

FAREWELL SERMON

Exeter Cathedral

Sunday 17th September 2023 at 3pm

Isaiah 40.25-31; 1 Corinthians 2.1-10

It's quite a complicated business retiring when you're a bishop. There is the obvious question of where are you going to live, but there is the added challenge of where can you go to church?

I began researching my options some time ago and used my annual leave to do the odd recce, turning up in churches incognito to see whether or not I could cope. One church looked particularly promising: lovely medieval building; nice welcome, warm without being over the top; and hymns I could actually sing. On the day in question, I had cut it a bit fine and, as I walked in, the churchwarden was at the lectern giving out the notices.

It turned out that the vicar was on holiday and the priest celebrating the Parish Eucharist was retired. This could be me in a couple of years' time, I thought to myself. Everything was fine until we got to the Peace when the priest stood in front of the altar and said, 'Today we're going to do something different.' And my heart sank.

Instead of saying 'Peace be with you', he said, 'I want you to turn to the person sitting next to you, or if you are sitting by yourself, turn to the person sitting in the pew behind you. Take them by the hand, look them in the eye, and say, "I think you're beautiful." And then they are going to reply, "I think you're beautiful too."'

This is why people don't go to church, I thought to myself. I shuffled along the pew to the elderly lady sitting next to me.

'Would you mind very much,' I said, taking her hand in mine, 'if I just said, "Peace be with you"?' 'That's alright dear,' she said. 'Peace be with you too.' 'Do tell me,' I said, 'who is the priest conducting the service?' 'I know he's embarrassing,' she said. 'He's my husband.'

As you can tell, I found the experience excruciating but it has stuck in my mind. What constitutes true beauty in life? Does God think we're beautiful? Do you think you are beautiful?

When I was a child, we sometimes went to Southend-on-Sea for a day out and, at the end of the pier was the Hall of Mirrors: some convex, some concave, others wobbly and misshapen. Standing in front of them, you looked either like a stick insect or ginormous or mad as a hatter. Even as a child, I knew the images the mirrors reflected back weren't true, but sometimes we internalise distorted images of ourselves, and they become our reality.

Self-harming amongst children and young people has reached epic proportions, in part fuelled by social media. What has gone wrong in our society that our children should feel that this is the only way they can communicate or ask for help? What distorted images of themselves are they living with?

I have always been struck by a remark of the medieval philosopher, Meister Eckhardt, who said, 'God is always in us; the trouble is, we are rarely at home.' Being at home in our bodies is crucial not only to our wellbeing but to our understanding of God.

The week after I was installed as Bishop of Exeter, I was back in the cathedral for an informal evening service entitled, 'Meet the Bishop' that concluded with me, sitting on a sofa here at the front, being interviewed Michael Parkinson style. Some of the questions I had anticipated, but one question took me by surprise. 'Who is God for you?'

It was a fair question to ask a new bishop, but not one that I had ever anticipated and I was a bit flummoxed. Eventually I said: 'For me, God is supremely beautiful. In God I discover my worth and my own beauty, and in Jesus Christ I recognise God's human face. There is a depth to the love of God that I cannot fathom, and it continues to draw me ever deeper.'

Whatever the reality is to which the word 'God' points, I know that God must always be higher and greater and deeper than all our concepts and images. It is why prayer is important to me and it is why I find Isaiah's words from our first reading so arresting:

'Have you not known? Have you not heard? The LORD is the everlasting God, the creator of the ends of the earth. He does not faint or

grow weary. His understanding is unsearchable. 'Even youths will faint and be weary, and the young will fall exhausted. But those who wait upon the LORD shall renew their strength. They shall mount up with wings like eagles. They shall run and not be weary. They shall walk and not faint.'

As Christians, we dare to believe that God, the creator of heaven and earth, became a human being in one time and place in order to bless and redeem humanity in every time and place. Jesus Christ is God's Yes to the world. As St Paul says, 'In Christ, every one of God's promises is a Yes' (2 Cor. 1.20).

The God of scripture is not a negotiator God. God is the relentless Giver who affirms all that is good. Centring our life on Christ, in whom God's promises are fulfilled, has to be the key to the renewal of the Church. Our task is to show the world the face of Jesus Christ and to serve the people of Devon with joy, a joy that comes from knowing that we are known and loved by God.

When I was a student, I used to help out at residential holidays for deprived children run by the Diocese of Chelmsford. It was exhausting but rewarding work. I remember the leader of a workshop inviting a group of 9 and 10 year olds to paint a picture of God. They were encouraged to reflect on their experience and come back in half an hour with their picture. I thought it was a crazy thing to ask, but the children didn't seem phased by the challenge at all.

When the group reassembled, as you can guess, there were pictures of Jesus on a cross and of God as an old man with a beard. One picture, however, was different. It was a gigantic circle, painted dark blue. When I asked the girl why she had represented God like that she said, 'I chose blue because God is peaceful, and a circle because God hasn't any rough edges.' Perhaps it's another way of talking about the beauty of God?

Unlike God, I have plenty of rough edges, as those of you who know me will gladly testify. It's another reason why I pray. In my experience prayer is a bit like sandpaper. It's how God smooths off our rough edges and repairs the damage that life inflicts. Most importantly, it opens up deep places within to his healing grace.

Prayer is an adventure, a vulnerable-making process because it involves standing unprotected before God. As St Teresa of Avila said, 'Prayer is

looking at God and discovering that God is looking back at you with love.' It is why our worship needs to be both accessible and authentic. Worship is a gymnasium in which God retrains our hearts and stops them going rusty.

Perhaps you know the prayer of the Iona Community? 'O Christ the Master Carpenter, who on the cross through wood and nails worked our whole salvation: wield well your tools in the workshop of this world, that we who come to your bench rough-hewn, may by your hand be fashioned to a truer beauty and a greater usefulness.'

A truer beauty. When Mother Teresa of Calcutta was asked why she had set up a home for the dying and destitute, she said that she 'wanted to do something beautiful for God'. I met her when I was a university chaplain. She was tiny, no more than 4 foot 6 tall, with bright blue eyes. Visiting her home for the destitute in Kalighat, I watched two young sisters wash the suppurating sores of an elderly man who had been brought in off the streets. I remember the smell of his necrotic flesh and wondered how the sisters could bear to be that close to him.

As they cared for him, I spotted a sign written in English, pinned to the wall above the bed on which he lay. It said, 'The Body of Christ'. 'I was hungry and you fed me. I was thirsty and you gave me something to drink. I was in prison and you visited me. I was naked and you clothed me. I was sick and you cared for me.' Those words of Jesus should be written on the pages of every human heart.

If we cannot perceive the presence of Christ in one another, including when disguised in the poorest individual, then we will never perceive the presence of Christ in the sacrament of his Body and Blood in the Eucharist. If we cannot find God in the sacrament of this present moment, there is little point in looking for God somewhere else. Our worship of God needs to be linked to our service of others.

Before I was a bishop, I was vicar of Primrose Hill in north London, and on days off I often visited the British Museum. One of my favourite exhibits was the Lewis chessmen. Discovered on the Isle of Lewis in 1831, they are carved from walrus tusks. The figures date from the twelfth century when the Hebrides were part of the kingdom of Scandinavia, not Scotland.

Two things distinguish these medieval chess pieces. First, instead of rooks, this chess set has wild-eyed berserkers, biting their shields with

battle fury. The success of the Vikings' raids was rooted in the way they deployed berserkers, highly aggressive foot soldiers, to cause havoc in the enemy ranks. In so doing, they bequeathed the word 'berserk' to the English language, meaning unbridled chaos.

The other interesting feature of the Lewis chessmen are the bishops. They are depicted wearing cope and mitre, each holding their pastoral staff in their hand, but their faces are all different. Indeed, one of them looks as if he has a pinecone up his bottom.

If you know the rules of chess, you will know that unlike the other pieces on the board, bishops are not straightforward. Bishops move diagonally. I feel it is a parable of my own ministry. In chess, the bishops are not the most powerful pieces on the board, but they can knock out the berserkers.

That has certainly been how I have conceived part of my role in the wider community. However inadequately, I have tried to face down those who shout loudest or who are destructive. I have tried to be a voice, particularly for those who live in our rural and coastal communities, or rather to help them find their own voice and to hold their heads high.

The last nine and a half years have been the privilege of my life. For you I have been your bishop, but with you I am just Robert, a fellow Christian, seeking the mercy and love of God.

I have come to know and love this county, and I treasure the many friendships I have made. It will be a wrench to leave. I am proud of the way our churches, our church schools, and chaplaincies are making a difference for good across Devon. We need communities of faith and friendship to soften the rough edges of our abrasive, anonymous world.

When I was appointed Bishop of Exeter, I asked that the announcement might be made in one of the poorest communities in the diocese rather than here in the cathedral, reckoning that if the gospel of Jesus Christ isn't good news for them, then it's not good news. So it was that on a bitterly cold day in January, I arrived at St Budeaux's church in Plymouth. A clutch of folk from the parish had tipped up, together with children from the local Primary School.

At the appointed hour, I was solemnly introduced as the 71st Bishop of Exeter and, as I stepped forward to the microphone to deliver a few well-chosen words in front of the waiting television cameras, a child in the

front row piped up: 'Are you really 71?' And that was it. Forget the speech. That was what was broadcast.

Well, ten years on I'm still not 71, but I am 69, and the time has come to lay down my crozier and pass the baton of leadership on to whomever the Lord calls to be the 72nd Bishop of Exeter. I do so with thanksgiving for all that you have taught me about being a Christian. In my experience, friendship with God is often refracted through the prism of friendship with others.

For me, every day is a gift and a cause for celebration, and at its heart is the realisation that life is the breath of God. I close with words of Paul from our second reading:

'When I came among you, I did not come proclaiming the mystery of God in lofty words or wisdom. Instead, I decided to know nothing among you except Jesus Christ, and him crucified. I came to you in weakness and in fear and with much trepidation. My speech and my proclamation were not made with plausible words of wisdom, but with a demonstration of the Spirit and of power, so that your faith might rest not on human wisdom but on the power of God.'

The foolishness of God is indeed wiser than human wisdom, and the weakness of God is stronger than human strength. May it be the experience of each one of us as we journey on. Amen.

+ Robert Exon