

Sermon series on Five Priorities for our PRIORY STRATEGY

1. WORSHIP

Through the five Sundays of Lent, we are going to be using our sermons to focus on the five themes which we have set as our priorities for the Priory's Strategy for the next five years. At our Away Day next Saturday (sign-up sheet at the back) we will be reflecting together on the practical ways by which we should develop these themes to make these priorities a reality in our shared life here in Lancaster Priory.

Three of the priorities are taken from the Blackburn Diocesan Vision 2026, because we do not exist in isolation here: we are part of wider circles: as a parish we are a part of the Deanery of Lancaster and Morecambe, the Diocese of Blackburn, the Province of York, the Church of England, the Anglican Communion, and the whole Church of God in earth and heaven!

The Church of England exists with an ecclesiology which makes the Bishop the focus of unity in every diocese, and the bishop is called to set the agenda for the diocese in ways which are consistent with the wider Church of England. So in a national programme, which was agreed by the General Synod of the Church of England, and called "Renewal and Reform," every diocese is being challenged to respond to this challenge from the national church.

Renewal & Reform *is an ambitious programme of work, which seeks to provide a narrative of hope to the Church of England in the 21st century. It is rooted in a sense of Biblical hope and an understanding of Christ's call to us to pray that the Lord of the harvest will send out workers into the harvest field.*

It is therefore right that every parish church should respond to this bold initiative. In Blackburn Diocese, the Bishop initiated Vision 2026 to lead us up to the centenary of the formation of the diocese in 8 years' time with an ambitious programme, and under the banner

headline of “Healthy Churches Transforming Communities” our diocesan vision focusses on:

1. Making disciples of Jesus Christ
2. Being witnesses to Jesus Christ
3. Growing leaders for Jesus Christ.

For our own part in making this vision a reality, we have added two further priorities, which are implicit in the diocesan vision, but which I believe we need to make explicit. So we have added to those three priorities:

- OFFERING WORSHIP TO GOD THROUGH OUR LORD JESUS CHRIST
- REACHING OUT IN THE NAME OF JESUS CHRIST

So in future weeks, we will be looking at the themes of discipleship, witness, leadership, and outreach. But we begin today, as I believe is right and proper, with Worship.

For this is our primary obligation as Christians - to give God the honour and praise for all his gifts to us, and above all, the gift of his Son Jesus Christ. “**Worthy is the Lamb that was slain, to receive power, riches wisdom, strength, and honour and glory and blessing.**” It is that **worthiness** of God, or to use an older form of the word, worth-ship –which gives us the word, worship – the giving of glory to God.

Another word we use for our services, is the “Liturgy” a word which comes from two Greek words – ‘λειτος’ meaning public, and ‘-εργος’, meaning work – so liturgy is the “work of the people” it is what we do here together that offers praise to God, that is the very best that we can offer to be worthy of his name.

Of course, you don’t need robes, choirs, even a church building to worship God – you can worship anywhere. My favourite hymn, “How

great thou art” was written in the mountains of northern Romania, where I often used to walk, and whenever we sing the lines:

*When through the woods, and forest glades I wander
And hear the birds sing sweetly in the trees
When I look down from lofty mountain grandeur
And see the brook, and feel the gentle breeze
Then sings my soul, my Saviour God to Thee
How great Thou art, how great Thou art*

I am reminded that such awe-inspiring beauty can cause us to fall to our knees in awe and wonder.

But I do believe that we worship best when we worship together as a community; and since the earliest days of Christianity people have gathered to **worship the Lord in the beauty of holiness**, and inheriting traditions from the Jewish Temple, and the Imperial courts of Rome and Byzantium, we have made our worship into a sacred rite, an offering of praise and thanksgiving, embellished with all the creative arts: the architecture of a church building which draws our eyes to heaven, and sacred choral music which expresses our wonder, love, and praise in ways to which words alone cannot do justice.

It is the holiness of our worship which can draw us close to God, and that sense of holiness is all the more striking when “**craftsman’s art and music’s measure**” combine to lift the faithful heart to God. Our evening service on Ash Wednesday was one such occasion when everything came together in a wonderful act of worship that so many people were moved to tears by the awareness that God was present in our hearts and voices as the choir led us in singing his praises.

Our worship is enriched because we are sensory beings, and all our senses are addressed in our worship here:

- **we see** an awe-inspiring building where people have gathered to pray for over a thousand years, “**towers that may tell forth salvation**”
- **we hear** music which lifts our hearts and souls to worship, and we **sing to God new songs of worship** as **with the choirs of new Jerusalem** around God’s throne
- **we smell** the **incense of lowliness**, that ancient and costly offering which “**owns a deity nigh**” or in more common parlance, is used to heighten our awareness that we are in the presence of God
- **we touch** the sacrament when it is given to us as we come to receive communion, and we are fed by Jesus as he fed his disciples at the Last Supper, and **the hands that holy things have taken** are strengthened for our service in the world
- and **we taste the wine of the Kingdom** of heaven in the shared communion cup – uniting us powerfully to each other as we, who are many are one body because we all share in the one true bread.

But there is more to our worship, as we do engage our brains when we are in church (I hope!) for that is why we have a sermon every week, to try and make sense of all that is said in our readings from the Bible, in our own time and place. The Bible is not always an easy document to read and to understand. We need it to be put into our own context, and helped, challenged, and inspired by what it means to be a Christian in our own context. So that is what we try to do in our sermons – building up the Body of Christ who are gathered here today. We sing God’s praise, we are assured of God’s forgiveness, we hear God’s word, and we engage with that word: as St Paul says, “*I will pray with the spirit, but I will pray with the mind also; I will sing praise with the spirit, but I will sing praise with the mind also.*” (1 Cor 14.15).

We also make our prayers to God, and are assured that God hears our prayers. We **put peace into each others’ hands**, and after giving

thanks to God for the gift of Jesus Christ to save the world, we are fed with the Body and Blood of Christ before being sent out into the world to do what God calls us to do in His name.

As someone once said, when our worship ends, our service begins: for yes, although we serve God in our gathering as the people of God to offer praise and thanksgiving, we also serve him in our ministry when we serve the needs of those we know to be in need, and who we are called to serve according to our gifts.

So – as we make worship a priority in the coming years, we will be seeking to:

- worship God in ways that represent the very best that we as a community have to offer:
- welcome others to benefit from the richness of our worship
- work to deepen our understanding of God's call to us
- ensure our church is fit for the challenges of our life and worship in the 21st Century.

Exactly how we do all this – is over to you, as we put the flesh onto the bones of our strategy for the coming years.

We, the clergy, the churchwardens and the PCC cannot do this on our own. We need your support, contributions, and involvement to make this happen.

If you are not able to come to the Away Day, we will be sharing the detailed questions I am putting to all the participants, and I invite your responses, so that our Strategy may benefit from the contributions and the wisdom of the whole church community here, and I do hope that you will respond, both now, and when the strategy is published in April at our APCM, to fulfil our calling to:

- offer to God the best we can offer in our worship

- make disciples of Jesus Christ
- be witnesses of Jesus Christ
- grow leaders for Jesus Christ, and
- reach out in the name of Jesus Christ to those he calls us to serve in his name.

Amen.