

DIOCESE IN EUROPE

THE CHURCH
OF ENGLAND

The Bishop in Europe:
The Right Reverend Dr. Robert Innes



September 2019

For Clergy and Churchwardens

Dear Brothers and Sisters in Christ,

‘..this mystery, which is Christ in you, the hope of glory...’ (Colossians 1:27)

I do hope that these past weeks of summer have provided you with opportunities for rest and restoration. When I moved to Belgium in 2005, one of my most striking impressions was the strong rhythm to the year with its general social expectation that in summer life would be much quieter with smaller shops and medical practices routinely closed for a good length of time and the roads free of most of their traffic. With many of our societies running at breakneck pace, this commitment to proper rest (which doesn’t exist so much in the Anglo-Saxon world) is something I find a godsend.

But the new academic year has begun with heavy and difficult international news: a tense gathering of world leaders in Biarritz, an increasing likelihood of a no-deal Brexit, the looming threat of a trade war between the giant economies of the USA and China, and raging fires in the Amazon rainforest. In regard to the fires, President Macron expressed many of our concerns well when he said: ‘our home is burning’. The widespread destruction of forests which act as the lungs of the planet portrays vividly the threat to us all of climate change in a globally interconnected world. Those fires do not just destroy trees; they destroy hope.

Aware of this spirit of looming heaviness – emotional, political, ecological – I took the opportunity over the summer to re-read Jürgen Moltmann’s *Theology of Hope*. One of the classics of 20th century theology, this book invites us to put ‘hope’ front and centre in our Christian thinking. Moltmann helps us understand the Old Testament as the story of God’s promises for the future. These promises reach a decisive fulfilment in the resurrection of Jesus Christ. Jesus enters the depths of suffering and the worst of human experience and God raises Jesus through these experiences into new life. But God’s promises are not exhausted in the resurrection of Christ. The first Easter is the first day of a new creation, and God continues to work out the implications of this new creation in the ongoing work of the Spirit and the mission of the church. After Jesus, we work out this mission in the tension between the world as it is, and the world as God wants it to be and how it one day will be.

In 2019, I believe the task of Christian ministers is to embody and point people to sources of hope. This is hard - and despair is one of the greatest temptations of the age. Despair tells us that nothing can be done and that there is no point in trying. But living without hope is not living fully or properly, and at the entrance to hell in Dante’s vision is written: ‘Abandon hope, all you who enter here.’ So against the sin of despair, we are to encourage people to rejoice in the promises of God, to know the reality of the resurrection, and to look everywhere for signs of God’s promises being realised in our world and in our individual lives.

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Brexit and the possibility of No-Deal

Hope enables us to confront the world around us with clear-eyed realism without being overwhelmed. So turning to an issue that affects very many of us: the replacement of Theresa May with Boris Johnson as UK Prime Minister at the end of July has made Brexit more difficult for our diocese. PM Johnson has been clear that the UK will leave the EU on 31st October ‘with or without a deal’. ‘No Deal’ is now something we must take very seriously. The prospect of ‘No Deal’ is of huge concern to me, and to my episcopal brothers and sisters in England. Some of them have issued a statement, which I completely support: <https://www.churchofengland.org/more/media-centre/news/bishops-issue-open-letter-brexit>

I will be working hard with senior colleagues to evaluate and ameliorate the impact of No Deal on the diocese - we have booked a meeting with the Secretary General of the National Church Institutions next week. I do encourage all our clergy and lay leaders to try to ensure chaplaincies have access to the best local advice (e.g. from citizens’ groups and British Consulates) in regard to such things as residency, movement (people, animals, funds, data), and - especially – access to healthcare. I hope that chaplaincies will be paying especial attention to the needs of elderly and vulnerable people who will be feeling particularly anxious. And I am aware that British expatriots on fixed incomes continue to struggle with the low value of sterling against the euro.

My sense thus far is that our host countries have in general been remarkably understanding of our predicament. However, it is worth being aware that a no-deal Brexit could hit the economies of the countries where we live, and any moves by Britain to evade payment of debts that the EU believes it is owed could quickly generate bad feeling. So, now is the time to intensify efforts to build friendship, understanding and sympathy with those amongst whom we live.

Other Diocesan News and Staff Moves

Britain may be leaving the EU, but the Diocese in Europe is here to stay! - and earlier in the summer we received some heartening news from two countries where we minister. In **Italy**, the *Intesa* between the State and our church Association giving our churches full legal recognition (and potential funding through the tax system), was finally signed between Canon Vickie Sims and Prime Minister Conte. This is a huge achievement, with lots of people working together over many years. Well done to all involved! In a similar vein, more than a decade of patient diplomacy in **Belgium** has led to the granting of state salaries to the President of the Association that represents our churches and to a secretary – for which we thank King Philippe of the Belgians most warmly.

Clergy wellbeing remains a priority. In addressing the issues raised by our clergy wellbeing survey, we are first of all wanting to improve oversight and support. We conducted in July interviews for a new archdeacon for Germany and Northern Europe and for the East. A candidate has been offered the post, formalities are nearly complete and there will be an announcement very soon. Advertisements for a freestanding, full-time stipendiary Archdeacon for Gibraltar and Italy and Malta Archdeaconries are currently in the Church Times. In addition, a stream of work is well underway with diocesan and deanery lay chairs to help lay people understand better how they can support their clergy, from recruitment and induction onwards.

I need to let you know that Tola Hummel is leaving us this month. Tola has been at the heart of our safeguarding work, first with Ian Carter, then as acting manager and more recently with

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Andrea Watkins. She has played a key role in enabling us to implement professional safeguarding arrangements in the diocese and she leaves with our very best wishes for her future.

Finally, I wish you all much strength in the coming term. I am expecting the next few months to be challenging. I trust we will be able to support one another and that our shared faith will work itself out in hope. We live from the resurrection of Christ and look forward to seeing how God will work out his promises in our lives in the months to come.

Yours sincerely,

+ Robert Gibraltar in Europe

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