Our heartfelt prayers go out to the people of Mosul in Iraq and to the surviving citizens of Aleppo. We can only begin to imagine what life under fire is like. I was recently being brought up to date about the situation in South Sudan which I knew well for a while when I was part of the Diocese of Salisbury. The plight of the Sudanese, caught between two warlords, is desperate, but now under the radar of international news. Bishop Hilary of Malakal in South Sudan is on study leave at Ridley Hall at the moment. I haven't had a reunion with him yet; but I hear that his diocese has been devastated. Church leaders have been involved in every effort to achieve peace; but the bishops are just as likely to victims of the violence and power shifts as anybody else. Let us give thanks for the courage of our sisters and brothers. We have used Luke 10 as one of our dwelling in the Word passages. The witness of Christians in terrible situations reminds us, that with them, we are called to proclaim the presence of the kingdom of God as people of peace.

Very recently, I have seen this courage at work when I was party of a World Council of Churches theological working party in Manila, the capital of the Philippines. We were hosted by the IFI – Iglesia Filipina Independiente. The Church of England is in full communion with this church. With approximately eight million members, it is a church of the poor and for the poor. They have their own recent martyrs, like Bishop Ramento, who was brutally murdered for standing up to a corrupt regime in God’s name. They work closely with the families of low skilled migrant workers in the Middle East and Europe. I was taken to a particularly polluted and poor shanty village. I thought that I had witnessed acute poverty in Africa; but I had never seen or smelt the stench of grinding poverty close to shiny new hotels and casinos. Poverty is bad enough, but it can carry with it terrible isolation. It was great to see the church refusing to accept this isolation and connecting people to share what little they have. I met a crippled old man living in a shed no bigger than a sentry box in which there was no room to lie down. He was giving thanks to God for the even older widow who has chosen to share her meagre meals with him.

In the coming months we shall begin to develop some clear values around stewardship and the principles we shall use in future deployment of our clergy and lay ministers. There will be plenty of consultation about all this. My sense already is, however, that whatever we undertake for ourselves needs to be rooted in renewed outward-facing generosity and sacrifice. I am acutely aware that our Fully Alive Strategy for Ely 2025 could be interpreted as being all about us. The imperatives to deepen and grow will only show hard evidence of our transformation in Christ when we are seen to be engaging in our communities here and globally with deep commitment. Thank you for all the reality of engagement that is already visible in our region and through our overseas links at parish level.

Commitment to engagement makes it such a joy to have licensed and commissioned Mike Booker today as our market towns officer. We are investing – hopefully with matched funding from the Church Commissioners – in the flourishing of our market towns in a phased way over the coming years. This will involve supporting the further renewal of discipleship and growth in our churches through traditional ministry and fresh expressions. It will also lead us into new partnerships with sister churches and many other partners of good will to offer more explicit support for families. Our schools will be at the heart of our endeavours. We are not going to throw money at projects to make us feel better. We are going to help people renew community and purpose for themselves where we discern with rigour that our intervention will help transformation to happen. In the very different context of Cambridge the Growth Fund is already working in partnership with St Paul’s Hills Road to empower the Revd Jon Canessa to be the Bishop’s Officer for Homelessness. I licensed him at St Paul’s last Sunday where we heard personal testimony of breaking free from drug and alcohol abuse and street-living to rebuild a life with a home and a job.
People in the Philippines are very slightly built, so I was Gulliver for a week. I have to say, however, that a number of the people I met were spiritual giants. They may not have given their lives yet; but they are martyrs in the sense that the Greek word means 'witness'. The IFI churches I saw hinted at flamboyant and rather baroque worship. What I saw with my own eyes was people regularly and deeply and beautifully in prayer before going back to tackle the ugliness of poverty and oppression. Our Strategy has at its heart a pledge to offer templates and support for a Rule or Way of Life across the Diocese. Alex and I were talking about it only this week with the deans and chaplains of Cambridge colleges and we were saying that what we intend is to have every one of our diverse communities involved. Individuals can already sign up to a rule of life for themselves through Cursillo, or as a Franciscan Tertiary. We are not going to duplicate or compete with the formative relationships people already have. What we are committed to is encouraging parishes and networks across the Diocese to develop patterns of mutual spiritual growth and accountability, so that, maybe at our Annual Meeting we were not just reviewing the year's activities but how we have lived our prayer covenant together. Alex Hughes and Jane Keiller are working at this. In the meantime, I hope that you will all sign up for next year's diocesan Lent course, called All Loves Excelling. Full details will be available very soon. James Blandford-Baker, Andy Chrich and Richard Darmody have been working hard on this together.

I am cheered but not complacent about another the publication. This is the independent Safeguarding Audit which was carried out in the summer, about which you will be hearing more later on. The auditors had mostly positive things to say about our commitment to safeguarding and their recommendations were mostly about matters to which we drew their attention in the first place. I want to record here my thanks to Rebecca Boswell and Sarah King, our safeguarding team at the centre, and also to all our volunteer trainers and our parish safeguarding officers. We all owe you a real debt of gratitude. It is also good to welcome to Synod, Katherine Geary, our new independent chair of the safeguarding management group and to thank Janet for her commitment and support as the previous chair.

I need say little about education except that I think that my national engagement seems to bearing fruit in a time of great flux. I am delighted that our diocesan multi-academy trust is highly regarded by the experts and is making life better both for teachers and children. It is tiring work; but when I get frustrated by the complexity or just plain weary I pray for all those children and families in our care. We are only in it because God’s hand is on it for the flourishing of the children. It is wonderful that we have opened our new school at Ermine Street by Alconbury Weald and we have won the bid for a new adjacent secondary school. We have bids in for more. We have been a generous local partner to Tatton Park School in Longstanton by letting them borrow our new school at Northstowe until more house-building delivers us primary age children. Certainly while I am the bishop, we shall not be making any of our schools selective on any grounds. Of course we shall not be deflected from our commitment to school improvement; but we are dedicated to the education of the whole child and not just training for SATs.

The World Council of Churches has set itself on a Pilgrimage of Justice and Peace. I saw this embodied in Manila. The language of pilgrimage is tainted for some by its medieval associations and corruptions. But the journey towards Him who is the Way, the Truth and the Life is the one we are on together. The journey always starts with the movement of love between the Father and the Son in the power of the Spirit. We are invited to be people of the journey by Christ, the Prince of Peace. Keep praying for peace, for evil thrives all the more when our prayers fall silent. Pray for one another and please, pray for me.