**BISHOP OF PORTSMOUTH**

**VALEDICTORY SPEECH, HOUSE OF LORDS, 12 May 2021**

My Lords, it is more than seven years since I first spoke in your Lordships’ House. It is a long time since I was a Maiden like Baroness Blake and Lord Lebedev, whom I congratulate on their arrival and speeches. Today my name has Valedictory next to it.

Three weeks ago I said an emotional Godspeed to the people of the Portsmouth Diocese at a cathedral service, scaled down but intensely moving for me and for my wife, Sally, at least, as we thanked so many.

The service also gave me the opportunity for a Bishop’s equivalent of Desert Islands Discs – choosing the music, sung wonderfully well by the Cathedral Choir. This included my favourite hymn, one among many: *There’s a Wideness in God’s Mercy.*

It praises God’s gentleness and mercy and justice – and how those qualities are rooted in His radical inclusion. It is something I touched on in my valedictory sermon. That the Church is its congregations, yes, but it is far more its communities. We must always keep our doors open – especially to those who have no figurative or literal shelter.

So I am interested, not a little intrigued by the Government’s talk of levelling up. The phrase suggests that those who already have will not have to give anything up, and that those who need a hand-up will be propelled upwards by … well, my Lords, that is the question. How does the rhetoric become the reality? That is a dilemma that the Christian church understands; we proclaim the Kingdom but find building it challenging.

Much of what a Government does, does not depend on the contents of its legislative programme, but it is the flesh on the bones of the grand narrative it tells – and levelling up does provide a very grand narrative indeed.

That is against the backdrop of an economic situation that remains uncertain. Last week bullish briefing suggested that the economy will grow back quicker than ever before. That, my Lords, is true - up to a point. But if we grow back 7.5% after a drop of towards 10% then we are still, in the book of this former economist at least, and the much more to be trusted economist Lord Eatwell, very much still behind.

Moreover, who benefits from the growth will be critical. After the 2008 Crash it was those at the sharp end who suffered most – while those responsible for the crisis walked away with barely a scratch.

The Diocese of Portsmouth has many at the sharpest point of the sharp end. The third of children on the Isle of Wight living in poverty; that is 7,000 children on the Island whose lives and life chances are being blighted.

Or the people of Charles Dickens Ward in Portsmouth itself – which has the misfortune to be in the 1% of most deprived wards in the country, with many struggling with the iniquities of universal credit, on which you have heard me, your Lordships, many times.

I find myself asking what in the programme will benefit them – not least since their lives, already far from easy, have been hit hard by the pandemic. I fear I can see not much, worthy though many measures are.

I find myself, first, regretting the continuing absence of anything meaningful on social care – a decade on from Dilnot, and still no time scale for action. This is a crisis that we just cannot consign to the long grass - again. Surely the urgency is even clearer post pandemic. To tease vulnerable and elderly people saying there’s a plan, ready or perhaps not, or putting off action is cruel.

I am astonished that, with a focus on levelling up, there is nothing intended to address the injustices of those employed in the gig economy or under the pressures of zero hours contracts. I cannot imagine we can achieve levelling up without improving the working circumstances that so diminish wellbeing for many. To claim that the pandemic demands delay is evasive if there is truly commitment to levelling up.

Lifelong learning is indeed a laudable ambition, but does the Government really think that the hard pressed working families in the diocese I serve, just about keeping their heads above water by having three or four jobs, can afford the time to re-train or carry the burden of a loan to do so.

What the Speech proclaims is hopeful but the signs that these measures will deliver are scanty.

My Lords, I conclude my speech with something central to faith - thanksgiving. Thanks to the staff of the House for their unfailing courtesy and service to us, to this parliament – and to our nation.

Thanks to my colleagues on these benches; our presence here may be sometimes contested, but we bring a distinct voice to the deliberations of this place, not least because of where we are rooted and whom we serve.

Thanks to members of the House past and present for all their kindness and encouragement, especially to the late and much missed Lord Judd, who often sent across a scribbled and supportive note when I spoke, often on the most extraordinary scraps of paper. By virtue of my office I may have been called Portsmouth. He was Portsmouth to the very marrow of his bones – and always stood up for and spoke for those who risked being left behind.

And my thanks to the people of the Diocese of Portsmouth. A Diocese of great diversity, but nonetheless a people of a very distinct identity and culture. I may not be Portsmouth till I die, as they will soon sing again at Fratton Park, but I hope I have spoken for them, for their God - and for the wideness of his mercy.