



Bishop Stephen Wright

Bishop of Hexham & Newcastle

Bishop's House, St Aidan's, Coach Lane, Benton, Newcastle, NE12 8AD

Pastoral Letter 2nd Sunday of Lent 15th – 16th March 2025

“This is my Son, the Chosen One, listen to him.”

Dear sisters and brothers

On the Second Sunday of Lent we always listen to an account of Jesus' Transfiguration. It is a foretaste of the glory of the Resurrection that is to come. The disciplines of Lent only make sense because of Easter.

Jesus' disciples needed this insight into Jesus' glory. They were tired and had been listening to some hard-hitting teaching from Jesus. Just prior to climbing the hill, Jesus had been teaching them that they must take up their crosses, they must lose their lives to save them, and if they are ashamed of Jesus and his words then the Son of Man will be ashamed of them. Perhaps part of the Lord's intention in displaying His glory in the Transfiguration was to affirm and reassure his followers.

Every Sunday we receive that same affirmation and reassurance from the Lord. We all need it. Every Sunday the glory of the Risen Lord is present in the Eucharist. The Bread and wine are transfigured into the Body and Blood of the Lord and given to us. The Eucharist is our foretaste of the heavenly banquet that is to come.

Peter, James and John were taken by surprise by the sight of Jesus' glory. Jesus shows Himself to be the completion of the Law and Prophets as he appears with Moses and Elijah. Struggling for words, Peter suggests, “Let us make three tents,” one for Jesus, Elijah and Moses. Why not mark such a holy event with buildings? Jesus had other ideas, and the cloud, the image of the presence of God, descends and the voice of God is heard, “This is my Son, the Chosen One, listen to him!” The Transfiguration is not a call to build structures rather it is a call to mission, to build the Kingdom of God. We are invited to listen to the Lord and put into practice His ministry here and now. It is a call to mission with Heaven as our focus. As St. Paul writes in our Second Reading,

“But our citizenship is in Heaven, and from it we await a saviour, the Lord Jesus Christ, who will transform our lowly body to be like his glorious body...”

To be a baptised Christian is to have a vocation to build the Kingdom of God here and now. The focus must be mission. Not buildings, not structures, but mission. Buildings and structures serve mission, not the other way round.

Last year I shared with you all an initial vision for us a diocesan family. It was not simply my words but the product of listening and discerning with a cross section of the diocesan family. In summary we offered four major themes for mission: To Walk with Jesus and Enable Others to Encounter Him; To Grow as one Diocesan family – Building Relationships; Forming and Developing People for Mission and Living Justly and Caring for our Common Home.

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My hope is that parishes and partnerships will reflect together on the draft Diocesan Vision, engaging in synodal conversations to discern their response. There are resources for these synodal reflections on the diocesan website. I thank those Parish and Partnership Councils who have already begun discernment on the Diocesan Vision and have shared their reflections with me. I invite us all to be involved - people and clergy. We all have gifts and talents to offer. We are all co-responsible for the mission of the Church, which continues Jesus' ministry.

The third part of our diocesan vision is to form and develop all people for mission. Please discern how you can assist in the mission of your parish and please be generous. Speak with your clergy. Some of us will have more time to offer than others but we can all offer something.

Pope Francis encourages all parishes to have a pastoral council. Indeed, he made them mandatory in his Diocese, Rome. I know many of our parishes have pastoral councils that function well. Many of our parishes also come together to form partnership councils, a welcome outcome of "Forward Together in Hope." Partnership Councils can discern and co-ordinate mission over a wider area. At a diocesan level I meet regularly with the chairs of the partnership councils that exist. I welcome that forum to listen and share. In effect we have a diocesan pastoral council, which I wish to continue. At our last meeting I was asked what our priority should be now, I replied, "mission, mission, mission." Without mission it is irrelevant what diocesan structures or buildings we have.

For effective mission, I invite and encourage us all to breathe new life into parish and partnership councils. We need formation to do that. As part of the formation, we will be sharing materials and running pilots with the willing in each deanery. In time these materials, and good practice will be shared across all our parishes and partnerships. I am very grateful to the lay faithful and clergy who have worked hard at putting together such accessible materials to assist us all. If you would like more information, then please contact our Department for Faith and Mission. Materials are on the diocesan website: <https://diocesehn.org.uk/living-the-faith/pastoral-councils/>

There is no one size fits all on offer. Our parishes and partnerships are diverse. However, I trust we can all agree on some basic principles for mission. We are all co-responsible for the mission of the Church. Yes, our responsibilities in so many lay ministries, as deacons, priests and as Bishop are different, but we are all involved. Parishioners and clergy must work together, affirming one another, encouraging one another, caring for one another and lovingly challenging one another to listen to the Lord and carry out his will. Parishes must work ever more closely together in partnerships. Over time parishes will become larger than they are now, as in many cases a partnership becomes a parish. We need to share our human and material resources much better for mission.

Christ's glory shines in the Transfiguration. We are called to shine with the same glory in our mission. May part of our mission be ever better co-responsible ministry in our parishes and partnerships. May we be open to be transfigured in mission by the Lord.

With assurances of prayers

+Stephen
Bishop of Hexham and Newcastle
