

MAUNDY THURSDAY 2019 : CHRISM EUCHARIST

Exeter Cathedral

Preached by the Right Reverend Robert Atwell, *Bishop of Exeter*

I'm sure I'm not the only person here who was given for Christmas a copy of Fergus Butler-Gallie's, *A Field Guide to the English Clergy*, subtitled 'A compendium of diverse eccentrics, pirates, prelates and adventurers; all Anglican, some even practising.' It makes good bedtime reading.

Among the clergy quoted is the redoubtable Sydney Smith, a Canon of St Paul's Cathedral in the early nineteenth century. Known for his caustic wit, the book includes several of his waspish comments. One barbed remark, however, which escaped the anthology has since been sent to me by an anonymous well-wisher in the Diocese:

'I must believe in the apostolic succession,' said Sydney Smith, 'there being no other way of accounting for the descent of the Bishop of Exeter from Judas Iscariot.'

I don't know which of you kind people sent me that particular bon mot, or which of my illustrious seventy predecessors Sydney Smith was castigating, but it is always good to be reminded that one has feet of clay.

Thanksgiving is where I want to begin this morning as we come together as ordained and lay ministers to renew our commitment: thanksgiving to God for the privilege of ministry and my own thanksgiving to each of you for your partnership in the Gospel.

As I travel round the Diocese I am conscious of just how much you give, often sacrificially, of your time and energy, and at no small cost to your families and friends. So thank you. In fact I have a quotation of my own this morning, not from the Bible and certainly not from Sydney Smith, but from the American poet, e e cummings:

i thank You God for most this amazing
day:for the leaping greenly spirits of trees
and a blue true dream of sky; and for everything
which is natural which is infinite which is yes

We come to the cathedral today to renew our 'Yes' to God, and to rejoice in God's 'Yes' to us in Jesus Christ. As Paul says in his Second Letter to the Corinthians: 'As surely as God is faithful, our word to you has not been Yes and No. The Son of God, Jesus Christ, whom we proclaim among you was never a mixture of Yes and No; but in Christ it is always Yes. For in him every one of God's promises is a Yes.' (2 Cor. 1.18-20)

God's 'Yes' to us in Jesus Christ, is not conditional or ambiguous. It overflows with warmth and grace. In the words of John's Gospel, 'God did not send Son into the world to condemn the world, but that the world might be saved through him.' (John 3.17)

Sadly we do not always embody this unconditional, affirming love of God in our ministry. That is why we come before God today not only in thanksgiving, but also in penitence. As we renew our promises, we offer to God our failings as well as our deep desire to be worthy of our calling.

I remember one priest at a Deanery Chapter when I was a vicar in north London boasting that his motto in life was, 'Start each day with a smile and get it over with.' Sometimes the noise of our behaviour and our body language drowns out the noble words of our preaching. We need to look in the mirror from time to time and face the fact that the way we relate to people will either dismantle or reinforce the walls of opposition to the good news of Jesus Christ.

We are inviting people into friendship with God. That means we have to show them friendship ourselves. Otherwise they will simply not believe it.

The other day I rediscovered some words of the late Canon George Briggs. Writing to a friend of mine, he penned this prayer: 'Set a watch, O Lord, upon my tongue: that I may never speak the cruel word which is untrue; or being true, is not the whole truth; or being wholly true, is merciless.' To that prayer, I hope we would all say Amen.

'By this shall all people know you are my disciples, if you preach good sermons.' In case you've forgotten, Jesus actually said, 'If you love one another!' Too often love is the missing ingredient in our ministry, the simple warmth of human kindness. And the love that I am talking about is more than sentiment or toleration. True love, as Jesus points out in the Sermon on the Mount, is going the second and third mile with people, including those we don't particularly like.

We are living in a world that has become highly regulated and is increasingly compartmentalized. In this brave new world of experts and professionals, we clergy are easily criticised for being a bunch of amateurs. We don't tick any of society's boxes. We are the jack of all trades and the master of none; and when we're feeling tired, it's easy to lose confidence in God's calling and become defensive.

We do need to be trained, made accountable and be professional in our ministry, particularly in safeguarding for example. But equally we need to be giving energy to developing our relationship with God as the wellspring of our ministry. After all, the root of the word 'amateur' lies in the Latin verb *amare*, to love. Amateurs are those who literally love what they are doing.

As ministers of the Gospel, we should be proud to be amateurs, who seek to love God with our whole heart and our neighbours as ourselves. I hope we also love learning more about what it means to be a disciple of Christ and to walk by faith in life.

And in that context, what has this morning's gospel (Luke 4.16-21) to teach us because it takes us back to the beginning of Jesus's public ministry. Luke tells us that Jesus went to the synagogue as he regularly did, and was handed the scroll of the prophet Isaiah from which to read. 'The spirit of the Lord is upon me because he has anointed me to bring good news to the poor.' Then sitting down Jesus says: 'Today this scripture has been fulfilled in your hearing.'

The way Jesus read the passage and his final comment had an electric effect on the assembled congregation. Jesus was in effect setting out his stall. He had stepped out of obscurity onto the stage of human history and on his lips the words of Isaiah become a manifesto.

Luke wants us to understand that Jesus of Nazareth is no ordinary rabbi. He is the anointed one of God, the Messiah. If you want to know what God is like, Luke is saying, then look at Jesus. Jesus makes the invisible God visible. This is the spectacular claim of the Gospels and this is what we are summoned to proclaim. He is the 'Yes' of God to the world.

What is also interesting is what Jesus doesn't say. Jesus has come to set the oppressed free, and to proclaim a year of the Lord's favour, but not apparently to proclaim a 'day of vengeance for our God.' Those words of Isaiah, Jesus appears to have deliberately omitted.

It is the compassion of God, not the vengeance of God that Jesus emphasises. And that emphasis needs to be reflected in our own preaching.

Let me finish with a story about a friend of mine from my student days who became a professional photographer. Last year he and his wife went on safari to Botswana to celebrate his 60th birthday, determined amongst other things to take a photograph of a Cheetah, which had eluded him all his professional life.

Sadly, although they saw lots of wonderful sights and various wildlife during their visit, he didn't succeed in seeing and photographing a cheetah. On returning home and going through a portfolio of old photographs from when he had first visited Africa, he suddenly discovered a photograph of one.

There in a photograph he had taken 30 years previously of a herd of elephants, he suddenly spotted lying on a branch of a tree, watching the elephants, a cheetah, perfectly camouflaged. It had always been there, only he had never noticed it.

One of our tasks is to help people see things in the picture of their life that they easily overlook in their search for happiness, and that includes missing the hidden presence of God in the story of their life. In words from the Ordination Service, our task is 'to make the love of God visible'.

God does not force himself upon us. The challenge, whether we are ordained or not, is to make the love of God visible to others so that they feel free to say yes to Jesus Christ and become his disciple too.

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Genesis opens with God's survey of creation and his affirmation that it is glorious, that it is 'very good'. The Book of Revelation closes with another yes. In the last verse of the last chapter it says: 'Yes, I am coming soon. Amen. Come Lord Jesus.' God's word to us in all eternity is Yes. And in that confidence we make our prayer and rededicate our lives in his service.

+ Robert Exon