**Homily on the Solemnity of the Assumption, and the Renewal of Our Diocesan Parish Structures.**

On this great solemnity of the Assumption, our thoughts turn to the humble virgin Mary and her example. In many respects she led an unremarkable life, and never sought to attract attention to herself. This is shown by how little we actually know about her life. She could easily have attracted publicity, being the mother of a famous son, but she was self-effacing to the end. Yet in other respects she is remarkable, and does stand out as unique, and could not escape the attention of the Church her son established. She was the only disciple of the Lord not to lose faith in him after his death on the Cross. The day before his Resurrection, a Saturday, would have been a day for her filled with hope. Knowing her Son, she would have known that death would not be the end of the story for him, or for mankind. Therefore, on the eve of the Resurrection she would have been looking confidently to the future, anticipating in some way the salvation to come. Mary, by her steadfast and faithful example teaches us to do the same- to approach the future with humble faith and serene trust in God’s providence.

Over the past few months, a number of meetings have been held all over the Diocese, involving both the clergy and lay representatives of each parish. At these meetings the bishop has outlined his plans to renew our parish and diocesan structures so as to enable us to be more missionary, and to face the challenges of the future with fewer priests and active lay people. These problems, both financial and pastoral, were always ahead of us, but the pandemic has greatly accelerated to the pace of change by perhaps ten or more years.

According to this diocesan plan, in most deaneries (i.e. grouping of parishes under the jurisdiction of a dean) at least one church is unfortunately marked out for closure. Fortunately, in our deanery, the Lindsey Deanery, which is North Lincolnshire and North East Lincolnshire, this has not happened. The bishop has decided that all of our church communities are viable. However, he has decided there will have to be some lesser structural changes to better equip us for the future. Our deanery will shortly be merging with the Lincoln Deanery, which comprises much of mid-Lincolnshire, to form one large deanery. Many other deaneries are merging throughout the diocese in a similar way. Parishes all over the diocese will be merged to form larger parishes. Our four local parishes of St. Norbert’s, Crowle, St. Thomas of Canterbury, Gainsborough, Holy Souls and St. Bernadette’s Scunthorpe, are to merge into one large parish, with one set of parish accounts, and one parish council. Other areas parish representatives have been asked to discuss include:

1. How we can communicate information more effectively for the mission of the Church.
2. Bringing people together to work together to be more missionary. (For example joint outreach such as alpha, social action, SVP, Cafod. Joint support for musicians, eucharistic ministers, readers etc.)
3. How best to ensure pastoral care.
4. Working together in various ways on sacramental programmes, sharing resources and expertise.
5. Lay leadership. We need to find ways to promote a greater sense of co-responsibility between clergy and laity. Parish Councils and Finance committees are to come together.
6. Parish Administrative support. We need to do an audit of parish administrative support, establishing what support exists and what will be needed in the future.
7. Ecumenical and civic relations, asking how we work with other local churches and civic authorities.
8. Hospital/hospice care. We need to ask how we can best support our NHS and demonstrate the Gospel in action.
9. We need also to look at how we work with our schools in a more strategic fashion.
10. We need to ask how best to use our buildings for mission. Do we need to sell some of them or let them out to generate income for other uses.
11. We need to look at our finances, and moving to single accounts and making our finances work for the mission of the Church.

For the time being there will still be two priests in this area. These changes will also leave the four local churches, their worship and community life, much as they are. Hopefully there will be considerable advantages in the pooling of local resources, enabling us to be a more effective missionary presence.

As a first step towards implementing the bishop’s pastoral strategy, I will shortly be inviting two representatives from each of our four parishes to meet together to discuss the way forward, so that we can work out a plan to implement the changes we have been asked. Your parish representative’s names will be published, and part of their job is to listen to what you as a community have to say. The Bishop has explained that this is a work of discernment and synodality. This means that prayer to the Holy Spirit for guidance is very important, as is listening to all voices with respect throughout the process.

Let us take Mary as our model. She always faced the future with faith and hope. Today we celebrate the great feast of her Assumption on which she rose body and soul into heavenly glory. In doing so, she shows us that the Gospel is the best possible news for the whole of humanity. Let us also look to the future as she did, with joy and peace.