Thank you for inviting me to speak and to lead the prayers today. Let me say a quick word about myself. I am Bishop Philip Egan, the Catholic Bishop of Portsmouth here on the south coast of England. Our Diocese stretches from South Oxford in the north through Reading and Windsor down to the south coast - Bournemouth, Southampton, Portsmouth - the Isle of Wight and the Channel islands: in fact, Jersey is our biggest parish. We have 90 parishes and 120 priests in active ministry. There are about 200,000 baptised Catholics of whom 30,000 are practising. We also have 70 Catholic schools and 35 religious communities, monks and nuns, including well-known monasteries such as Farnborough Abbey, or Quarr Abbey on the Isle of Wight. Originally, I come from Altrincham, Cheshire. I’ve been a priest for 37 years and, in my time, have been in many different ministries. Until summer 2012, I was the parish priest of Romiley, near Stockport, when suddenly the Holy Father, then Pope Benedict, asked me to become the next Bishop of Portsmouth. So, this is my ninth year as Bishop. Catholic Bishops retire at 75, so if the Lord spares me, I may still have another decade to go.

In the 1990s, I spent two years in Boston Massachusetts, where I was a fellow of Boston College. I lived in a nearby parish and helped out. I don’t know if you’ve ever been to Boston? It’s an easy American city for a Brit to live in. It has lots of Victorian buildings and an industrial past.  A great sea-port on the Atlantic, it’s a bit like Liverpool or a city of northern England. I used to have lots of visitors from home and I’d do with them the usual touristy things: the Freedom Trail, the Duck Tour (a sort of amphibious bus that would take you round the sites then dive off the harbour onto the waters for a view of the city skyline) and the Sunset Bar, with its 150 beers, 40 on tap. But a great favourite of mine was taking people up the Prudential Tower, one of the tallest buildings in Boston, not huge by American standards just 52 floors, but it had a big observation deck at the top. When you got out of the super-express elevator, once your stomach had settled down and you’d gasped with relief that the lift wires hadn’t snapped, you’d get a spectacular view across the city, over the harbour to Logan Airport, indeed over the whole of metro Boston. A rolling, wooded landscape, it was an awesome sight: you could stay there for ages surveying the panorama.

There’s always something special about heights: like being at the top of a tall building, or climbing a mountain, or being on a cliff-top looking out to sea. Heights can give you a sense of ecstasy, i.e., *ek-stasis*, standing out. As you survey the landscape, you find yourself asking deep existential questions: Where am I? Where am I going? What’s happening in my life? What’s really important to me going forward?

In the Bible, high mountains are sacred places, nature’s altars where it’s also possible to encounter God. Think of Moses going up Mount Sinai to meet God and to bring back the Ten Commandments. Think too of Jesus going up Mount Tabor, a very high mountain, taking with Him Peter, James and John; and when they got to the top, He was transfigured. But at the end of St. Matthew’s Gospel, Chapter 28, Jesus takes His apostles up another high mountain – we’re not told which one.  It’s just before His ascension into heaven. We’re told: *“the eleven disciples went to the mountain to which Jesus had directed them in Galilee. And when they saw him, they worshipped him, but some hesitated. And Jesus came and said to them, ‘All authority in heaven and on earth has been given to me. Go therefore and make disciples of all nations, baptizing them in the name of the Father and of the Son and of the Holy Spirit, teaching them to observe all that I have commanded you. And behold, I am with you always, to the end of the age’”(vv. 16-20).*

For Christians, this is always a special passage. We call it the Great Commission. In it Jesus commands us to go out on mission to proclaim the Gospel, to evangelise the whole of humanity. To be a disciple means to be an apprentice, a student, a learner who sits at the feet of Jesus, imbibing His teaching, learning how to imitate Him in life and enjoying a personal friendship with Him. Jesus chooses us to be His disciples, His friends. But here, Jesus also calls us to be His apostles, someone sent, a missionary disciple, an ambassador of Christ who seeks to represent Him in the world. As an apostle, we are called to spread the Word, to build the Kingdom of God, and to draw others to the gift of eternal life. And Jesus promises to be with us through the power of His Holy Spirit.

As a Bishop, something that truly distresses me is the large number of people in our society today who do not know Christ. In fact, many say they do not believe in God. They see themselves as *nones* - not nuns! - but nones, people of no religion. Surveys suggest almost 50% are nones. They don’t know God; they don’t seem to have a friendship with Him; they are unchurched, spiritually adrift, without faith, without the hope of heaven, without the love of Jesus. I said before, there are 200K Catholics in our Diocese; there are also other Christians too. Yet over 3M people live and work in our area: what are we doing to reach the nones, to offer them the Gospel? Our busy, Western secular society constantly tries to tell us that faith, the vertical dimension, the sacred canopy, friendship with God, is an optional extra. We’re meant to shop til we drop, keep active, have a good time and follow the science. Yet we know there’s much more to living than that. Every single human being on earth wants to be happy. Yet without God, the human heart is restless; our lives lack purpose and meaning; our value-systems become groundless. Without a friendship with God, we lack the grace, strength and energy we need to bear sickness, suffering, sadness and death. Indeed, thinking of World Vision International, it was the grace of God that led Robert Pierce and Frank Phillips to found it as an evangelical charity focused on humanitarian aid, development and advocacy.

Let me tell you a quick story. Before COVID, I paid a visit to the Salvation Army here in Portsmouth. I’m a great admirer of the Salvation Army and the amazing work they do. Portsmouth is an area with a great deal of deprivation, surprisingly so given all the opportunities available such as tourism, the naval dockyard, jobs in marine engineering, the university and so on. In the city, the Salvation Army run a huge furniture store and charity shop, a good neighbour befriending scheme, food banks and care of the homeless, a pre-school nursery, an employment advice centre and a haven with over 30 staff serving the elderly and most vulnerable. It’s really impressive to see the charitable service and the outreach they offer. But I was stunned when I asked them about their Sunday congregation: they said it was usually about 50. I ask myself: how is it that 50 people can support such a massive operation? Our Cathedral has over 1000 people at Sunday Mass: what are we doing for outreach and charity?

I must add that since then, we have been upping our game, seeking to identify needs, gaps in provision and how best we can help. Recently we began some mental health projects; we also run a refugee sponsorship scheme. We have established Caritas to serve people of any faith or none through projects of social justice and environmental action. My point is, in the Great Commission, Jesus commissions us to go out on mission, AND to serve Him in the poor and needy. He gives us the grace and energy we need to spread the Kingdom of God and its values, and also to serve the poor and needy. In other words, with mission always goes with service, with charity, with care of the neediest.

The work of World Vision, it seems to me, is exactly about this, mission and service. Through its humanitarian aid, its work of advocacy and its promotion of development, active in over 90 countries, World Vision is remarkably one of the largest charities in the world. I’m told its workers come from many Christian denominations and represent all faiths and none. Originally inspired by Jesus’s Great Commission and the values of the Gospel, World Vision serves people wherever there is human need, most notably through the child sponsorship programme. As a worker for World Vision, no matter what might be on today’s agenda for you, surely you must feel truly proud of what has been achieved and the good to be achieved soon. So let’s begin this day by climbing the mountain. Let’s go up into the heights to be with Jesus. Let’s ascend to the summit in order to join the apostles and to hear the Lord say to us once again: *Go therefore and make disciples of all nations .. teaching them to observe all that I have commanded you*. And let’s remember too His consoling promise: *Behold, I am with you always, to the end of the age.*

We now spend a moment with the Lord in prayer, placing before Him the needs of the world and all our own needs too. The response to these Intercessions is *Lord, hear our prayer*.
1. Let us commend to him the government leaders and experts meeting this week in Glasgow for COP26, that the Holy Spirit will guide their discussions and bring about a consensus on tackling the climate crisis. We pray to the Lord.
2. Let us also pray for a speedy end to the coronavirus pandemic, for all who have died or who are sick, for the safety of medical staff and care-givers and for access for all to the vaccines. We pray to the Lord.
3. For an end to war, violence and terrorism, for peace and reconciliation in troubled countries of the world, especially in Afghanistan, Cameroon, Ethiopia, Mexico and Yemen: we pray to the Lord
4. Let us pray for all children, wherever they are who are vulnerable and at risk, for an end to enforced marriage, child labour and recruitment of children as soldiers. We pray to the Lord.
5. Let us ask God today to bless the work of World Vision and all its aid-workers and partners, and for all who seek to alleviate poverty and injustice in our world. We pray to the Lord.
6. Let us pause for a moment in silence to pray for our own needs, our families and friends, remembering especially the sick and those who have asked our prayers.
7. In the power of the Holy Spirit, let us now pray to the Father in the words the Son has given us: Our Father …

May the Lord bless us and keep us and bring us all one day to everlasting life - in the name of the Father, and of the Son and of the Holy Spirit.

Let us go in peace to love and serve the Lord. Thanks be to God.