Welcome to you all and especially to those who are with us for the first time. Among the clergy, they include Canon Anthony Stidolph and Padre Peter King, and it is good to see you both.

This is the first Visitation and Gathering service that we have held in May, and we do so following the recommendation of the Wardens’ conference last year. It is right that we hold this service as new Wardens and Councillors are taking their places, following AGM’s, but coming as it does at a different point in the liturgical calendar, it does perhaps have a slightly different ethos.

I have reflected recently on the words of a former Mayor of New York, Mario Cuomo about elections. He said, when you campaign, you campaign in poetry: when you govern, you govern in prose. In other words, campaigning is the time for the big picture described in expansive and perhaps symbolic ways. Government is about relating that big picture to the mundane reality of every day life and its problems.

The Church too has its poetry and prose occasions. We come here today with recent memory of the poetry of Easter with its word pictures of earthquakes, cosmic disturbance and talk of Resurrection - language that connects the events to the great prophetic visions of the Kingdom of God, and enables us to talk about the dawn of a new age. We come also with the poetry of Pentecost fresh in our minds with its tongues of fire, mighty wind and peculiar communication possibilities; with its sense of fulfilment of the prophecies of Joel that young men will see visions and old men will dream dreams.

Today is, if you like, the prose that relates to that poetry. It is the working out of that vision of the Kingdom in our everyday lives in our churches. It is about living the dream. And we must never, even at the most mundane, monotonous, or even irritating moments; we must never forget the poetry. But our focus today is the prose.

As a Biblical backdrop and context for the charge this year I have chosen an Old Testament piece of poetry and a New Testament piece of prose. The Letter to the Hebrews may seem an odd choice. For many people, Hebrews remains an inaccessible and unpopular read, but in fact it has much contemporary resonance. One of the fascinating things to do with this book is to read between the lines to find out more of the situation
that prompted it, and if you do that, you discover that the Letter is written to a church that seems to have run out of steam. People have stopped attending meetings. Initial enthusiasm and commitment has dwindled. The social action that went hand in hand with earlier membership has now disappeared. There seems to be little enthusiasm for learning new things. In chapter 5 the author describes the addressees as being ‘slow to learn.’ By now, says the author, you should have reached the stage where you yourselves could be teachers but instead, ‘you need someone to teach you the ABC’s. You need milk instead of solid food’ (5:12) He goes on to say that solid food is what adults should be eating.

Obviously that does not describe our situation, but what is interesting is the suggested antidote. The author says that to turn this around they need to rediscover what it was that attracted them in the first place: to remember why they are Christians. They need to be regular in meeting and assiduous in good works. And as an encouragement the author aims to stimulate their interest by providing them with a dazzling new theology that might shake them from their apathy. Of course we can’t go into that in detail today but just consider some of the new names and titles that are given to Jesus in this Letter. He is our brother, our liberator, the pioneer, the high priest who is also a layman; the one who has written a will that can only be effective on his death. This author believes that theology newly expressed can jolt a failing church out of its slumber and decline. He believes in the vitality of a learning church.

As I said, I did not choose this passage because I think it describes our churches – far from it. I chose it because I see in so many of you the same kind of energy that I see in the author of the letter: that persistence; that sometimes frustrated ambition for your churches; that desire that they may truly be worshipping, learning and serving communities. You are the people who come early and go late and somehow have to find God in between, and I thank you for that, not only on my behalf, but especially on behalf of the Bishop. It is your example that often inspires; your enthusiasm which others catch. Thank you sincerely.

If this were a Visitation in the UK, each parish would have filled in a form called ‘the Articles of Enquiry’ describing in detail the current state of each church from a number of perspectives. Here we can be much more
informal than that, but that does mean that any description of where we are as a group of island churches and parishes has to be based more on feelings and perceptions than on that kind of hard evidence. Last year I tried to catch the sense of where we were then by describing it as a time when we were recovering slowly from a period of self doubt, and anxiety about whether our present pattern of church life were sustainable. This anxiety had a number of causes: particularly the situation in Dubai that threw the diocesan vulnerabilities into sharp focus; the resignation of a cleric unable to live with that degree of insecurity, and the decline of some traditional forms of income. The process of moving forward has, I think, gained momentum now, helped by a new diocesan focus that has made stewardship a subject of public conversation.

At its meeting in February, Synod commended a resource paper that was presented there, for study by every Council in the Diocese, and asked them to report back with the outcomes of that discussion. The paper, for those who haven’t seen it, contains some background on the importance of stewardship to Christians, together with lots of practical suggestions and information. We are already beginning to receive some feedback. All that is necessary is a few bullet points setting out the parish’s strategy on stewardship for the coming year. I do hope everyone will take part in this, and send their strategy on stewardship sooner rather than later – they should certainly be with us no later than September. I do realise that SOS is not perhaps the most appropriate acronym.

One postscript on finance: I was asked at a recent meeting what should be the first spending priority for a parish. The answer to that in case anyone else is asking the same question, is ministry. In churches in places like the UK a single payment to the diocese covers ministry costs, both for local ministry and for the wider ministry of bishops, archdeacons, support staff and specialist sector ministers. Here we split that payment into two, but each is important and each can be regarded as a contribution to ministry. The diocesan payment should never be regarded as Cypriot drivers regard traffic lights – advisory, discretionary and elective. They represent what the diocese needs and what it is fair and possible to pay.

With AGM’s still fresh in our minds, another issue that has been raised in more than one place is the status of parish constitutions. Actually I think this is a presenting issue for something deeper - and that is the whole
question of how we describe distinctive parish identity. It is right that parishes have personalities and that those personalities find expression in liturgical practice, mission priorities, modes of service and so on. Just as a parish is made up of many personalities, so an archdeaconry or diocese is made up with churches with different personalities, and when they work together that is a rewarding thing. But I sense a tendency to use individual constitutions as markers of individuality when other markers are weak, and this is not a role for which the constitutions are fitted.

Constitutions have two roles. They are a necessary evil in our interface with the many different civil authorities in the diocese, and they are also a convenient summary of the way in which individual parishes run their affairs. What they are not is documents with legally binding force that work as a kind of court of last resort. This system of individual constitutions is foreign to most Anglican provinces. Diocesan or Provincial constitutions are the norm as they provide common ways of working. We are on the way to having such a constitution but we are not there yet. In the meantime we have all kinds of anomalies. Take a simple thing like, who can be a member of a parish Council. In some parishes husbands and wives can both serve on a Council. In others they cannot. In some parishes the secretary is appointed from the elected members and so they have both a voice and a vote. In others they are not and do not. In some parishes those who hold a Bishop’s Licence as ministers, either lay or ordained are ex officio members with a voice and a vote. In others they are not there at all. In others they have a voice but no vote. What on earth is the bishop, a symbol of our unity, to make of all this? We are after all, an Episcopal and not a congregational church. How do you think he feels when having given his assent to a document outlining a set of arrangements, that document is used to thwart judgements he has made as if it were a document drawn up by ecclesiastical lawyers, that trumps anything he may wish to see?

Throughout his ministry Jesus was confronted by people waving the rulebook at him and saying in effect, God has signed this off, so stick to it. And we know what Jesus’s response was: typically, the Sabbath was made for man, not man for the Sabbath. Constitutions were made to enable mission, not to constrain it.
If stewardship is a measure of one perceived cultural shift, there are others. Spirituality continues to make a difference and we now have a diocesan lectionary, and will shortly have a diocesan calendar of saints. People have benefited from courses run on a number of subjects, and Paul continues to make his input in the Readers’ Days, which along with the rest of his work, is greatly appreciated.

The whole area of vocation is another of those discernible cultural shifts. During the last year we had a second Exploring Faith group start here at the cathedral, and that now includes two Ordinands and three prospective Readers. The applications for two other prospective Readers have also been received. Next month we shall have a historic occasion here when four people (Chris, Geoff, Kent and Harry) who have been nurtured in our own system will be ordained: three priests and a deacon. I am sure that will be a great occasion, and ask you to pray for all concerned as that time approaches.

I have updates on some of the things I reported on at the last visitation under the heading of JEMT issues. The electricity supply at St George’s is now organised, we are on the way to providing a toilet facility, and joint chairs of the new supporting body have been appointed (not the supporting body of the toilet). They are Dean Jeremy and Bill Grundy. They will shortly be in touch with parishes to begin to form a team that will support St George’s with creative ideas about its development, and that will also liaise with JEMT to make best use of resources there. If you would like to be part of that, then I am sure that Jeremy or Bill would be pleased to hear from you afterwards.

The other issue is disability access and I am pleased to report that we are now in an advanced state of planning to provide disabled access toilets on this site. However this is a much bigger issue than the provision of toilets in one place. The whole subject of how the churches regard disabled people, and the care they take to make sure that participation is possible for them is a much wider one than falls within the JEMT remit, and is actually closer to the remit of the Diocesan Group for the Protection of Vulnerable People (who continue to do sterling work under the new Executive Officer Chris Goldsmith). I am currently studying a publication from the English Diocese of Southwark entitled, ‘All One in Christ.; the Biblical Imperative – A Parish Resource Pack on Disability,’ which runs to 22 pages plus appendices. That gives some idea
of what might be involved. I hope to have more to say about it after further consultation.

I would like to say a word if I may, about Mission to Seafarers work on the Island. The Mission has recently been undergoing a radical survey that has involved all its Chaplains and ports, and that has resulted in a reassessment of priorities and some new structures. Our work here has come out of this review particularly well. We have one of the best and biggest groups of volunteers anywhere in the world, the work is being expanded in ways that meet with the approval of the Mission, and our Chaplain Ken is credited with doing an excellent job. There is a suggestion that his current three-day contract may be extended to four days.

Money is tight for the Mission and the movement is towards encouraging local fund raising and self-sufficiency. In that context may I commend the Mission as a deserving destination for mission giving.

There are three specific new areas I want to say something about this afternoon. The first concerns participation. For the last two Meetings, Synod has adopted a way of working that involves discussion groups dealing with issues such as how we express our common life, and how we pursue our common mission. Participants have clearly (from the feedback we have received) found this helpful and energising. At the February meeting one result was a request that we might consider Archidiaconal Synods with elected members, maintaining the momentum of this kind of participation, between annual Diocesan Synods. I could foresee that the Bishop and the Archdeacon in the Gulf among others, might be reticent about any kind of new formal structures that make a distinction between Cyprus, where such a body might in principle be possible, and the Gulf, where it probably would not, but we need not make the best the enemy of the good.

The underlying desire behind this request, it seems to me, is about achieving maximum participation and involvement, and that is a good thing. I believe that on the one hand we have done much to achieve this in this archdeaconry, and on the other, that we do not necessarily need formal structures in order to develop what we have achieved. It is not too long ago that the churches on the island had little opportunity for
inter-parish meeting. Church life was almost exclusively parish-focussed, with the exception of Synod. But now we have a new and different situation. We have regular meetings of Clergy and Readers, and will shortly be having a similar series for Curates. We have a Community of Cyprus Treasurers, and annual conference for Wardens, and this year for the first time, a conference for Parish Secretaries and Communication Officers (which I hope you have noted and intend to be represented at). We now have this annual Gathering, and a Dean and cathedral that wants actively to promote the idea of its being a welcome home for all the island churches. Parish Safeguarding personnel meet regularly under the auspices of the Diocesan Group for the Protection of Vulnerable People.

In addition to all of that we also have the Cyprus Forum. This annual gathering in the Autumn began life some years ago as a Standing Committee Road Show so called, whose aim was precisely to extend understanding and ownership of the work of Synod, to a wider constituency. It has focussed primarily on that work through the filter, or from the perspective of finance, and that has been and continues to be, a great help to many, but as a vehicle for the discussion of issues, the Forum does already exist, and I feel we might make more use of it. Accordingly, before the next Forum I shall be asking parish Councils what items they would like to see discussed or to raise, so that this might answer in part that desire for greater participation. The format of the Forum might change to include discussion groups on different issues if people think that would work. The Forum is a flexible and informal model, which is capable of replication wherever it is demanded.

The second thing is about social outreach and social responsibility. There are several reasons why I am raising this today. One is our growing awareness of and involvement in the refugee crisis, and our attempts (through Christine Goldsmith) to try to coordinate the work of several interested groups. Another is the increasing interest of the Anglican Alliance (a communion wide body that coordinates social responsibility) in having a presence in Cyprus. A further reason is the experience of trying to find a suitable project for which to apply for UTO funding this year. This funding, made available from the Episcopal Church’s United Thank Offering, is for projects that satisfy certain social responsibility criteria.
The present picture with regard to social responsibility is at best uncoordinated: at worst chaotic. Every faith community has an imperative towards social responsibility and that is well represented on the island. In addition there are faith-based agencies such as Caritas or Oasis working in specific sectors. Then there are, what we might call fellow travellers, whose aims are consistent with those of faith communities and with which some links and partnerships have been fostered. These parties often have little idea of what others are doing, and no opportunity for any joint action or the sharing of good practice, creative ideas or perspectives.

Accordingly the Bishop has taken an initiative to convene and host an all island Consultation on social responsibility. This has now been arranged for Wednesday September 14th, Holy Cross day. It will take place at the House for Cooperation on the Green line to enable maximum participation. If you have not yet responded to the e-mail about this, or can think of further organisations that could make a valuable contribution to such an event, then please let us know as soon as possible.

The third thing I want to flag up, and have already alluded to, is my sense of the beginnings of a new anxiety, and that is about decline in the numbers attending some churches. It is noted in some Council Minutes I have read and I have seen it in my own congregation. During the past four years or so over thirty people have either died or moved back to the UK or elsewhere just from Larnaca, and that is echoed I think in other churches. In my experience that has brought out the very best in those who remain, but it does place a large burden on them too, and there is a critical mass beneath which it is difficult to achieve growth. People like to attend something that looks as if it’s growing rather than declining. I do believe this to be an island-wide phenomenon. People who moved here in the late nineties or the early years of the present century, perhaps when their children left home, now find they have grandchildren from whom they are separated. As they grow older some health concerns may creep in and the sense of being isolated from the rest of the family. Or again, some people find that they themselves have to support family members in the UK or elsewhere through some trauma.
What this points to is our need to put Church growth at the head of our agendas. However many people may have gone, there are still dozens of thousands left of potential congregation members. In the past we have perhaps not needed to be proactive in the way circumstances now prompt, but Councils do need to talk about this and look at strategies for growth. There are many ‘how to’ books on the subject of church growth, and all kinds of auditing systems you can buy into. If you want to get the flavour, then www.healthychurches.org will supply you with the 8 EQ’s (essential qualities) of a healthy church – worth reading if only to take issue with them. Perhaps this is something again for which the Diocese needs to provide some commentary, but in the meantime it is good to recall what a healthy church looks like, and what makes a church attractive to newcomers.

All of which brings us back to Hebrews. The author has his own view of the basics of church growth, and we’ve mentioned some of them. But at the end of the letter there is a verse (13:17) which is worth repeating, and which might be an interesting basis for a Bible study. It speaks of church leaders. In our context that could be either lay or ordained. The author says, “they are tireless in their care for you…..See that their work brings them happiness, not pain and grief, for that would be no advantage to you.” The question is: what do you think prompted that remark? In this dispirited and failing church, what, in this climax to the letter, has caught the author’s attention specifically? Why does he talk about advantage? Can we paint a picture of a situation that would call for this kind of advice?

I think that somewhere in there is a memory of a congregational leader who has not been treasured or valued, and who has become at best disappointed and at worst disillusioned. And that that disillusion has infected the whole church in the ways we’ve seen described. Pain and grief spread more easily than enthusiasm. And I wonder if that is one of the reasons why the letter contains so much about leadership and priesthood, describing the author of all ministry as the great high priest. And I think there is a lesson there too. On the one hand it’s about the importance of a dedicated leader for all the ministries, part time and voluntary, that make up the total ministry of each church, which is a very demanding and essentially fulltime job. On the other it reminds us that there is something very attractive about settled happiness within a church. Newcomers quickly recognise if a church is at peace with itself.
The most attractive churches are those that have a tangible sense of purpose, fellowship, prayerful concern, intentional good quality worship and preaching, and generous hospitality. Such churches are a pleasure for us all to work in.

But then, as they say, I’m preaching to the choir. We are all the people who know and understand that. But often we work alongside people who do not.

May we continue to encourage such churches and so continue to enjoy that sense of fulfilment and happiness that ministry can bring. And so, may I wish you God’s blessing through the coming year. May you be aware of his presence in all you do and may he bless you richly in all that you attempt in his name.