



This year through Lent the Diocese of Salisbury has been Praying Together. It is very simple: each day there is a short passage of Scripture, with an equally short reflection, prayer and suggested action. Some will be doing this in groups; most of us will pray by ourselves; but because this is a shared activity we are praying together, about 25,000 of us. The shared experience is very powerful and deeply encouraging.

Praying Together was launched on Ash Wednesday by Bishop Michael Perham. Michael grew up in the diocese, in Dorchester. In retirement after being the Bishop of Gloucester

he took on a key role for us by chairing what we called the Pray Forum as part of our diocesan commitment to Renewing Hope - Pray, Serve, Grow. Bishop Michael has a malignant brain tumour. Almost certainly the sermon he preached in the cathedral on Ash Wednesday about the feast of Lent and of our accepting joyfully the cross marked on us that day in ash, was his last. The manner of his preaching was at one with the message - from a seat in the sanctuary where he read his script because he could no longer rely on his brain to make sense of notes from which he would formerly have spoken. It was delivered with grace and not much evidence of the enormous physical effort involved.

The following week I went on retreat. Retreats always begin tired. I got up on the first day for the eucharist and the priest started talking about the refugee crisis. My heart sank. I wanted a retreat. It was peace and quiet I needed, not refugees. It took a good five minutes and a well written confession to help me arrive. Lent is a feast in which we joyfully accept the cross that is given us. Why on earth was I feeling resentful at these people impinging

on my space and recreation time when they are so desperate that an overcrowded boat in a dangerous sea looks better than the terror where once they lived.

This Lent we have had a Diocesan Appeal for the South Sudan where we have been linked for 44 years. It is a part of the world in which there has been relentless conflict. After the hope of independence in July 2011, they have fallen back into violence and there is great suffering. Some 3.4 million women, men and children are displaced from their homes. The economy has collapsed, malnutrition has soared and hunger has taken a firm hold. At least 100,000 people are now facing starvation and a further one million are on the brink of famine. We cannot do nothing. So I appealed to

the Diocese for urgent help for our brothers and sisters.

One person wrote to say what others must have thought. He said that we have been helping these people for years and it is time for them to help themselves. It was a shock. I nearly wrote back: "Do to others as you would have them do to you." I am glad I didn't because that person might have been making the same journey Bishop Michael must have made to accept his brain tumour, as a cross imposed on him; as I made in the slow realisation that retreats are not escapes into fantasy but confront us with reality. Praying Together in cathedral and diocese is what brings us joyfully to Easter with a new and deeper thanksgiving for the life God has given us with love.

+Nicholas Sarum