

Bishop Hugh's address to Diocesan Synod - March 2026

Good morning everyone. I'm very grateful to have this opportunity to share my thoughts and reflections with you 6 weeks into my time as Bishop of Worcester.

This diocese has been here well over 1000 years, so 6 weeks is not very long.

What I am about to say are therefore my early and initial reflections, which emerge from lots of listening - but they are absolutely not definitive or conclusive, and I reserve the right to say 'I was entirely wrong about that' in future - and I invite and encourage you to share your responses with me, both on anything that seems about right, and anything that really doesn't.

Before anything else though, I want to say 'thank you'. Thank you for your generosity and kindness in making me so welcome. Thank you for inviting me to your churches, schools and communities for worship and fellowship, and for sharing your joys and challenges with me. Thank you for beginning to invest your trust in me - I do not take that for granted.

There was a moment a couple of weeks ago when, in the middle of a full and varied day, I realised that this is what joy feels like, and that there is literally nothing that I want to be doing more than this.

So thank you for helping me to know the joy of God, present amongst us in this diocese.

I want to do something this morning that I began to do in the sermon at my installation service. And to do so as the next step in a tentative exploration with you - I want to consider what it means for us to be 'Kingdom People'. And as I do that, I want to underline what I hope you have already consistently heard from me - that my priority is and will be to engage with children and young people, to learn from them and to explore with them what it means to follow Jesus as his all-age, every person, all in community - the kind of community that will stand before the Lord when Jesus returns and which the book of Revelation describes as - *'a vast crowd, too great to count, from every nation and tribe and people and language, standing in front of the throne and before the Lamb.'*

And in exploring what it means to be Kingdom People, I'm not going to get into the detail of what we need to do, but to focus on the who we need to be.

And then I'd like to have a conversation. And, just to reiterate what I said - I really want to hear your responses and thoughts on what I'm about to say; you are the experts in mission in your communities, and I really want to hear what that means for us as a diocese together - as the Kingdom People of Dudley and Worcestershire.

So, to the phrase that sits on every letterhead, email footer, Instagram post and formal document that we produce in the Diocese of Worcester - 'Kingdom People'.

That phrase was one of the things that first drew me to this Diocese. I want to be part of the Kingdom People. In fact that has long been a deep call in me; to seek the presence, grace and mercy of God in the middle of the muddle of this world, with all its beauty and all its mess; it's why I spent 13 years living and working in one of the L'Arche communities with people with learning disabilities; it's why I loved being a parish priest and it's what I long to see flourishing in the churches, schools and worshipping communities of this diocese.

Because it's clear to me that the Kingdom of God, or the Kingdom of heaven, is at the heart of what Jesus came to be and to do. That he didn't come to start the Church of England, or to give the world some pithy wisdom - but to tear open the veil that lies between heaven and earth, so that the way things are in heaven, pours down onto earth, so that 'God's kingdom might come, on earth as it already is in heaven.' And I want to be part of that.

And I take it that 'the kingdom of heaven' is shorthand for 'how things are when they're the way God wants them to be'. And that that is already and always the case 'in heaven', and that by his life, death and life again, Jesus came to make that possible here on earth too.

And I take it therefore that Jesus wasn't just a particularly good person, nor a divine being who floated around for a while being nice to the people he met - but that he is '*heaven in a human being*' - he is '*how things are when they're the way God wants them to be*' in a person. Which is why, when people suffering from illness or pain meet Jesus, they are healed - not because Jesus has some magic healing gifts, but because anyone who meets Jesus is in heaven, and in heaven nobody can be ill or in pain.

And I take it that when Jesus said, at the point of his ascension back to the Father - '*I am with you always, even to the end of the age*' he really meant it. Which means that this world; the real actual world in which we live and work and hang out with our families, and go to church and make dinner - and everything else - is infinitely close to Jesus, who is heaven on earth, in every moment.

I take it therefore that God's Kingdom is close enough for us to reach out and touch, right now, and in every 'right now'.

When our children were younger, we went to the Lake District a lot for our holidays. And one afternoon, I was walking down a beautiful Lake District lane with one of my daughters. If you've been to the area you can imagine it - a sunken lane, stone wall on one side with a view of glorious hills beyond, a thick hedge on the other, full of the wonder of creation - beauty

everywhere. But I was distracted, thinking about something or other, and wasn't paying much attention to that beauty, when my daughter starting tugging my sleeve - 'daddy, daddy, daddy, look'. And in her hand was a raspberry - a beautiful ripe red raspberry. Now, I'm ashamed to say that my first assumption was that she had nicked it - but there were no gardens nearby. Nor any picnicking families. 'No daddy, LOOK!' she said. And there, in the hedge were raspberries, hundreds of beautiful wild raspberries - enough for a feast.

Friends, there are raspberries everywhere. The beautiful wild raspberries of God's grace, joy, love, mercy and hope are all around us all the time; because the kingdom of heaven has come very, very close.

And so I believe, in the deepest part of who I am, that our role - those of us who try, stumblingly and haltingly, to follow Jesus, is to look for the kingdom raspberries. And I think that's what church is for. We are called to be God's raspberry spotting Kingdom People.

And specifically, the call to be Kingdom People, means church is for three things; we are a learning community, or a school, for kingdom living; we're signposts or witnesses to the kingdom and we're workers for or builders of the kingdom.

Kingdom learners, kingdom witnesses and kingdom builders.

Let me say a little bit more about each of those three calls.

Our first calling as church is to live as Kingdom People - to be a community that is marked by the love, compassion, freedom and justice that shows us the presence of heaven on earth. And that means learning how to be like that. And we do that by opening scripture together and by receiving the sacraments; we do it by discussion, prayer and worship; we do it by being together, by forgiving one another when we mess up and by learning from one another. We do it in every holy encounter with the living God.

Because the church is not 'the kingdom' - we don't simply or straightforwardly become 'heaven on earth' by going to church - and we know that our communities are just as messy as any other part of society. But we are called to be what St Paul calls 'the first fruits' of the kingdom; when people look at us they should see some raspberries!

And that means modelling both a deep confidence and a rich humility; confidence that heaven really is close, and that we really do have all we need in Christ to learn how to live 'on earth as it is in heaven'. Humility that we are not 'the kingdom' and that we are only ever apprentices, learning from Jesus, so that we might by his grace be a little bit more like him tomorrow than we are today.

Church - and those of us who are 'church' - are called to be kingdom learners.

And where might we look for examples of people for whom learning is the centre of their lives?
To children and young people.

And because the church is not 'the kingdom', and because heaven is pouring out onto earth in every place and time, our second calling is to be skilled at spotting where it is and then pointing others towards it - 'there, that's heaven' - that's what things are like when they're the way God wants them to be.

We're to be signposts to or witnesses of the Kingdom wherever we find it - experts in spotting wild raspberries, perhaps in unexpected places. In the communities we serve, the places we live and work; in schools, parks, shops and pubs; in the media and in conversation - wherever we see love or compassion; wherever justice is being done or we sense the freedom of a human being fully alive - or wherever we notice the buds of mercy, grace or hope breaking out; wherever we see heaven on earth, our calling is to point to it and to say 'there, that's how the world is meant to be; that's heaven on earth'.

And in my experience, that is most likely to happen when we go to places and people who are left out, or cast aside; when we spend time on the edge of society, with the kind of people and communities that Jesus spent time with - including children and young people who, let's never forget, Jesus said are the ones to whom the Kingdom has been entrusted.

Kingdom learners, Kingdom witnesses and then, because it's not good enough simply to watch from a distance, and because we are absolutely meant to get our hands dirty, our third calling is to be Kingdom builders or Kingdom workers. That might mean spotting where there are signs of the kingdom, and going to join in, and it might be noticing where the kingdom seems particularly far away, and doing the hard work of building more love, more compassion, more justice and freedom.

And that's what so many of you do when you run a foodbank, sit with a child helping them learn to read; when you partner with a development agency or work to care for creation. It's what you do every time you roll up your sleeves and make things more like heaven than they were before.

Kingdom learners, kingdom witnesses and kingdom builders - that's what I think it means for us to be Kingdom People. And I honestly cannot think of anything better to give our lives to.

And in case you're thinking - 'yes, but where's evangelism on that list?' - It's all evangelism. To be Kingdom People means doing all that learning, witnessing and building in the name of Jesus Christ. And to be constantly and in every way possible, inviting people to know him and to be part of his Kingdom People.

I hope that gives you an initial sense of the kind of community of churches that I think we are called to be as Kingdom People in Worcestershire and Dudley. And I think it matters that we get this part right, as it gives us our shared purpose - the story that we are all invited to be part of as churches, schools and worshipping communities in this diocese. From that story flows everything else - our dreaming and planning and prioritising, all our mission and ministry. Or to put it another way, we need to know who we are, before we figure out what we do. And who we are, are the Kingdom People called and sent to learn about, to witness to and to build 'heaven on earth'.

Questions for conversation.

What makes sense? What doesn't?

What's important? What's missing?

What of this could you share with others? What could you not?

