The Bishop in Europe:

**The Right Reverend Dr. Robert Innes**

Dear Brothers and Sisters in Christ,

BISHOP’S EASTER MESSAGE 2015

“We are an Easter People and Hallelujah is our Song!”

The great St. Augustine of Hippo wrote these words 1600 years ago and they have spoken to people through the ages down to our own time. Being an Easter people means that resurrection is part of our life experience. Easter celebrates how Jesus dies and rises in each of us – in our personal lives and in the community of the church. Easter celebrates how Jesus is present in our daily work, our relationships, the joys and sorrows of the world.

We are an Easter people, in a Good Friday world. Within Europe, many countries continue to live with the grinding effects of austerity. In the South of the continent, we have a whole generation of young people growing up without work. Eastern Ukraine has faced the misery and devastation of armed struggle. This is in addition to the conflicts in the wider world – in Afghanistan, Pakistan, Nigeria, Syria and Iraq - with their tragic humanitarian consequences.

In this kind of world, it could seem that the only God in whom we might believe, or refuse to believe, would be a deist god – that is, a god who may have created the world back in the mists of time but has since then left it alone to run down by itself. Whilst philosophers might find it interesting to debate whether or not such a god exists, the deist god would not make any practical difference to the way the world is.

By contrast, the Christian Easter insists that God is not a god who is far off, but one who in Jesus draws very near. In Jesus, God himself comes among us. As the Church Fathers insisted, “what God has created, only God can redeem”. In his bursting from the tomb on Easter Day, God releases new energy into the world. Far from allowing his world to decay, according to a relentless law of entropy, God in Christ initiates a programme of renewal. Beginning with the first disciples a new community is created that exhibits a remarkable degree of joy, hope, and love. 2000 years later, the Easter people is still growing rapidly in number, especially in Africa, in China and in some other Asian countries.

Unfortunately, in the old continent of Europe, the churches (or at least the traditional churches) are generally not enjoying numerical growth. Our own Church of England has been declining at the rate of about 1% per year for many years. On top of this, the average age of our church has increased so that it is now much higher than the average age of the UK population. This means that, even if we manage to replace all those who leave the church, we will still decline as a large proportion of our current membership comes to the end of their lives. Moreover, a bulge in the clergy age distribution means 40% of our clergy are due to retire in the next 10 years.

Faced with this reality, one approach would be to dig our heads in the sand and either pretend that decline wasn’t happening or that it doesn’t matter. If our God was a God who had simply left the world to decline in its own way, than that might be permissible. But as an Easter people we simply daren’t do this!

Aware of the great challenge facing the church, the General Synod at its meeting in February approved a range of reports that constitute an ambitious programme of ‘Reform and Renewal’. At the heart of these is a renewed commitment to personal discipleship across all dioceses. There are plans to alter the way in which central church funds are distributed so that the church particularly addresses areas of deprivation and possibilities for growth, plans to increase the number of candidates for ordained ministry by 50%, proposals to simplify the process of church planting, all backed by a significant investment programme from the Church Commissioners.

The February General Synod was a gathering of some historic significance, and it left me with a real sense of hope in the future of our church. But all of us are aware that ‘renewal’ is not something that can be programmed or managed centrally. Renewal happens personally and locally. It is in our local congregations that lives are touched by the love of Jesus. It is through personal friendship and invitation that people come to know and follow the Lord. It is in the gathering for worship of our local communities that minds are challenged and hearts transformed.

This Holy Week, I will be spending Palm Sunday in Naples and Easter Sunday in Florence. I am deeply thankful to all our clergy and lay people who will be involved in the preparation and conduct of worship for Holy Week and Easter. I pray especially for those who will be endeavouring to communicate the Easter message in ways that will connect with regular churchgoers and visitors alike. I hope there will be an expectancy that people will come to faith in Jesus through the welcome and worship we offer. We have a great story to tell and a wonderful song to sing!

I wish you a blessed and joyful Easter,



**+Robert Gibraltar in Europe**