

THE BISHOP OF ST ALBANS' PRESIDENTIAL ADDRESS

DIOCESAN SYNOD

12 OCTOBER 2024

I want to talk about two things this morning: the **Diocesan Year of Spiritual Renewal and Wellbeing** and the **Assisted Dying Bill** which is to be debated in Parliament this autumn and which is attracting significant attention in the media.

Next year we embark on a **Year of Spiritual Renewal and Wellbeing**. It will be launched on **Saturday 11 January** by **Archbishop Justin** who will visit the Cathedral in the morning and Woburn in the afternoon. The year is designed to offer clergy, lay ministers, congregations, schools and chaplaincies a series of enriching opportunities to deepen their spiritual life and grow in holiness and wholeness.

Many things, not least the legacy of Covid, have turned our eyes 'downwards'. It is my belief that the time has come to lift our hearts and minds to God in prayer and thanksgiving, and seek the renewing life of the Holy Spirit. We know from the Emmaus story in Luke's Gospel that the risen Christ travels with us in all times of challenge and uncertainty, just as he walked with the two bewildered disciples, listening to their concerns and renewing them in hope and love. In company with many others, I believe the time is ripe to re-gather with compassion and kindness, to open and re-engage with the scriptures, 'to break bread' with the risen Lord in our midst, and be transformed.

The Year of Spiritual Renewal and Wellbeing is a golden opportunity for all our church communities to be renewed in grace. Its objectives are to:

- lift our eyes to God and make it a visible priority
- enhance our spiritual and personal wellbeing
- enable spiritual growth which will resource numerical growth
- respond to those issues highlighted by wellbeing surveys
- build on the momentum of this year's Clergy Conferences

An imaginative programme of events has been prepared which will run throughout the year, offering a wide range of events and activities. For clergy there will be:

- Guided/silent retreats (St Beuno's etc)
- Creative Retreats (Lee Abbey etc)
- Walking Retreats (various lengths and number of days)
- Quiet Days (e.g. day on canal narrowboat etc)

For congregations there will be:

- Funding to support a Parish Quiet Day
- Diocesan organised Retreat Days

For everyone there will be:

- A School of Theology – a week-long festival of seminars in the spring with speakers from diverse traditions on a wide range of subjects such as doctrine, education, science and technology, and wellbeing.
- There will be a School of Prayer – a week-long focus on spiritual practice
- In the summer the Cathedral will host a 'Festival of Ideas' with speakers and panel discussions on themes including disability, music, racial justice, literature, and the environment.
- In the autumn there will be the annual Alban Lecture and an event marking the 800th anniversary of the 1225 Magna Carta.
- For our schools, we are preparing new resources for Collective Worship and Lent, and leading an enrichment day.

I want to encourage everyone to engage with something during the year ahead. Funding has been made available through the generosity of various trusts. So be assured: nothing next year will be met from parish share.

I realise that our front-line clergy and lay ministers are busy people with commitments and obligations stretching months ahead. So to make things as easy as possible, everything on offer will be prepared for you to book via a dedicated website. This site will be launched in the coming weeks. Please do then take a look at the calendar of events and decide what would suit you and your church community. Discuss it with your colleagues and PCCs, and book those things which will nourish you personally and your people.

Finally, I want to record my gratitude to the Revd Oliver Blease, Vicar of Radlett, for chairing the team organising and planning the year. They have worked incredibly hard and very imaginatively.

For more information, please visit: year.stalbansdiocese.org.

Assisted Dying Bill

I now want to say a few words about the Assisted Dying Bill which is coming before Parliament shortly. It is a debate that arouses strong emotions and I'm sure there will be a range of views present here today.

The theological basis which has led Christians to oppose euthanasia is rooted in the sixth commandment (Exodus 20.13): 'You shall not kill', sometimes translated as 'You shall not murder'. This commandment is repeated by Jesus in each of the synoptic gospels (Matthew 5:21; 19.18; Mark 10.19; Luke 18.20). Traditionally Christians have believed that life is sacred; it is a gift from God and it is sinful to take life. Instead, in the face of death, Christians have consistently argued that the dying and terminally ill should be shown compassion in their vulnerability and be treated with dignity.

This conviction has shaped our culture and informed our laws. The right to life is now universally recognised as a fundamental human right in both domestic and international human rights legislation. The law places an obligation on governments and their agents to respect, protect and promote it in the conviction that every human

being is of intrinsic value. This conviction undergirds not only our criminal law but all medical, nursing and social care. In my view, anything that might undermine it, either in principle or in practice, ought to be resisted.

Arguments in favour of assisted suicide (because that is what it is) often focus on human autonomy, on the faculties and abilities that an individual enjoys or on an individual's sense of personal worth. These are important considerations, but they must not usurp the intrinsic, God-given, value of a person's life.

Removing or eroding this fundamental principle would not only have a detrimental effect on many aspects of the law, health and social care and on community cohesion, but would also overturn centuries of medical practice based on the Hippocratic Oath. This ancient covenant between doctors and their patients states that doctors are there to heal, not to kill.

There are also practical reasons why I believe the proposed legislation should be resisted.

Potentially, a change in the law will be threatening to disabled people, many of whom already experience terrible discrimination and misunderstanding on a daily basis. There are often treated as if they are not equal with fully-abled people, but they too are made in the image and likeness of God. We are equal before God.

A change in the law may also assist those who perpetrate domestic abuse, particularly of women. Feminist commentators such as Sonia Sodha have spoken of their concerns. She says: "Writing about domestic abuse has opened my eyes to the extent that coercively controlling relationships drive people to do things because others want them to. Of course, there will be women who get a terminal diagnosis, whose partners have been emotionally abusive to them for years – telling them their life isn't worth living – who will come under intolerable pressure to opt for assisted dying."

A change in the law may also adversely affect some elderly people. It is not unusual for older people, especially if they've been ill, to suffer from depression and feel that their lives are not worth much. How easy it would be for them to think they ought to volunteer for euthanasia to reduce pressure on hospital beds. We all know of excellent nurses, care homes and nursing homes, but sadly the mistreatment of older people is all too common. Figures from the Hourglass charity (formerly Action on Elder Abuse) which works to combat harm, abuse and exploitation of older people show that every year more than a million older people are physically, emotionally, financially or sexually abused in the UK.

A survey this summer conducted by the group 'Living and Dying Well' has shown how support for assisted dying amongst the public fluctuates when confronted with evidence from countries where it is legal. For example, nearly half of those in their recent survey (47 per cent), were worried that people in countries where it is legalised opted for assisted dying because they felt they were a burden.

The experience from those countries that have introduced assisted dying is certainly disturbing. Canada, for example, loosened its euthanasia laws in 2021. It no longer requires that a patient's condition should be terminally ill. Instead, it now allows

people whose condition is serious and incurable to also request it. As a result, the number of medically-assisted deaths (MAID) in Canada has risen significantly from 1,018 in 2016 to more than 13,241 in 2022. That year, MAID deaths accounted for about 4.1% of all deaths in the country.

In a survey of over thirteen thousand Canadians (The Fourth Annual Report on Medical Assistance in Dying (MAID) in Canada in 2022) who ended their lives under MAID, the vast majority cited the “loss of ability to engage in meaningful life activities” as the reason for them wanting to end their life. More than one-third of respondents said their decision was, in part, informed by a feeling they were perceived to be a burden by their family, friends or caregivers. Unbelievably, there is now a live debate in Canada about the further expansion of MAID to include people with chronic mental illness to request it.

So what is the alternative?

Surely, it is to provide funding and resourcing for palliative care services in this country. We need to ensure that our hospices receive the level of state funding that they are so badly lacking at present. Research released by the end-of-life charity Marie Curie earlier this month showed that in England and Wales, one in three dying people were severely or overwhelmingly affected by pain in the last week of life, with bereaved people reporting how difficult it is to get joined-up support from health and care professionals at home.

Matthew Reid, the Chief Executive of Marie Curie said: "We are shocked to see this clear evidence of dying people struggling with pain and other symptoms because they cannot access the end of life care they need from overstretched GPs, district nurses and other health workers. There are no two ways about it, care for dying people is in crisis."

In July 2022 the General Synod of the Church of England voted by a large majority to call on the Government to allocate more money for palliative care. It also reaffirmed its opposition to a change in the law on Assisted Dying and the DPP guidelines on this issue.

The Church of England believes that the very best care and support ought to be extended to all who are suffering. It has a noble record of supporting palliative care and the hospice movement. It is wonderful that so many Christians and parishes support our hospices in this diocese who offer outstanding end of life care to people.

As Sarah Mullally, the Bishop of London and former Chief Nursing Officer for England, put it: "No amount of safeguards could ensure the safety of the most vulnerable in society, should there be a change in the law allowing for assisted suicide. We believe that there would be unintended, serious and fundamental consequences for the whole of society, especially for those who are at the most vulnerable point of their lives, and for those who love and care for them."

I am keen to encourage a wide debate in our diocese about this issue and I hope that you will write to your MP to express your views. This matter is too important to be left to a small group of politicians in Westminster to decide on a change that will affect us all.

+Alan St Albans