

A letter from me to the new Bishop of London:

Dear Bishop Sarah, My Lord Bishop,

I think we still address you formally as Lord, but it is significant that we can greet you personally and by your name. I don't know how many Bishop Sarahs there have been in the life of the Church, but certainly you are the first for London. Alleluia!

Yesterday you entered your cathedral, and you were welcomed by the people and clergy of the diocese. What an exciting service, with such a range of wonderful aspects of the life of this city so well represented. And there were many well-wishers, who are not Anglicans, and may not be Christians, all there to mark your arrival and what you represent, which is not least an office which dates back to Roman times, and even predates the See of Canterbury. On Thursday, the Feast of our Lord's Ascension you joined those gathered from our neighbouring parishes to pray on that great feast day of our Lord's enthronement, and it is impressively significant that you should be installed in your Cathedra as we continue to contemplate our Lord's place, at the right hand of the Father, enthroned in majesty and might, uniting heaven and earth and drawing the created order into the union of all things in and through Him.

I hope you might bear with some reflections from this parish, whose boundary is on the same hill, from which you blessed the city before you on Thursday morning, and which honours your nomination and the historic moment of welcoming the first woman Bishop of London.

First, we continue to ponder the extraordinary reality of our Lord's Ascension. If it puzzles any Christian, it should not be a surprise. From the earliest NT writings we know that Christians believed Jesus was at the Father's right hand in glory, but little is said of the how, and why and where: how did he get there and where is that anyway? We will touch on that; but we have two accounts of the actual Ascension, one in Luke's Gospel, which seems to take place on Easter Day, the other in the Acts of the Apostles in its early verses, in more detail is very clearly 40 days after Easter.

I think what Luke is doing in giving us these two versions is to help us to step into or least observe the heavenly realms. Most of the post resurrection accounts have something of that hazy, gossamer-screen-like effect. Without being filmic, or directly dream-like, we are taken somewhere new and different in these moments of revelation, beyond time and yet in time; however different each of the resurrection stories are, and they are, they all succeed in being different from the other encounters in the same Gospels from which they come. Let's ponder John's Gospel for a moment, John's Jesus has no account of the Ascension, all his resurrection accounts are a form of Ascension, while also being profoundly intimate, they are characterised by a departing closeness, which is poignant and dynamic. Think of Mary in the garden by the tomb: The earlier way of relating to the earthly Jesus is no longer possible. It is the same phenomenon that Paul describes "Even though we once regarded Christ according to the flesh, we regard him thus no longer. Therefore, if anyone is in Christ, he is a new creation." The old manner of human relationship is over. From now on we can touch Jesus only "with the Father". Now we can touch him only be ascending.

Your ministry amongst us is an earthly one, but your role as Bishop points us directly to our heavenly origin and destination.

We believe your ministry rests on that of the Apostles, to whom by your consecration your authority reaches. This is not a talisman this great succession, but a weight of history, which your office helps you bear, as you may not bear it on your own. Through our prayers and the prayerful goodwill of those whom you serve, but primarily through God's grace and call, you are borne up in the office and task you must perform.

As our Diocesan you represent the faithfulness of those who have gone before us and you point us not just to tomorrow, but God's dawning new day, which is already breaking. You help us see the signs of the Kingdom which is yet to come and yet is known. Our Lord's Ascension partly tells us that our lives are already "hid with Christ in God", and you must remind us of that dynamic Kingdom-centred truth, raising our hopes above mere tomorrows, and paltry platitudinous aspirations of merely human origin, towards the great bold Beatitudes and the Joy and blessedness of a fully renewed life which is drenched in the Kingdom of God.

You inherit an extraordinary legacy.

First of all, before your ordination you were a nurse, and of course most senior nurse of your profession in your early 40s. As the Chief Nurse, you will have had to grasp the complexities and political realities of a vast organisation, the NHS. It is clear that you were greatly respected in that role. That profession itself draws on several noble sources. The history of the care of the sick is deeply tied up with the Christian tradition. Places like Bart's Hospital, in this diocese trace a direct line of descent from 1123, when Rahere went to Rome was miraculously cured of a terrible illness and returned and in thanksgiving founded the Priory and Hospital of St Bartholomew. Your own profession was indelibly marked by the verve and multiple capacity of Florence Nightingale, about whom you spoke in your sermon yesterday. Rather nicely your enthronement was on her 198<sup>th</sup> birthday. You drew attention not only to her gifts as a nurse of unique leadership, but her interests in epidemiology, statistics and Theology. You also rightly repeated the word compassion as at the very heart of Christian ministry. I wish you so well in underlining this vital Christian virtue and spiritual gift, and modelling it in your ministry. So many areas of life now need that sign. It is desperately needed in the life of this diocese in all its institutions, it is so vital in education, care of the sick, being a voice for the poor. We need to hear it the in preaching of Good News in places where it is drowned out by the noise head-phones, social media storms, and the clamour around security on our streets and throughout this city. We are all beset and bewildered with incomprehension at how young people could contemplate jihadist martyrdom in Syria, or gang-land violence. It is only with compassion that we can ever enter into the experience of the marginalised and frightened. Help lead us in this effort, which speaks directly to the streets of this parish and its immediate environs. Pray for the youth work of our neighbours at St Mary's, which is on the forefront of work with local gang members. And be a voice of reason and compassion on all the platforms your office provides for you.

Bishop Richard, whom you succeed was a towering Bishop, whose personal prayerfulness and vision restored hope and confidence after a season of despair in this diocese. For years, against national trends and by any indicators there has been consistent and measurable growth in Church attendance and practice in the Diocese of London. There are lots of theories about why this is, but the singular leadership of the last Bishop renewed hope, and was the basis of a new strap-line for the Diocese: Confident, Creative and Compassionate. While personally I squirm at the word confident in relation to faith. It can be an oxymoron and the

progenitor of dark things. However, creativity and compassion are the name of what this city does well, and of which here at St Mark's and its surrounding area there seem to be overwhelming examples.

You said in your sermon yesterday that by your unexpected appointment you were "subversive". You also said you were intending "to embrace" this vocation fully. Some may have been fearful of this claim, for others it may have fulfilled their worst fears. I took all that you said to underline the ultimately subversive character of the Gospel itself which comforts the comfortless and discomfits the comfortable. Jesus's message did precisely this, from before his birth his mother foresaw the thrones of the powerful being overturned, and Jesus's return to Nazareth, this is something of the age he is clear he is bringing about. Remind us of the urgency of the Kingdom; help us connect our liturgy with a divine order which is not a confirmation of the complacency of this age. Comfort the comfortless and with your very unique compassion speak truth to power.

"Thrones and dominations, stars upon their way, all the heavenly orders, in the great array" Sounds the hymn. It continues "In your hearts enthrone *him*: there let him subdue all that is not holy, all that is not true."

As your enthronement, dear Bishop signals that of our Lord's, help us to enthrone the ascended Christ in our hearts, that touching him we may touch God, as we believe this Eucharist we do too, point to him, teach him, as we pray for you.

William Gulliford  
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