First of all, thank you for coming. And thank you for coming not just today; but every Sunday, thank you for coming, probably among the first there and last to leave. Thank you for supporting Church life and adding to its vitality in the many ways you do. Thank you for the contribution you make to Diocesan life and decision making. Thank you for being the core of the Church in this place, and thank you, not just on my behalf but on behalf of the Bishop, especially, but also on behalf of the Diocesan staff, at least when you answer their e-mails promptly.

This year we welcome some new clergy. Martin, Catherine Eve and Grace (and Perci) Philipps - Last, who have moved into Ammochostos; Andrew Burtt, the new senior Chaplain in Paphos, and Kent Middleton our new stipendiary Curate in Niocosia. We have said goodbye to Harry Ching. This will be the last service of this kind for Derek and Sue Smith who are retiring and moving back to the UK in the Summer. Both the parish and the Island churches will miss them enormously. They have made a great contribution to enabling St Barnabas to be the inclusive and welcoming church which it is, and will hopefully continue to be. We shall miss the wise compassion, the insightful humour, and the reasoned faithfulness – and we shall miss Derek as well.

Also, later this year we shall lose Peter and Lizzie King. As senior Military Chaplain here, Peter has made great efforts to integrate with the churches on the Island, and his gentle ways and infectious enthusiasm have endeared him to us. We wish all four of them well in the future. They will remain in our memories and our prayers. In the clerical family we have prayed for and rejoiced with Brian and Christine Elliott during and after her surgery, and of course have expressed our love and compassion for our Bishop and his family during their recent bereavement.

Visitations as we interpret them here, and as we qualify them by describing the occasion as a Gathering, are an expression of our togetherness, our connectedness and our acknowledgement that neither dependence nor independence is what we aspire to; but rather interdependence, partnership in the Gospel, communal as well as personal witness, shared membership of the Body of Christ.

This year the theological support to the occasion came first from the prophet Isaiah. Do not be afraid, for I have redeemed you – the Gospel of the Old Testament. The repeated ‘Do not be afraid’ suggests that the people addressed were in fact afraid. So what were they afraid of? They were exiles, or perhaps more likely, the descendants of exiles, in a foreign land. Most of them would have been born there, and the talk of Israel, Zion and the God YHWH would have seemed remote, historical and useless. They are afraid of disruption to their accepted ways and landmarks of meaning. They have heard of a land of Israel, a place of justice, truth and above all peace, and that’s an attractive idea, but achieving a return to that seems daunting compared with the securities of the present. The prophet tells them that believe it or not, God is in their midst, and he will be part of their future if they trust him. His people are loved and he will gather them together from the four corners. Once again they will have an identity. Those are
words and sentiments that speak to many situations and generations. They are an exhortation to an adventurous faith and trust. They are an encouragement to be excited once again by the prospect of what God is leading and calling us towards.

Romans chapter 14 begins in a rather non-PC way: “one person may have faith strong enough to eat all kinds of food, (says Paul) while another who is weaker eats only vegetables.” But it does get better. The chapter is about how Christians relate or should relate with each other. In fact, that example is meant to illustrate a frame of mind which does not judge others, which accepts others as they are, which encourages attitudes of graciousness towards them and prompts us to be humble before others. In that way, as the final sentence tells us we should pursue the things that make for peace and build up the common life. That is what a church should look like. It is what a Christian society should look like. Nowadays we might use words like: inclusivity, diversity and generosity to describe what Paul is commending. We recognise that only when the church is living in that way, and obviously so, is it an effective means of mission and evangelism.

It is this common life that we celebrate, and in our human way seek to symbolize with our gifts of diversity cakes. But it is also what we celebrate as we contemplate, in this Easter season, what it is to live a risen life and commend it to others.

I speak of a theological underpinning, a theological support, and make no apology for that in what some might consider to be an occasion to speak about strictly practical matters. Without that theological support, none of the rest makes any sense. I have no intrinsic interest in finance, buildings or (God forbid) constitutional reform. My interest in them is a direct result of the context in which they present themselves. Finance, buildings and constitutional frameworks assume importance when they are seen as contributing to that bigger picture of serving God, serving the common life and exemplifying the grace, courtesy and inclusiveness that accompanies a risen life. George Herbert’s hymn: Teach me my God and King, made that point 400 years ago and it still holds true: “who sweeps a room as for thy laws makes that the action fine.” Nothing can be so mean, so inconsequential that if it is done “For thy Sake” will not grow bright and clean. So welcome to this annual attempt to make drudgery divine.

Actually, this past year has been anything but a drudge. It has achieved much. We have established a new parish formation in Ammochostos, and thanks to everyone who has worked so hard to achieve that. We have begun to breathe new life into St George’s Church in the Troodos, thanks to the efforts of Bill Grundy, the Dean and the team they are beginning to gather, and to JEMT for doing the essential structural works to make services viable. The Barnabas musical involved most parishes and was hugely enjoyed across the Island. Some people have started to come to church as a result, I hear anecdotally. New people have come forward to be considered for Reader ministry. I hope it will not be too long before selection procedures really do mirror those for ordained ministry. We now have a full team of selectors again, including more from Cyprus.
More widely: we have a new Disability resource pack, which all churches should use as an audit tool and then hopefully be able to adopt the Diocesan policy agreed at Synod. When I introduced it there I said that what was needed was a culture of empathy, a culture of being able to see ourselves in the position of others. Without that perspective, any audit is likely to be a pretty thin process. With that approach, it can be revealing in all kinds of ways. The Barnabas Team has reviewed its work and is about to enter a new phase. I know that the work done by the Team to date has been welcomed especially in Cyprus, and hopefully it will be possible to appoint a new coordinator for a newly configured team this year. The new style Cyprus Forum with the option for discussion groups drew a great response in the Autumn. The new opportunity for Secretaries and Communications Officers to get together was welcomed to the extent that there has been a demand for another this year. The Social Outreach Forum enabled new network opportunities and really opened our eyes to the potential for exercising social responsibility. Many people were genuinely surprised by what is already happening and by the energy for development. This is an area that may well feature as a theme in next year’s Synod.

Against that background of vigorous church life, there are, however, some notes of caution to sound. Almost everywhere I go, people are anxious about resident core congregations declining in number and growing in age. People are not coming to retire in Cyprus in the numbers they once were, and people are leaving. There was valuable work done at Synod this year on Intentional Discipleship. Intentional discipleship means setting out to get new members and having definite plans to help members grow and develop in every way. The discussions there, have been produced in a form suitable for church Council or congregational discussion, and I hope every Council will take the opportunity to do that. Can I also suggest that this is a good time for imaginative development. Projects with a social outreach element of some kind can attract external funding and can provide something to capture the imagination of those who do not come, but who are not far from the kingdom in their attitudes and lifestyles. New ways of attracting people to touch the fringe of our garment: new kinds of service, new uses of church buildings, new partnerships. This year we have had innovative Ascension Day services, pet service, flower festival, special services for those bereaved throughout the year and so on. The work done at Synod needs to filter down and well thought through plans are likely to be encouraged. Alongside that, we do have a valuable role to play in providing an Anglican church presence and life for visitors and swallows, and that should not be underestimated, or disregarded when mission planning is on the table.