



Bristol Cathedral

**A Sermon preached at the Installation of Nicola Stanley, 1st March 2014,
By The Dean**

The Broken Themes of Praise

We are all telling stories from the First World War at the moment; here is another. On 9th July 1917, a dreadnought battleship, HMS Vanguard, was docked on the North Shore of Scapa Flow. Vanguard had fought at the Battle of Jutland, but now she was in need of repair. Scapa Flow was far from the fighting on the Aisne and the Eastern Front and a long summer night settled on the Orkneys. Then, at twenty-past eleven, two explosions lit up the entire fleet. As it went dark again searchlights could not locate HMS Vanguard. It has never been clear exactly what had happened, but it is most likely that old, deteriorating cordite triggered the blast. Vanguard was one of the largest ships in the Navy and that night there were 845 men aboard. Just two survived. The following day, midshipmen, boys of fifteen, were sent out onto the shore, with buckets, to clear the beaches of body parts.

After the war, an attempt was made to give those midshipmen something of the childhood that had been taken from them. They sent them to Caius College, Cambridge (which is exactly where anyone would go if they were looking for a bit of light relief). Rudyard Kipling thought about that and thought about what those boys had seen and done and wondered what they would make of life in a gown:

*They have touched a knowledge outreaching speech – as when the cutters were sent
To harvest the dreadful mile of beach after the Vanguard went'*

'They have touched a knowledge outreaching speech'. There are, said Kipling, truths you will never put into words, there are times when words will fail you.

We forget that. The fact is, Christians talk too much. Remember E M Forster,

poor little talkative Christianity

Or Thomas Keating

Silence is God's first language; everything else is a poor translation

Christians talk too much. Isaiah in the Temple and Moses at the burning bush had no words for the glory before them. The faithful, in scripture, have the good sense to fall on their faces and shut up. We, on the other hand, arrange a Chapter meeting, a community meeting, a workshop, or a lecture and, when we have talked and talked, we look up brightly and ask 'Is there any other business?' Christians talk too much and the clergy are the worst offenders. And, here I am with more words. The knowledge of God is a knowledge outreaching speech. We have too many words and not enough wonder.

That is always challenge in the cathedral, however you dress it up. We shuttle daily between the things we *can't* say and the things we *must* say. This extraordinary building, built and rebuilt for over eight hundred years, is a sustained attempt to give glory to the God we cannot describe. Walls go up to say something about God's might and strength, then windows are punched through to remind us that God is illumination not brute power. Arches reach up and up because God is limitless, chapels are small because the God's Spirit draws us into relationship and intimacy. We have spaces to process because our God goes before us and we have altars where he comes to us. Nicola will find the building is never done with her. It says one thing and another, it speaks and falls silent because ultimately our faith is worked out the things we know and the things we will never *know*.

Nicola, is a priest in the Church of God. She must and will speak to us. In *The Declaration of Assent* she made, at the beginning of this service, she was reminded that the Church has a faith which it is charged to *proclaim*, actually to *proclaim afresh* in every generation. She was charged specifically *not* to be silent, but to make Christ known. Priests preach and teach. They search for the words to describe that glory that is always better than our best efforts. Priests also give counsel and pastoral advice. Our Canon Pastor (and every priest) must find words that will bear the weight of our sorrow and our joy. So, Robert helps us to

find the words we use with each other. And then priests lead us in worship. It is the job of the Canon Precentor to find the language we need when we offer words to God.

Do you know the poem *The Minister*, by Anne Stevenson?

*We're going to need the minister
to help this heavy body into the ground.*

*But she won't dig the hole;
others who are stronger and weaker will have to do that.
And she won't wipe her nose and her eyes;
others who are weaker and stronger will have to do that.*

...

*No, we'll get the minister to come
and take care of the words.*

*She doesn't have to make them up,
she doesn't have to say them well,
she doesn't have to like them
so long as they agree to obey her.*

*We have to have the minister
so the words will know where to go.*

I know the clergy talk too much. By the grace of God I think we are installing a Precentor who has the necessary gift of quiet. That was one of the many gifts that commended her to us. Even so, knowing we need to shut up sometimes the clergy must use words wisely, test them against scripture, tradition and experience, employ them to sustain us and unite us. That will be Nicola's work amongst us.

So words and then something else: Nicola's ministry will also be worked out in music. And music adds something important.

The night before I was ordained in Ely Cathedral the Bishop of Ely came to the retreat house and spoke to us. That particular Bishop of Ely was a quiet man. He chose words carefully. He read us a poem about Dietrich Bonhoeffer. Bonhoeffer was a Lutheran Pastor imprisoned, by the Nazis, sent to Buchenwald and finally executed, by hanging, in Flossenbug, less than a month before the German surrender. If you want a model of courage and steadfast dedication and hope it is Bonhoeffer. The night before you are ordained, I

have to tell you, a poem about Bonhoeffer is pretty bracing stuff. For a while it scared me rigid, and it stayed with me.

I will not read you that poem; it is by Geoffrey Hill and you only really understand Geoffrey Hill if you *are* Geoffrey Hill. The poet knows about Bonhoeffer. Knows he was one of the great theologians of the last century, in the worst of times insisting that all things can be reconciled in Christ. He also knows that Bonhoeffer believed that we have a duty to refine our speech, a duty to do better. Instead of making a few celebrities he thought we should all see what we might become together. Bonhoeffer thought that was a hard thing to do, but words and music can help. He thought that, just sometimes, and especially in music we can surpass ourselves, we can become for a moment better than we are and catch a glimpse of what we will be in Christ. Just for an instant, with the help of music we see what we could become. He wanted us to return

from feverish activity to unhurried leisure, from dispersion to concentration..., from snobbery to modesty, from extravagance to moderation.

That poem, read on my ordination retreat, described Bonhoeffer pacing out his prison cell while bombs were falling on Berlin. And then it says that Bonhoeffer

Restores the broken themes of praise.

He

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What does that mean? Well our best efforts and our words are important but they are never enough. Even a Precentor, even this Precentor, will not be able to praise God as God should be praised. Our words are not good enough and frankly, we are not good enough. Delightful as we all are this afternoon in our finery for this great day we are still the slightly scruffy people of God, a bit compromised, fitfully good, seldom holy. Our praises are not all they should be. Bonhoeffer knew that; knew the themes of praise are broken. And he knew we can do better.

Our cathedrals, in soaring architecture and equally soaring music, do things mere words will never do. Here we restore the broken themes of praise. We surpass ourselves. We give glory to a God we can never define or describe. Nicola we welcome you into this community and we praise God for the gifts that are in you because this will be the responsibility you have. You (with the help of our choirs and all your colleagues here) will set before us our better selves, and offer a glimpse of the God whom we adore. You will do that and just for a moment this will be none other than the house of God and the gate of heaven.

ⁱ From *The Scholars*, I am indebted to Dr Jeffrey Lewin who helped me track down the reference.