Sermon to mark the public ministry of Archbishop Andrew

I’d like to start by welcoming you here to this ancient place. We are so pleased you’ve come to share this day with us and hope it encourages you whether you are a Christian or of another faith or none. You are most welcome. At the heart of human life, what makes us unique perhaps, is the extent to which we are dependent on one another. We belong together and to each other.

And as a society and as individuals we are facing new and demanding challenges, perhaps unprecedented. We are only just beginning to see what ‘post pandemic life’ might mean – supporting those who’ve lost loved ones, rebuilding essential services and economy, managing changes to the way we work and interact with one another. At the same time our NHS is struggling to cope with extraordinary levels of demand; the costs of living are increasing at a rate not seen since the 1970s. And across the world, climate change continues to impact the poorest communities, while the richer nations share a lack of consensus reducing our capacity to offer effective and sustainable solutions.

We meet too in the context of ongoing wars and bitter feuds in different places of the world. The bloodshed in Ukraine, sanctioned alarmingly by a part of the Church, has reminded us that it is less easy to keep the peace than to start a war. Contending for the truth is costly. Whenever justice is compromised we become complicit in collaborating with evil. This, together with the rise of a new kind of nationalism across Europe, is a reminder that these are fragile times.

We are all familiar with Saint David’s words – to keep the faith and do the little things. These words can empower us to do the good which counts and to be responsible and care for each other. However, there is a way of saying this which reduces its impact. ‘Keeping the faith’ also invites us to consider the bigger picture. The future is shaped by global, geopolitical considerations - and our use of power, for good or for ill, can craft a future in which there is human flourishing or human misery.

The Christian take on power addresses this directly: St Paul put it well: ‘For you know the grace of our Lord Jesus Christ, that though he was rich, yet for your sake he became poor, so that you through his poverty might become rich’. (2 Cor 8:9). When Jesus came to us, it was in the context of the most powerful and bombastic empire the world had ever seen to an obscure province and to an oppressed people. He lived and died on the margins of power, the King of the nations humiliated, tortured and killed. His death was a protest, inverting accepted norms of power and control, taking the role of a servant but unmasking what was wrong and resisting evil.

When we resist evil and injustice (as we must) we also need something which takes us beyond the missiles, beyond conflict to a place where there can be reconciliation and a restoration of peace. We believe that God raised Jesus from the dead, not to take terrible revenge on those who laid hands on him but, extraordinarily, to offer forgiveness. God does not crush or brutalize but offers hope for all people.

And in the context of where we find ourselves in Wales at the moment, I am certain this power to do things differently, to forge a better future is well within our grasp. But it must be about more than economic prosperity. I’ve been conscious of the strain presented today by social media pressures and perfectionism stress with its attendant effects on mental health of young people especially. It is not easy to build resilience when pressure levels are unremittingly high. Values and securities which foster spiritual and emotional well-being are as essential to any society as are sound economic policies. At the heart of the Easter season, there is a story which tells us that people are cherished and are loved for who they are and that life can be restored and have new purpose.

During the pandemic we all had to make huge adjustments to daily life. We found ways of navigating a very strange landscape. We discovered it was possible to forge resilience – that challenges, which stretched us almost to breaking-point, also produced character, resolve and a kindness for the plight of others.

Near this city, just a few miles from here, a community of people committed themselves to seeing no-one in their town was without medicine, food or human contact. Churches of all denominations and people of goodwill from across the region found their voice again and ensured no-one was abandoned. Even in this Cathedral, which became a vaccination centre, we found the opportunity to serve in a new way was possible. And what was true here was true also across many regions in Wales. This act of self-empowering - to love and to serve seems to me to be at one with what Christians call the Kingdom of God – it describes God inspired activity which reflects the values and the ambitions of Almighty God. And in localities, communities, towns and cities it takes shape when people act in a way that betters and improves those who are most vulnerable and marginalized.

I want once more to pay tribute to the way many made life possible during this time: workers in the NHS performed under some of the most challenging of circumstances as did others too. But I want also to thank colleagues – ministers and priests alike for ministering when it was profoundly difficult: taking funerals when few could gather to grieve, maintaining contact when face to face gatherings was not possible. For your faithfulness and creativity, we thank you all for staying true to your calling: this power to touch human frailty is immensely important. The power to serve, to bless and to give reminds us we are all called to be Good Samaritans whose heroism may seem trivial to some but is life saving for others.

Of course, the church, the institution, needs to hear its own message at this point. We don’t have an unblemished record when it comes to the use and misuse of power. We have let down survivors of abuse and failed to admit our shortcomings, preferring at times to protect our reputation above the individuals damaged by our neglect. We owe an apology to those whom we have failed - and make that apology unreservedly.

We have also found working together as churches, at anything more than a local life, to be problematic and this is surely, a sin. For my part I want to invite colleagues to a conversation about ways in which, together, we can bless the people of Wales – in our shared commitment, in both our languages, to all our communities. I will be writing to churches, old and new very soon for honest conversations about where we are and how we can make the saving love of Jesus Christ more visible across this land. And to my dear friends of other faiths, I also make this invitation: we need each other and we can do more together than apart. I wonder what the future holds for our different faith communities and how we can manage a future which proves better than our past?

However, it is not only the church which needs to rediscover the power of apology. Our national life, political and cultural, needs to be shaped in a way that inspires confidence that when mistakes are made and deliberate wrongs are done, we acknowledge truthfully our own part and, in words familiar to Anglicans, neither dissemble nor cloak our failings before the face of almighty God. There is a power in saying sorry and taking appropriate action so confidence and trust can be restored.

This kind of honesty is key to unlocking wider and bigger problems. The issue of climate change is rightly at the top of our nation’s agenda. The Church in Wales has appointed its first Climate Change Champion and at our Governing Body meeting this week endorsed a Net Zero carbon framework urging all our churches to move quickly to net zero. But we need to be honest with ourselves as a nation – with industries that need to shift from their reliance of fossil fuels for energy, we need to be honest about our housing sector, with the agricultural markets and producers of food, our dependance on roads and we need to hold ourselves accountable for our own use of earth’s resources and what effect we have as individuals.

Here too there is a power to choose which has consequences.

I was invited yesterday to say something personal about me and my hopes. Born into a home, a happy home, where different cultures and languages were very familiar to me, I have found it natural to celebrate difference. What gave me life as a young person was Llanelli rugby and Liverpool football. As a parish priest, I discovered what I learned as a young Christian that God is full of endless goodness and is always one step ahead of us. I came to discover that the good news of Jesus Christ is the hope for our world because God forgives and restores us whoever we are and whatever mess or success we have made of life. And so, my passion is to make Christ known – when the church shows in its life the scars he bore for us and the victory he won for us all, it does something good and blessed. I long for that authentic life for myself, my family and friends and for our church.

So this remains my deepest hope: that Wales can known redeeming love, never lose to Italy again at the National Stadium, Pep comes second and that what lies before us is like the promised land of old – full of hope and promise. My hero, other than my brother, is Polycarp whose last words before he was martyred are recorded like this: ‘Fourscore and six years have I served him, and he has never done me injury; how then can I now blaspheme my King and Saviour?”

I mentioned at the start of my address that this is the season of Easter and we know this is for us as Christians the great feast and festival of hope. We believe in the power of love over hate and life over death. The power to choose, to orientate ourselves to this way of living, is truly transformative. My hope, my prayer is for us in Wales to live this good news in the big and in the smaller decisions we make. May God bless us to a future in which we, our sons and daughters and their children too, find hope and live it out too for the sake of others.

Amen