

## MAUNDY THURSDAY 2022

### Chrism Eucharist: Exeter Cathedral

Address by the Rt Reverend Robert Atwell, *Bishop of Exeter*

The sinking of the Titanic in 1912 hit the headlines across the world and still today that terrible disaster has an iconic status. Its sinking, however, was not the only maritime disaster that year. In January, in thick fog off the coast of Virginia, the steamship *Monroe* was rammed by a merchant vessel called the *Nantuket* and sank with the loss of forty-one seamen who drowned in the icy waters of the Atlantic.

Following an inquiry into the disaster, the captain of the *Nantucket* was arraigned on charges of culpable homicide. In the course of the trial, Edward Johnson, the captain of the ill-fated *Monroe* was grilled in the witness box for five hours by lawyers.

During the cross-examination, it emerged that Captain Johnson (and I'm quoting from a contemporary report of the trial) 'navigated the *Monroe* with a steering compass that deviated as much as two degrees from the standard magnetic compass. He said that the instrument was sufficiently true to steer the ship, and that it was the custom of masters in the coastal trade to use such compasses. However, his steering compass had never been recalibrated in the year since he had assumed mastership of the *Monroe*.'

A faulty compass, that had initially seemed adequate for the task of navigation, in the event proved to be a disaster. This terrible realization shocked the international marine community and after the trial, reporters witnessed the heart-rending sight of the two sea captains outside the courtroom sobbing in each other's arms.

The *New York Times* reported, 'The sobs of these two burly seamen were a moving reminder of the tragic consequences of misorientation.' The captain's steering compass had never been recalibrated.

The reason we come to the cathedral today, as clergy, readers or lay ministers, is to recalibrate our moral and spiritual compass. And it's something we need to do on a regular basis lest we become complacent and inadvertently steer the ark of God onto the rocks.

Words from the Book of Proverbs come to mind: 'Above all else, guard your heart, for everything you do flows from it.' (Proverbs 4.23) Our hearts are God's built-in homing device, and we need to recalibrate them regularly, tuning them to God our Creator, our magnetic north. The good news is that if we get this fundamental inner orientation right, then other things in our life and ministry will fall into place naturally.

In this respect, worship is God's gymnasium in which God retrains our hearts. It is why attentive listening to the voice of God is the foundation of prayer. As the boy Samuel, lying down beside the ark of God that night in Shiloh, learned to say, 'Speak Lord, your servant is listening.'

When it comes to prayer, I'm not very good at listening because I invariably get stuck in transmit mode, lecturing God about my various woes. Too often, my instinctive posture is not 'Speak Lord, your servant is listening', but 'Listen Lord, your servant is speaking.'

I don't know how God puts up with me. And yet patience and compassion towards his wayward children belongs to the essence of God and the same attitude should characterise our attitude to others, and indeed towards ourselves.

St Francis de Sales, writing in the sixteenth century, says this: 'One form of gentleness we should all practise is towards ourselves. We should refrain from self-recrimination, and not be fretful or spiteful towards ourselves.'

The gospels are united in telling us that at the heart of Jesus's ministry was a clarion call to repentance. 'Repent and believe the good news, for the kingdom of God is close at hand.'

The Greek word we translate as repentance is *metanoia* and it is rich in meaning. The clue lies in the second half of the word because it derives from *nous*, meaning mind or understanding. In philosophy the *nous* referred to the rational part of the soul. *Meta-noia* meant 'turn your mind round'.

But the word *nous* spawned another word in Greek which found its way into the English language unchanged: *para-noia*.

*Paranoia* does not just refer to individuals whose ideas are crazy. We all go a bit off beam from time to time. *Paranoia* describes someone whose whole existence is soaked in the unreal. And *metanoia* is its opposite. *Metanoia* is God's summons to move from fantasy to reality, to embrace the real and live the real. And it is this that lies at the heart of Jesus's message. It was a summons to life:

'The spirit of the Lord is upon me because he has anointed me to bring good news to the poor, to proclaim release to captives, sight to the blind and to let the oppressed go free.'

The way Jesus read the passage from Isaiah in the synagogue that sabbath was powerful, but what had an electric effect on the assembled congregation was the way he concluded the reading: 'Today,' he says, 'this scripture has been fulfilled in your hearing.'

In that moment, Jesus stepped out of obscurity onto the stage of world history. On his lips the words of Isaiah became a manifesto, a summons to life shaped by the abundant grace of God. Luke wants us to understand that Jesus of Nazareth is no ordinary rabbi. This man 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. He is the 'Yes' of God to the world. This is the spectacular claim of the Gospels, and it is such good news.

God does not force himself upon us. Our challenge as ministers is to make the love of God visible to others so that they feel free to say yes to Jesus Christ and become his disciples too. We are not called to be salesmen for God. God doesn't need our merchandising. Christian ministry is not a job or a sales pitch, but a vocation in which we are possessed by the holy and

eternal God, who enables us to grow into our full potential as women and men.

A priest will be glad to be with God for the sake of the people she or he serves. A priest will be glad to be with people of all sorts and conditions for the sake of God.

It is why, in all the demands that are made upon us, we need to give our best energy to deepening our relationship with God as the wellspring of our joy. Only so can we recalibrate our spiritual and moral compass.

But here let me speak a word of caution.

The genuineness of a vocation is invariably tested by suffering, and this pandemic has tested us to the hilt. Some of us are exhausted. Some of us have been very ill with Covid. Some of us are bereaved. Some of us have been brought to the edge mentally. No one has been unaffected by this pandemic.

In the Letter to the Hebrews, we are told that although Jesus Christ was the Son of God, 'yet he learned obedience through the things that he suffered'.

I remember an old monk once saying to me, 'Suffering is good for you.' I resented his words because I wasn't in a good place and I was full of self-pity. Many years on I'm still not sure what I think because his words had a flavour of the merciless against which I still rebel. And yet. And yet.

Perhaps you know the words of the Greek playwright Aeschylus. They have always haunted me:

'Pain that cannot forget  
falls drop by drop upon the human heart  
until in our despair and against our will  
there comes wisdom  
through the awful grace of God.'

'Jesus learned obedience through the things that he suffered.' It's a hard call. I think I can just about embrace that, but whatever is being spoken of in scripture is qualitatively different from self-contempt. What I absolutely know is that when we are intolerant of ourselves and refuse to forgive

ourselves for the mistakes we make in life or ministry, then we wither inside.

As Paul wrote to the Romans with characteristic candour, 'All of us fall short of the glory of God'. We are all flawed. We all mess up. We all get things wrong and people wrong. I do. But forgiving others and forgiving ourselves for being ourselves unlocks the floodgates of compassion. It is God's way of recalibrating our hearts. My old tutor at college use to describe grace as God's superglue: it stops us falling apart inside, she said.

Let me finish with a story. Last month I had to be in London for a series of meetings and caught the bus to Westminster. Sitting in the seat in front of me were two elderly ladies, deep in conversation. One was explaining to the other how she kept getting giddy spells.

'My son says that I ought to move into sheltered accommodation or at least a bungalow. It's the stairs that's the trouble. He says I should stop halfway on the stairs and catch my breath. What do you think, Eileen?'

'I wouldn't do that if I were you, Doris. At our age, if you stop halfway, you might forget whether you're going up or coming down.'

It's that mixture of common sense and quiet determination that is the essence of Christian ministry. Be of good courage. Persevere. Recalibrate your heart. Keep your heart true to God and the God of all grace, hope and compassion will be with you and won't let you go.

+ Robert Exon