

Diocesan Synod  
18 October 2025  
Bishop Joanne

I only discovered that I suffer from vertigo when, at the age of ten, on a school trip, I climbed with my classmates up the three hundred or so steps of the tower of our local Cathedral.

Everyone else was oo-ing and aah-ing at the beautiful stonework and the magnificent view.

I was standing stock still leaning against the tower wall, following Mrs Ripley's kind advice to feel my hands against the stones and keep my eyes fixed on one single point of the roof. But still the world swirled around.

In an idle moment this week, to relieve the boredom of packing boxes, I had a look at the St Edmundsbury Cathedral website. And I saw that you can take a tour up the tower. However, I did also notice that it very clearly says that "Access will not be permitted to ... Those who suffer from vertigo or claustrophobia or are nervous of heights, steep spiral staircases, narrow passageways and high galleries."

So there goes the new bishop's introductory tower tour. I've fallen at the first hurdle.

Nonetheless, it's exciting to plan my welcome service there, in January. I felt very emotional on my announcement day back in June when Dean Joe and I looked over towards the bishop's chair, the *cathedra*, and acknowledged that that would be my seat. Simply, this is the solid place where I will belong.

At the same time, though, I have Jesus's words in Luke's gospel on my mind. You might remember the account, in chapter 21, of him with the disciples when they're marvelling at the beauty of the temple in Jerusalem and the fabulous wealth and craftsmanship that it displayed. And yet they also hear Jesus then telling them that "all will be thrown down." And that war and terror and earth-shattering disaster will follow (*Luke 21.5-11*).

As a child of the 80s, the threat of nuclear war seemed to me to be ever present in the news. I would fall asleep at night praying that God wouldn't let it happen. I guess the fear of destruction swirled around in the disciples' dreams too.

Jesus's words speak into the events of his time, events that Luke already knew had come to pass. They speak into our own anxious times.

We know what it's like to turn on the news and hear dizzying accounts of war and terror, of natural disasters from floods to famines. This week, our minds might have been very much with the people of Israel-Palestine, and especially Gaza. We've seen some tentative steps towards peace, but we know that there are still more trials to face: for those who are grieving loved ones and lives forever changed, and for those who continue to struggle with the lack of water, sanitation, food, and safe homes.

As well as knowing what failure and division feel like in the world, we see their effects in the church that we love. I know that this week's update from the House of Bishops about Prayers of Love and Faith may have managed to displease people of every position on the spectrum of views. And I imagine that people whose lives are personally affected by each development, or lack of development, are holding the pain of all this even more acutely than the rest of us.

When all of this happens, it might well feel as if the world is swirling around us.

We can become disoriented, dismayed, and distracted. We can cling onto false hope and listen to false prophets who promise us easy answers. We can go into overdrive trying to get some control back, or we can give up in despair. We can feel as if there's no stonework to lean against, no roofline where we can fix our gaze. The end of the story feels horribly uncertain.

There are sensible steps that we can take. I hope we're going to take some of them today:

- To approve a plan for buildings and the environment, and a net carbon zero route map.
- To agree our 2026 budget, which will support the ministry of the whole diocese, and steward as well all we can the resources that God gives us.
- And to review our missional projects, discerning the learning that might come from them, and starting to think about how we discover a vision for the next season of our life together.

But the truth is, the end does not belong to us. Not our own end or the end of the whole story. There's no strategy or technique I can offer that will steady us and let us take control of the ending for ourselves. There is none. There is only Jesus.

Jesus is the Alpha and the Omega, the first and the last, the beginning and the end. This is God's story. And in the time of God's judgement, whether now or in the final days, it is Jesus to whom we cling. Not the temple, not the Church, not our familiar certainties; only Jesus. Jesus is our one fixed point.

So, if I were to speak to my ten-year-old self, or to any primary school kid today from Beccles, Haverhill, or St Edmundsbury itself, who comes to visit *our* Cathedral, the one thing that I would want to say to them is: keep your eyes fixed on Jesus.

You might live through some hard and anxious times. You'll see people disagreeing and picking fights with each other. Keep your eyes fixed on Jesus.

You'll see fabulous wealth and great new technology. You'll come across some persuasive people who will want you to follow them. Keep your eyes fixed on Jesus.

The world will swirl around you and you won't always know what to hold onto. Keep your eyes fixed on Jesus.

And perhaps this is good advice for us as a diocesan synod too, as we figure out how we work together over the coming years. It's certainly what I am going to hold onto.

Whatever trials we experience, whatever joy we know, in our beginning and at our end, Jesus is our rock-solid hope. Let's keep our eyes fixed on him.