

Bishop Stephen Wright

Installation Mass – Homily – 19 July 2023

Dear Sisters, Dear Brothers, my first words are “thank you.” Every Mass is a thanksgiving of the love of the Lord, made present in the Eucharist. From the Altar the thanksgiving then extends into His body, the Church. Thank you for your very kind and generous welcome into our diocesan family and here in the Northeast. Thank you to all who are here in the Cathedral and joining us via the live stream. Thank you to all our valued guests for taking the time to join us in our diocesan celebration. We are all most grateful and we look forward to meeting one another after Mass. I look forward to praying and working with you all in the years ahead.

Whenever I was appointed to a new parish, I always said this at the first weekend masses, so I say it to the whole diocese. I will pray for you every morning. Please pray for me. If we are getting along, pray for me. If we are not getting along for any reason, please pray for me even more. With biblical wisdom, I will work hard for you six days a week. Monday is hopefully going to be my Sabbath rest; we shall see if that works. I wish to get to know all the parishes, schools and communities and institutions quickly, so please invite me. If you don't, I might just turn up anyway. I love being a priest, which is at the heart of being a Bishop too. I am going to love serving you with my brother priests and deacons and the whole People of God. Thank you in advance for the many blessings to come.

Some of you may know that Bishop Kevin Dunn was my Parish Priest in Stafford when I was in my twenties. I was in seminary and then ordained a priest in 2000. I sense his infectious smile and humour and certainly his prayers. He influenced me a lot. You may get used to seeing me pausing to pray at his resting place in the years ahead. I always knew when Kevin wanted me to do something in the parish, “Stephen, do you fancy a pint?”. If it was bigger job, it would be two pints and possibly even a meal. I confess I am stood here wondering how many pints he has lined up for me now.

I asked for this Mass to be dedicated to one of our diocesan patrons, Our Lady of the Immaculate Conception. Our prayerful relationship with Our Lady may change over the years. Mine certainly has. In younger years, I confess, Mary was not a major part of my prayer life. But her presence and her ministry to me has grown and deepened. With Pope Francis appointing me to serve as your Bishop I feel Mary's prayerful presence has deepened again. With my mum or perhaps I should now say, “my Mam,” on the front row, she will hopefully nod along with all mothers present, as I say, Mums or Mams know what is right. Especially, with Our Lady, Mother of the Church, she knows what is right for us. She teaches us that we are called to say “yes,” to the will of God. That is what is always right for us.

I think Our Lady has been a bit busy. It turned out, my last public Mass as a Priest and Bishop of the Birmingham Archdiocese was at the diocesan shrine of Our Lady of Lourdes. My first public Mass as your Bishop is here in this beautiful Cathedral dedicated to Mary. I was in Lourdes on the Birmingham diocesan pilgrimage, when the phone call came to pay a visit to the Nunciature in London. The mind and the heart races a little when that happens, I can assure you. But I couldn't go. I was in Lourdes for another five days, so where better to pray. Straight after the phone call I went to the Grotto to pray and there under Our Lady's statue, are the words Our Lady spoke to St. Bernadette on the 25th March 1858, “I am the Immaculate Conception.” Having googled it enroute, I knew Our Lady of the Immaculate Conception is our diocesan Patron, just as she is a diocesan Patron of Birmingham. I didn't know with certainty why I was being invited to meet the Nuncio, but it was dawning on me, there in Lourdes at the Grotto, “Its Hexham and Newcastle, isn't it?” Mary's advice: say yes to the will of God.

Well, as you know next week we are off to Lourdes. I look forward to being there with our diocesan pilgrims. Where better to start to get to know people and begin my ministry? Our Lady is calling us to pray for our Diocese. The theme in Lourdes is "build a chapel here." To build the church. I think we have plenty to pray about. While I am in Lourdes be assured of my prayers for all the Diocese, especially for the sick and those who care for them.

We have just listened to the Gospel account of Mary listening to the will of God to be the mother of our Saviour. We are told that Mary was deeply disturbed by the words of the Angel. Sisters and brothers, I am joyful to be here, I assure you, but forgive me, when I say I was feeling a bit disturbed too. You know why. Mary questions. I have been doing a fair bit of that too. Ultimately, Mary gives the perfect "yes" in faith to the will of God. She accepts the unknown future and accepts that all the joys and all the pains that will pierce her heart are following the will of God in whom she trusts. Through the cross will come the glory of the resurrection. A path we all follow, collectively as Church, and individually. Mary's "yes" is perfect, full of grace. Dear sisters and brothers, please accept my imperfect "yes" to the will of God. In return I assure you all I accept your imperfect "yes" too! God's grace is enough for us as St. Paul tells us. It really is. But we must allow that grace in, in humility. We must work with that grace. Mary heard the words, "do not be afraid," and took them to heart. I pray for us all, that we will all take to heart that instruction, that affirmation, from God. "Do not be afraid."

St. Paul affirms us all in our second reading today. Speaking about us all, he says, "Before the world was made, He chose us, chose us in Christ to be holy and spotless and to live through love in his presence." God has willed you and me before creation. God makes you and me eternal, of infinite value and dignity. Why be afraid? Why let fear or doubt get in the way of our calling to be holy and spotless, to live through love in his presence. If only the world would always see and honour the God given dignity of every person. How much better the world would be. Well, that is our call, our vocation. To always uphold the God given dignity of every human person. When we say yes to God, we can do little else. We are all called to live through love in Christ's presence.

Our First Reading, from the Book of Genesis shows the disturbing effects when fear and selfishness and pride leads to sin. The story of the Fall of Adam and Eve explains what happens when our focus shifts away from the love and will of God and focuses on ourselves or other false gods. Sin enters. Sadly, right relationships break down. The right relationship with God is damaged. The right relationship with our sisters and brothers is damaged. The right relationship with our very own person is damaged too. It gets very ugly, very quickly. We see the wrongdoing and then the repercussions as Adam points the finger at Eve and Eve points the finger at Satan. We see Adam is ashamed of his own existence.

I have received many kind letters and cards in recent weeks. Thank you for those. One said welcome to our battered and bruised diocese. But went on to speak about many examples of how the love and the joy of the Lord is made present in our diocesan family. The bruises and the damage caused in our Diocese are very public. My first response as your new Bishop is, "I am sorry." I am very sorry to learn about the hurt that has been caused to so many people in many ways. I am sorry that trust and confidence has been damaged. I am sorry that people felt it necessary to leave the Diocese and have been hurt. I am sorry that people stayed in the most difficult of circumstances and have been hurt. I am sorry that right relationships have been damaged in so many ways. I am sorry. The journey towards healing will continue. Sorrow, confession, amendment, penance and forgiveness. These will take time and they all involve active choices on all our part. But above all and most powerfully, the Lord offers us His peace as a pure unmerited gift. As your Bishop, you will hear me say the words of the risen Christ to His Church, "Peace be with you," at the start of every Mass. I often wondered why. Well, I think

I now know. Peace is being in right relationship with God, in right relationship with our sisters and brothers and in right relationship with our own person. I will be praying that welcome, "Peace be with you," earnestly every time I say it. We always need the peace of the risen Christ, and we are called to genuinely share it with one another as we do at every Mass at the sign of peace. That is true always, but may I gently suggest it is especially true in our diocesan family at this time. Peace is more than justice, vital though justice is. The Cross and Resurrection is not simply justice. It so much more than that. It is the scandal of God's perfect love given as pure unmerited gift to us. It is our peace. It is our healing. It is our right relationship. It is our God given dignity, that St. Paul speaks of in the second reading. Peace be with you sisters and brothers; peace be with you. It is the gift the Lord wants to give us, to heal us all. My prayer is we accept it.

A voice that must never be lost is the voice of those who have suffered the most appalling breakdown of right relationships, those who have suffered abuse in the church and elsewhere. Many people across the diocese have felt pain caused by the recent history. May I suggest that is an insight, albeit a very, very limited one, into the pain of those who have suffered abuse.

I am so grateful to those here representing victim/survivors who accepted my invitation to meet and participate in this Mass. You are always welcome, and I invite you to please accompany us in the years ahead as we wish to accompany you. Our Church of England friends here in Newcastle, with LOUDfence and Safe Spaces have produced 10 prayer/reflection Angel cards for distribution. I have them here, and in time I pray they will become part of our diocesan life of prayer. The 10 cards reflect on what happens to people who have suffered abuse. The reflections are on Betrayal, Trust, Dignity, Honour, Justice, Fear, Despair, Shame, Outrage and Overwhelmed. Words that have been written and spoken to me in recent weeks. Words no doubt that have been in the hearts and minds of us all. Let me read the reflection about Outrage... *It is right to be outraged by what has happened. The abused may find it hard to navigate this outrage and may have their outrage ignored, minimised, silenced or criticised within a spiritual setting. Our own outrage at what has happened validates the experience of the abused. Outrage is the turning point where change happens within those affected and within the Church itself.* May this be a turning point for us all.

The prayer ribbon tied to my Bishop's chair, may look out of place. Good. It is meant to be out of place. It should not be there, but it will stay there, because harming the vulnerable has no place in the church nor anywhere. Harming others has no place in this Diocese. Let it be a reminder. So, when visitors here ask why the ribbon is there, we can explain why. When it comes to homilies, plagiarism is the best form of flattery. So, I plagiarise Antonia one of the ladies who presented the prayer ribbons. Our Lady is the first safe-guarder in the Church. So, she is. In today's Gospel we see Mary entrusted with the care of our Saviour. Mary was to nurture and care for the Lord. We ask for the prayers of Mary as we all exercise the ministry of nurturing and caring for others, especially safeguarding the vulnerable.

If I may move on and you will be glad to hear, finish. The story goes of a newly appointed bishop being asked what his plans were, and answering, "plans, I have no plans, I can show you a map, though." I am not sharing any plans here. Evidently, we have a vibrant diocese in so many ways, and I look forward to learning about it all. I must listen and learn. But I will share Pope Francis' advice to me and other newly ordained bishops when we met in September 2022. His theme was "be close to" "accompany," "approach". It was in keeping with his teachings on synodality. What Pope Francis told us newly ordained bishops can apply to us all in our different contexts of ministry. Be close to Christ. Every day. Prayer. Without that you are no good to anyone. Be close to brother bishops, he told us, don't get isolated. We are

in communion; we are not to be alone in ministry. Be close to your clergy, listen to them and be available to them. Spend time with them. Be close to your people, be visible and among them in parishes. Do not be stuck in your office. Shepherds are in the field with their sheep. They are not behind desks. Rejoice with your people when they rejoice, cry with them when they cry. Be close to the poor, to those who suffer, and those who society rejects. Go to the margins of society and see the reality of life through their eyes, not just through your own eyes or the eyes of those around you. Learn from them. Go to them.

Sisters and brothers, please pray for me as I will pray for you. Please pray that I will be faithful to the advice of Pope Francis who has sent me to serve you. Please pray that the peace of the risen Christ be with us all. Jesus gives us his gift of peace each day. It is for us all to choose whether to receive it or not. I pray we will. May we care, nurture and safeguard, always. It is a joy to be with you and we ask for the prayers of St. Cuthbert and Our Lady of the Immaculate Conception.

God bless you all. Amen.