seeing that happening day by day.

I have seen that vision of humanity reconciled, and creation restored, so absurdly ambitious, but mysteriously turned into reality in the great variety of our life together.

In Church buildings adapted for community use and ingeniously reducing their carbon footprint and turning churchyards into biodiversity havens, work which continues in the face of funding shortages.

In the care for the outcaste and the stranger and the welcome you have given, in partnership with local authorities and other charities, to those who have fled war and climate breakdown and seek refuge amongst us. Care you continue to offer in the face of increasing polarisation and politicisation. I pray courage for you and protection to those you serve.

I have seen vision become reality.

Amongst the people of Swindon as the town responded to the shock of the Honda factory closure yet resisted hopelessness and are finding new purpose with + Neil in support.

I have seen vision become reality.

In the family farms in North Wiltshire in their sense of the holiness of ordinary life, and care for neighbours and agricultural routines.

I have seen vision become reality.

In our many new suburbs where churches are creating both community and a sense of place in midst of consumer fragmentation and isolation.

I have seen vision become reality.

In areas of urban deprivation where social and spiritual innovation where what began as food banks became warm spaces too and community cafes and skill centres.

And then I saw how, as Covid impinged, each part of the diocese painfully refashioned its worship and its ministry even in the midst of deep fear and sadness. I will always remember 5 of 6 an online service to swear in churchwardens, an annual obligation, where all of us were zoom novices and our worship was infused with the hilarity of lost mute buttons and the presence of the Holy Spirit who I suspect revels in moments when Anglicans are just a little disorderly.

And since Covid I have seen the slow, and sometimes very slow regaining of confidence, confidence in each other, confidence in the story of Jesus Christ, confidence that others might want to hear about the story of Jesus Christ. And I have heard witness from the many I have confirmed who speak of faith and hope and new and renewed.

You have grasped the vision, and you are making it a reality.

A wise musician once said, 'begin with vision, end with thanks'.

And so, as I prepare to leave home for new adventures my thanks for all who have enabled us to be the open, generous, brave and creative people of God in this place. All of you, parish and community, Hillside House and Bishop's House.

My particular thanks to two people who have worked so hard to create this service, to Vice Dean Neil, precentor and impresario, neither of which is in his role description, and my chaplain Lucy doyenne amongst Bishop's chaplains. As individuals each of you during my tenure took the risk of making a journey into a diocese and community which was unfamiliar. Thank you for your courage in coming to join us, in bringing us such gifts and in teaching me how to uproot and move on with grace and courage.

And finally, thank you to Michael who has made and sustained our home and without whom the last 7 years would have been much less fun.

May God's blessing be with you all.