

***For those unable to watch the video, this is the full transcript of what the Bishops say:***

**Bishop Martyn:**

I'm sat outside the chapel here at Bishop's Lodge because this has been a very important place of prayer for me during my time as Bishop of Leicester. As with all our church buildings and places of worship this place has been closed to me. I've not been able to use it in the way that I used to during this period of pandemic and lockdown. Only now am I beginning to re-enter and start to say my daily prayers here again.

This video is a call to prayer to the Diocese of Leicester. Bishop Guli and I are wanting to issue this call to every church, every fresh expression of Church, every chaplaincy, every school, everyone who counts themselves as part of the Diocese of Leicester. To say that it's this period of time particularly now the beginning of September and as we then move on towards Christmas and the end of the year; this is the moment when we need to be asking the question once again what is God saying to us as a church?

During this period of lockdown and pandemic God has been reshaping the church, there can be no doubts about that. So much was stripped away from us, we were taken right back to our core essentials. Our life of prayer, our life of service to our neighbours and so on.

And now is the moment when we need to take stock and ask what this is going to mean for the long term future of the church. I believe that God has been active in the church and through the church during this time. But we need to listen to what God is saying to us as a church before we take what may be some quite big decisions about the future shape of the church.

So primarily this process which we've given the title Shaped by God Together is a process of listening. Listening first and foremost to God and that's why we need to start with a call to prayer. We hope that everyone will use the resources that are going to be available on the website and in your local churches to spend time listening to God, asking what God is saying to the church, both as we emerge from lockdown but also as we face all the uncertainties and unknowns about the future. We know that we have so much to learn. We didn't get everything right during this period of lockdown. We know that for some people there were new ways of engaging with the church while others really struggled to find ways of engaging.

We know that issues such as the environment and Black Lives Matter have really come to the fore during this time and it's important that that isn't just something that happens briefly and then we move on. But that we learn these lessons and that we make them a part of our life together for the future. They've also been other long-standing questions which we now need to address; our care of our church buildings, these wonderful beautiful symbols of God's presence in our midst. And yet for some small congregations now these buildings have become a real burden taking up all of their life together. What are we going to do about the care of these buildings in the future? And then there's the question of finance. We know that very few churches now can afford all that's involved in both caring for their building, and paying the stipend of their clergy, and all the on costs that are involved in all of that. We're very fortunate in the Diocese of Leicester that people have been very generous both today but also previous generations. We have income from historic assets but some of that income now goes to subsidize the church in areas that are actually very wealthy. While other areas that are much less wealthy don't receive any subsidy. We need to address that inequity in our use of finance. And then finally in questions of ministry we've worked with a model of ministry which has been very much focused on clergy and on paying clergy a stipend. We need to ask the question whether that is the right model for the future?

These are big questions that we've been wrestling with for a long time but we believe that now is the moment when we need to start exploring creatively how we address those questions. So this whole process Shaped by God Together is first and foremost a process of listening to God.

But then a process which we hope will lead on to answering some of these tough questions knowing that there will be big decisions to make in the near future. So as we begin this Shaped by God Together process Bishop Guli and I wanted to share some very brief biblical reflections which we hope might form the basis for your own reflections and your own listening as we embark on this process Shaped by God Together.

So Bishop Guli now introduces her reflections on a well-known bible passage from the Gospels about Mary and Martha.

**Bishop Guli:**

You'll be familiar I'm sure with the story of Mary and Martha from Luke Chapter 10, just five verses which tell of two sisters whom Jesus visited in their home in Bethany on the outskirts of Jerusalem. Martha busy doing all that's needed so their guest can be fed watered and looked after. While Mary sits at Jesus' feet. Eventually Martha's resentment spills over and she says "Lord do you not care that my sister has left me to do all the work tell her then to help me." But Jesus answers "Martha, Martha you are worried and distracted by many things there is need only of one thing. Mary has chosen the better part which will not be taken away from her." I confess that over the years, especially when I was younger, I struggled with this passage for at first sight it appears that Jesus is denigrating the work that was traditionally done by women. After all someone had to cook and clean and put food on the table. And in first century Palestine that was unlikely to be a man. By taking Mary's side isn't Jesus at worst belittling or at best taking for granted Martha's contribution. A contribution that many women even today will recognize as theirs too.

If I'm honest this still troubles me a little but I've come to realize that the story is better understood from a different perspective, and a more positive one.

Rather than devaluing Martha perhaps Jesus is inviting her, together with her sister, to enter into the space that would conventionally have been occupied by men alone.

This isn't Jesus rebuking Martha but raising her status by giving her, along with all those who are marginalized by society a valid place at his side.

Read like that the story exemplifies the importance for all of us, no matter who we are, of placing ourselves at Jesus' feet. In a posture of open and prayerful listening. This way of being characterizes Christian living generally; but is perhaps particularly significant at this time, as we adjust to the new demands placed on us by Covid-19. As we prepare for changes that lie ahead and discern the future shape of our diocese. In the face of uncertainty and change the temptation is often to rush towards one extreme or the other.

Either to throw ourselves into activity to be seen to be busy, making things happen, and feeling useful a little like Martha was doing. Or to bury our heads in the sand and hope the problem will go away or that God or someone else will fix it in time.

The problem with the first approach is that it can lead to hasty and unwise decisions.

And the problem with the second is that it represents a closed stance which doesn't give the Spirit any chance to enlighten or inform us.

I want to suggest that in the story of Mary and Martha we have a different model.

It does involve ceasing from activity and busyness. But it's far from passive or inert. You see there's nothing inactive about Mary's listening. She is absolutely intentional about her task. She's engaged in deep listening, through which she's growing towards a fuller understanding of God's vision for her and the world.

In this season of our life together I believe we'll do well to pause individually and collectively. Deliberately to lay aside our concerns and anxieties about the future and resist the desire to control events or find solutions. I want to encourage us to be purposeful in bringing ourselves before God to practice the art of being still and silent.

So that with open hearts and minds we can listen deeply and prayerfully to what God might be saying to us. Indeed to what God might be whispering to us in a small and barely distinguishable voice. If we don't make time and space to listen and pray, we may just miss it. My hope and prayer is that together with Mary and Martha we will seek to discern not our own way but God's way which is always full of surprises.

### **Bishop Martyn:**

The second passage that we want to recommend to you as part of this call to prayer is a little story which comes in 1 Samuel, Chapter 3. It's the story of Samuel and Eli, Eli being the old priest working in the temple, Samuel being the young apprentice, learning from him. It's a well-known story but I think it has something quite profound to offer us at this moment as we embark on this Shaped by God Together process.

You'll find it in 1 Samuel 3, and you might want to read something like the opening ten verses, you can go beyond that if you want to. But the opening verse makes it clear that Samuel who's at the centre of this story is still a boy. That's a significant point and I want to just dwell there for a moment simply to say, that in the Shaped by God Together process, as we seek to listen to God, we need to make sure that no one is excluded; in particular children and young people will have a really important part to play in this process, we need their voices to be heard and that's not just because they are the future of the church, of course they are, they'll be here after many of us have long gone. But it's also because they have a very important voice at this moment in time and bring a perspective that we need to be hearing.

But then secondly the story tells us, intriguingly, that the word of God was rare at that time and there were not many visions. This was the traditional way of God speaking to his people, whether directly through the prophets or giving visions to people. And the fact that it was rare at that time says something very profound about both society, but also the priests and those who looked after the temple worship. Now of course as Christians we live in a very different era the bible is very clear to us that God has spoken to us through the person of Jesus Christ. And the words that we have in the bible are there simply to lead us to the living word who is Jesus Christ. So again and again we go back to Jesus to hear what God is saying to us, and as Christians we believe though that Jesus is always with us in all our chain circumstances even through all that we've experienced in recent months here and we believe that Jesus continues to speak to us today. So again we reflect on this passage as a way of thinking about how Jesus would speak to us in our circumstances today.

I do believe that in the Church of England at this moment in our history we need to recover that sense of hearing very directly from God and listening to what He is saying to our specific circumstances and indeed to our specific society. And then of course there's this lovely story then of Samuel in the night hearing God calling him calling him by name; he uses the name Samuel. But of course Samuel is a young boy doesn't recognize this as God speaking to him he thinks it's Eli calling from nearby. So each time he goes to Eli and even Eli the old priest doesn't recognize that this is God trying to speak to Samuel until the third time. And then he realizes what God is doing and says to Samuel "go back and when he calls again simply say here is your servant." There's something very significant again in that about how do we as a community together recognize God's voice and hear what God is saying to us? We're going to need lots of different gifts and skills if we're going to discern God's voice at this time.

And then finally just to note from this passage that the message when Samuel does receive it is not a popular one.

He actually prophesies against the household of Eli and we can sense the discomfort in his own voice as he speaks with Eli. I'm not going to labour that point too much but just to say for now that we're going to need to be open to the fact that God may have surprising things to say to us, and indeed some of us may need to say unpopular things. We need to be ready to be honest and true to God in our listening.

So a very brief introduction to two bible passages that we commend to you for your reflection during this time of our call to prayer and the process Shaped by God Together. You'll find other resources on the website, we're going to be offering liturgy we're going to be offering different ideas for how you can pray together, individually, in small groups. But we ask you please to be setting aside time to pray for the life of the Diocese of Leicester as together we discern what God is saying to us and how God is shaping the church for the future. We have much to learn but we rest secure in the God of all hope who will inspire us for this next phase in our life together.