

# Bishop Stephen Wright

## Bishop of Hexham & Newcastle

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### Pastoral Letter

#### Second Sunday of Easter, Divine Mercy Sunday, 7<sup>th</sup> April 2024

Dear sisters and brothers,

A joyful Easter to you all. The Easter Season guides us from the Risen Lord's first encounters with His followers to Jesus' Ascension and the descent of the promised Holy Spirit at Pentecost. We will celebrate Pentecost, the Birthday of the Church, on the 19<sup>th</sup> May. Our Sunday Gospels describe Jesus preparing His followers to continue His ministry. Our First Readings, from the Acts of The Apostles, describe the reality of the early days of the Church. Their Spirit filled successes, and their challenges too.

The Risen Lord is preparing us all for mission. He is preparing us to be His Church here and now. At Pentecost Jesus will send His Holy Spirit on each one of us afresh so that we have all that we need to minister in Jesus' name.

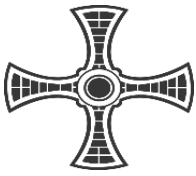
As a diocesan family we have been listening and discerning. That is good. You will be aware that the summary of all the listening exercises and my initial personal response are published on the diocesan website. Just as the risen Jesus shows his wounds to His followers in today's Gospel, it is fair to say we have been open about our family wounds too. It is Thomas who wishes to see and touch the wounds. Unless he does so, he refuses to believe the good news. There is nothing wrong in us all being like Thomas. We have touched the wounds of the Body of Christ, His Church, here in our Diocese. But the Lord calls Thomas to action. To be His missionary disciple. Our Keralan sisters and brothers and all from India delight in telling us this doubting, despondent man is transformed and brought Christianity to the subcontinent. From touching the wounds to proclaiming the Gospel and bringing Christ to others.

Like St. Thomas, the Lord is calling us to move from touching the wounds to being His missionary Disciples. To move from discerning the past to discerning our now and our future. As I visit more and more parishes, schools, and communities, I have the joy of seeing how so many of us are already active in serving the Lord and His people. It is inspiring and humbling. I am sure though the Lord is ambitious for our future.

In this Easter season I invite us all to pray and reflect on how the Lord is calling us to mission. For Pentecost I hope to share with you further reflections, not about the past, but about our now and our future. These will not be simply my thoughts. Since the New Year I have been listening and reflecting with women and men, young and more mature from across the diocese and from many of its varied institutions, on what the Lord is calling us to be and do. I thank them for their prayerful work. With others it is now for me to articulate those reflections. That is my Easter prayer and my Easter work. I pray what is offered will be a shared vision for us all to reflect on and discern. I will speak about that more at Pentecost.

So how can we begin to pray and reflect on the Lord's calling. May I mention just two themes from our readings today. The first is being present in communion. The second is focusing on Jesus' mercy.

Being present in communion. The change in St. Thomas from doubt to mission comes about for two linked reasons. The first reason is obvious, he meets the risen Lord. So do we in His Word



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and in the Sacraments. But the second linked reason is often overlooked. Thomas' doubts initially arise as he was not there with the community. He had isolated Himself and so was not present when Jesus first appeared. Not being present in communion led to him not experiencing the risen Christ. He missed out.

Jesus wills His Church. Jesus wills His followers with all their faults and failings to be His presence in the world. The Church is not an optional add on to Jesus' ministry. The Church, the People of God, you, me, all of us, are chosen and willed by the Lord to be His presence here and now. We must be together; we must be in Communion. Jesus prayed we would be one. No factions, no divisions, no isolating from one another. If that happens then we will never meet the risen Christ let alone share Him with others. As we discern our calling, be present in communion.

The second theme is Mercy. In the year 2000, Pope St. John Paul II declared that this Second Sunday of Easter be also known as Divine Mercy Sunday. His inspiration was twofold. Firstly, the readings at Mass carry the theme of mercy. The risen Jesus' mercy to Thomas and all his Disciples, most of whom had left Him in his hour of need. From the Acts of the Apostles, we read about the early Christian community's mercy to one another in sharing justly, with particular care for those in need. To quote Pope St. John Paul II's inaugural homily,

*In the various readings the liturgy seems to indicate the path of mercy which, while re-establishing the relationship of each person with God, also creates new relations of fraternal solidarity among human beings. Christ has taught us that man not only receives and experiences the mercy of God but is also called to practice mercy towards others... mercy which not only forgives sins but also reaches out to all human needs.*

The second inspiration for this Divine Mercy Sunday was a holy woman, Sr. Faustina Kowalska canonised by Pope St. John Paul II on this Sunday in the year 2000. Time does not allow a full biography. Suffice to quote Pope St. John Paul II again,

*By divine providence, the life of this humble daughter of Poland was completely linked with the history of the 20<sup>th</sup> Century... In fact it was between the First and Second World wars that Christ entrusted his message of mercy to her... witnesses and participants in the events of those years and the horrible sufferings they caused for millions of people, know well how necessary was the message of mercy.*

A visionary, St. Faustina met the risen Lord in prayer. She was entrusted with words for our troubled times. Most strikingly Jesus told St. Faustina, "Humanity will not find peace until it turns trustfully to divine mercy." Thomas found peace for his troubled soul in the mercy of the Lord. So will we. Mercy makes relationships right again. With God, with one another. Let us allow the Lord's mercy into our hearts and minds and let us share it.

Being present together in communion. Receiving and sharing the Lord's mercy. These are initial steps in responding to the Lord's call to be His Church here and now. Thank you for the many ways you put these into practice. In this Year of Prayer may we discern how the Lord is calling us to deepen our commitment to Him. May the Lord bless our Easter Season and our ongoing discernment.

With assurances of prayers,

+ Stephen