

Sermon – Trinity 6 2017

The Lord being my helper

This month has been a bit of walk down memory lane. Sunday 3rd July 1977 was the day of my ordination to the diaconate. And forty years on it was a thrill to be involved at the cathedral when the new deacons were ordained on 1st July. Squirrelled away in the attic I recently unearthed papers from my ordination : the Deacon's Orders, the Declaration of Assent and Licence authorising me to serve as stipendiary curate. I even found my first job description – hand written by my incumbent at our first staff meeting. It listed what he saw to be the chief fields of activity. Preaching happens to be at the top of the list. It states: “to achieve effectiveness in communication with economy and concentrated use of preparation time”. Well I can't speak for effectiveness but as my wife and family will verify the 'economic use of preparation time' is still very much a work in progress!

But as I reacquainted myself with that job description and that staff meeting, my mind went back to the ordination itself. I remember the congregation was wonderfully welcoming - the extended family and friends wonderfully supportive yet, as Margaret and I waved goodbye to the last of our guests, I experienced the most profound feeling of anxiety – of unworthiness - of self-doubt – of not knowing whether I could do this!

In the ordinal there's this list of declarations that the person to be ordained must respond to.

Will you accept the discipline of the Church ?

Will you be diligent in prayer ... and the reading of holy scripture?

Will you fashion your life and that of your household according to the way of Christ?

Will you promote unity, peace and love among all Christian people?

And the response given is simply, or was then,

‘I will, the Lord being my helper’.

And it was that phrase ‘the Lord being my helper’, that I needed to learn to trust as I launched out into the deep ... unclear of the journey that lay ahead.

That’s one reason why I enjoy hearing again the OT story of Jacob and his experience at Bethel. This for him was a liminal moment, his having reached a new frontier in his story of personal struggle.

To recap he had usurped his twin brother’s birthright and blessing and a consequence of his ill-gotten legacy required him to leave Be'er Sheba and journey towards Charan, to his uncle Laban's home where a marriage was to be arranged. While traveling, Jacob encountered "the place" (Mount Moriah) and since the sun had set, he lay down to sleep.

Here he dreamt of a stairway bridging heaven to the very spot where he lay and of heavenly beings ascending and descending the stairway. And when he awoke, was confronted by a deep realisation that this was no ordinary place, rather it was a meeting place of two frontiers – “how awesome is this place”, Jacob exclaims. And he lifted the stone where he had been resting and made of it a pillar, anointing it with oil –

“Surely the Lord is in this place and I did not know it ... This is none other than the house of God and this is the gate of heaven”.

And, in that place, Jacob made a vow to trust that God would fulfil in him the promise made to his forefather Abraham and thus he resumed his journey, leaving behind all that was familiar, going into a foreign place and into a self-imposed exile, but not an exile without hope. He was lonely, but not alone. Far from home, yet reassured. His misgivings and self-doubt were no longer the only reality. At Bethel a new frontier was traversed one that beckoned him into a deeper reality of meaning and purpose.

This familiar narrative from Genesis 28 marks a time of crisis. Before that, Jacob’s life had followed familiar paths, so he was less conscious perhaps of his deeper needs and it becomes the disruption and jarring of those familiar pathways that facilitates this liminal moment whereby he is led to a relational encounter with the living God, the God of his forebears.

In our life, too, fixed certainties have to be shaken sometimes, so that we can unearth fresh meaning and purpose - conscious at times of this to be no ordinary moment – for God’s spirit is in this space and that he has dawn near in ways that we could not previously have foreseen, or known, or understood. In ways that makes the journey ahead that much more trusting and hope-filled.

And that’s what we are meant to notice in those enduring stories about ‘wheat and tares’ and ‘mustard seeds’ and ‘leaven in the dough’ that characterise Jesus’ teaching about the kingdom. Jesus used familiar

things to describe as the psalmist remarks 'truths that lie hidden': things kept secret since the world was made.

New Testament scholar, Tom Wright, speaks of Jesus' parables not as some friendly illustration about some abstract point of theology but a means of describing the subversive truth of God's kingdom accomplishing that which it is purposed to accomplish.

And what Jesus is basically saying about the kingdom is: don't despise the small beginnings for what I (Jesus) am doing is planting seeds. They may not look much in the total scheme but they have all the potential necessary for them to grow and blossom and flourish.

Thus, if we take the case of Jesus' earthly ministry it was time bound by a few short years and restricted geographically to a few hundred square miles. If we take the number of people to whom he ministered - although considerable within a setting of first century Palestine - in contemporary terms his reach was really quite modest. Yet (and this is Wright's point),

the yeast that he stirred into the loaf, the kingdom-work he completed in a very short time and in a very small region has leavened the loaf of the whole world in a most remarkable way His way of love, forgiveness, humility and service, has woven itself into the fabric of many societies, so that even where it's ignored, people know that something happened in his life and death that changed the world.

And we are called, individually and collectively, to be leaven and seeds of God's kingdom and not despise the small beginnings that lead to greater outcomes.

We are called, individually and collectively, to embody that way of love, forgiveness, humility and service.

We are called, individually and collectively, to follow pathways that may seem unfamiliar and daunting but which lead to fresh moments of encounter. Where, because we are confronted by anxieties - thoughts of unworthiness, or self doubt, we begin to trust that we are not expected, or able, to stand in our own strength alone, but in the strength of the Lord and his capacity to be present at those frontiers of uncertainty; for us to glimpse the reality that *the Lord is in this place and I did not know it*; to be reminded of his gift of the Spirit and the promise of his grace and the assurance that there is *nothing in all creation that can separate us from his love*. Then, in the strength of *that* knowledge to go forth on life's journey 'the Lord being our helper'.

Prayer

O Lord, you have searched me, and known me.

You understand my thoughts afar off.

You compass my path and my lying down.

And are acquainted with all my ways:

for there is not a word on my tongue, but lo you know it altogether.

O you who know me so utterly, help me to know you a little.

Amen

Sermon for the Ninth Sunday after Trinity

Texts: Genesis 18:20-32; Colossians 2:6-15 and Luke 11:1-13

The assumption that prayer is difficult is one of the greatest impediments to Christian discipleship. But in our gospel this morning, the apostles make exactly that assumption.

They watch Jesus praying, and when he's finished, one of them pipes up: 'Lord, teach us to pray, as John taught his disciples.'

Lurking behind this request is the idea that there is a special knack to praying: the idea that you need to adopt a particular form or words, or cultivate a particular mental attitude, or even undertake a particular physical discipline, before you can pray properly.

This assumption that prayer is a quite complicated business is deeply rooted in many faithful people, I think. And it is only reinforced by the constant babble of well-meant spiritual instruction that pours out in countless retreat centres around the country. Franciscan spirituality; Celtic spirituality; Ignatian spirituality; Evangelical spirituality; you name it: almost every kind of devotional fashion is catered for somewhere or other.

As a historian, of course, I can only approve when the disciples of today find nourishment in the practice of the Church's past. Ignorance of the Church's history and of her long-established patterns of devotion can only impoverish her life in the present.

Even so, I do worry that, by making prayer the kind of thing you go on a little course for, we are at risk of turning it into an esoteric and complicated activity, which only initiates can really undertake. And there can be no better way of ensuring that people don't pray, than that.

But in our gospel this morning, Jesus makes it clear that prayer is perfectly straightforward. The disciples may have been looking for some recondite spiritual instruction; but Jesus's answer is entirely down to earth.

He has three things to say: pray simply; pray persistently; pray expectantly. Let's deal with each in turn.

First, pray simply. 'When you pray,' Jesus tells us, 'say: Father, hallowed be your name. Your kingdom come. Give us each day our daily bread. Forgive us our sins as we ourselves forgive everyone indebted to us. And do not bring us to the time of trial.'

If the disciples were anticipating an elaborate liturgical blueprint, they were sorely disappointed. Jesus confounds their expectations with a prayer that is direct, concise and utterly uncomplicated. Five brief petitions and it's over. How unlike the prolix and tedious intercessions, which are one of the great plagues of modern churchgoing!

Of course, Jesus is not giving his disciples a formula, to be precisely repeated, but an example, to be broadly followed.

It's not that there's anything wrong with using a set form of words. As Anglicans, of course, we have long contended that prayer, which uses a

set form of words, is likely to be rather more thoughtful, and certainly no less heartfelt, than the spontaneous utterances of our Nonconformist brethren. That said, no special sequence of words is ever necessary in prayer, however helpful it might sometimes be for breaking the spiritual ice, as it were, in our conversations with God.

Taking the Lord's Prayer, then, as an example, it does provide some useful guidance about prayer in general.

First, the form of address: 'Father.' To a First Century Jew, that was a scandalously casual way to speak to God. And many devout people today might be more comfortable with something more formal, and for perfectly good reasons. God is infinite in majesty and power, far greater and far more holy than anything in the universe which He has made. So it is fitting for sinful creatures to approach God with awe.

But by inviting us to address God simply as 'Father,' Jesus is encouraging us to participate in his own relationship with the Almighty. As Paul reminded us in our second lesson, God has forgiven 'all our trespasses, erasing the record that stood against us with its legal demands. He set this aside nailing it to the cross.'

As a result, we now stand beside Jesus, as his brothers and sisters through faith, and we may address his Father as our Father. We can dive, in other words, into the stream of love that flows endlessly between the Father and the Son.

Secondly, then, the balance of Jesus's prayer: two things particularly stand out here. It is a prayer that starts with God's agenda not ours; and it is a prayer that is honest about our own shortcomings.

As we heard, the opening petitions of the prayer are 'Hallowed be your name' and 'Your kingdom come.' The prayer that God's name be hallowed, is a prayer that God's nature be known. It is a prayer that God's boundless goodness and mercy might be recognised by all the creatures who are capable of understanding it, and that they might, in turn, respond with wonder and adoration.

The prayer that God's kingdom may come, is a prayer that God's purposes might be accomplished within the world he has made. It is a prayer that God's just and gentle rule might extend to all people, bringing peace and reconciliation amongst human beings, as well as between human beings and God.

What Jesus is teaching us with these petitions, I think, is that prayer is not primarily the assertion of our own wants and needs, but an attempt to align our wants and needs with God's redemptive purposes. As Christians, we acknowledge that our own preoccupations, no matter how pressing they are, exist in a wider context of God's saving action in the world; and our prayers should reflect that.

The second thing that stands out is the prayer's honesty. Jesus wants us to come to God, not hiding our shortcomings, but confessing them. We are sinners who have been forgiven, but we are still sinners. And we cannot progress as disciples unless we wrestle daily with that fact. That is

why Jesus wants us to come before God confident in His mercy, but not trusting in our own righteousness.

Jesus makes the same point later on in Luke's gospel. 'Two men went up to the temple to pray, one a Pharisee, and the other a tax collector. The Pharisee was praying thus, "God, I thank you that you are not like other people: thieves, rogues, adulterers, or even like this tax collector. I fast twice a week; I give a tenth of all my income." But the tax collector, standing far off, would not even look up to heaven, but was beating his breast and saying, "God, be merciful to me, a sinner." I tell you, this man went down to his home justified, rather than the other.'

So: pray simply. Now, pray persistently.

Jesus underlines the need to keep praying with a story about a man who wakes his friend up late at night. 'I tell you, even though he will not get up and give him anything, because he is his friend, at least because of his persistence he will get up and give him whatever he needs.'

It's important not to get the wrong end of the stick here. At first glance, you might assume the story means that, if you keep on praying, God is more likely to change His mind and do what you want. A little reflection will show you why that must be wrong.

First off, God is omniscient, so we cannot present him with any information He wasn't aware of, or suggest a plan which He hadn't considered. Secondly, God is perfectly good and that goodness guides all his actions and all his decisions. So even if we could persuade God to change his mind, we would only be persuading him to do something less

good than He had originally intended, and that wouldn't be desirable at all. Finally, as if all that were not enough, God is eternal, entirely outside time. And since God is outside time, there is no such thing as before or after in Him, as a result, there is no possibility of change.

It follows that the persistence in prayer cannot be about persuading God to do something which He wouldn't otherwise have done. It's rather that repeated conversations with God, enable us to understand his nature and purposes better, and to reconcile ourselves to them.

This can be seen, I think, in our Old Testament reading. Here is a classic example of prayerful persistence. And a casual reading of the story might leave you with the impression that Abraham kept on at God, until God agreed to do what he wanted. That isn't what's going on at all.

As we heard, Abraham gets told of the impending destruction of Sodom, so he intercedes for the people there. 'Far be it for you to slay the righteous with the wicked! Shall not the judge of all the earth do what is just?' God then answers 'If I find at Sodom fifty righteous in the city, I will forgive the whole place for their sake.' Abraham keeps praying, and on each occasion, God answers in a similar way, until finally he tells Abraham 'For the sake of ten, I will not destroy it.'

Now this might sound as though Abraham has haggled God down to a good bargain. But if you look carefully, there is no suggestion here that God ever changes His mind. Abraham simply expresses the trust that God is just, and God confirms that He is; so just, in fact, that if even a handful of good people can be found in Sodom, the city will not be destroyed.

In other words, the thing that changes in this story is not God's decision, but Abraham's understanding of God's nature. Repeated conversation with God enables Abraham to grasp the full extent of God's justice and mercy, regardless of subsequent events.

And that is precisely why we must be persistent in prayer as well. We should persist in prayer, not for God's benefit, but for our benefit. Prayer brings us into conscious contact with God, and enables us to perceive as Paul puts it 'the depth of the riches and wisdom and knowledge of God.'

So, pray persistently. And, finally, pray expectantly.

Jesus concludes his teaching on prayer by telling his disciples to expect a response. 'Is there anyone among you who, if a child asks for a fish, will give a snake instead of a fish? Or if the child asks for an egg, will give a scorpion? If you then, who are evil, know how to give good gifts to your children, how much more will the heavenly Father give the Holy Spirit to those who ask him.'

So Christians can pray in the confidence that their prayers will be answered.

That answer may take a form that they anticipated, or it may not. The job may be offered, or it may not. The sick relative may recover, or she may not.

But in all cases, prayer strengthens the Holy Spirit's presence within us. It strengthens the Spirit's presence not intrinsically, of course: because once the Spirit begins to dwell in a believer, He never departs. Instead,

prayer strengthens the Spirit's presence, extrinsically, in terms of the gifts which the Spirit has bestowed on us.

In other words, prayer strengthens those precious qualities mentioned in Galatians, 'love, joy, peace, patience, kindness, generosity, faithfulness, gentleness, and self control.' And it does so precisely because, as I have said, prayer is an immersion in the love that flows endlessly between the Father and the Son. And that love is, of course, none other than the Holy Spirit.

So, inspired by the words of Jesus, may we all learn to pray more simply, to pray more persistently, to pray more expectantly. And may we discover through that prayer, the living embrace of the Holy and Undivided Trinity.

Sermon Trinity 7 – Cathedral Eucharist Sunday 14th July 2013

Luke 10 verse 28: ‘Jesus said to the lawyer: “You have given the right answer”’.

From TV panel games to public examinations to interviews to decisions on health and education, this is just surely what we all want to hear: “You have given the right answer!” Great, it’s the right answer – you’ve just won £30,000 pounds..... Good, I wrote down all the right answers, it’s going to be 10 A* GCSEs! And on it goes. I don’t know how you are about it all, but I seemed to have spent my whole life from being a toddler to my current great age trying to get it right and wanting to hear those words “You have given the right answer!” quickly followed by a longed-for pat on the head, a bit like an obedient dog, and accompanied by a ‘well done!’

The lawyer and Jesus of course had quite a complex and interesting array of ‘right answers’. This is one of them: “You shall love the Lord your God with all your heart, and with all your soul, and with all your strength, and with all your mind; and your neighbour as yourself.” We know as Christian people that that that has to be the right answer. The lawyer had quoted the law and got it right. Well done, lawyer! But then, of course, comes the story of the Good Samaritan – the answer to the lawyer’s question ‘Who is my neighbour?’ Quite often, you see, right answers are enshrined in stories, especially when we are examining what it means to love..... what love actually looks like.

Of course, a parable like this doesn’t describe the world the way it is. Nor does the parable tell us what we can do. The parable tells us what God can do. Let’s not get it wrong. The Bible gives us a vision of the kingdom that comes when God’s will is done.

When we begin to think salvation is impossible, God does the impossible. In a world nowadays where people remain bystanders as a woman is brutally murdered, Jesus in his parable imagines a world in which someone is willing to stop and help. In a world where Samaritans and Jews are at each other’s throats, Jesus has the audacity to imagine a Samaritan who is good and binds up the wounds of a Jew.

When we say “thy kingdom come, thy will be done” we should have no illusions. We do not have the ability to bring in the kingdom, even in a small way. No matter how hard we try it won’t work. But, in the scriptures and especially in the life and ministry of Jesus we see a picture of how God’s will is done, what love looks like ... often in spite of what we do.

I suppose we shouldn't be overly critical of the Priest and the Levite who passed by on the other side. There was a practical side to what they did. Getting involved is dangerous. Compassion still carries a risk. But, sometimes, by the grace of God, the unexpected happens. A Samaritan stops to help, and the world is turned upside down.

All this of course is the Gospel, the Good News, which those of us who 'stand 10 feet above contradiction' in this pulpit are called to preach, in season and out of season, when we arrive, when we're in post and and when we depart. I hope I have preached the gospel faithfully alongside my colleagues whose particular preaching, I must say, has fed and nurtured my own, and for this I want to give huge thanks. I had really longed for that when I came to Bristol Cathedral and I found it.

However, I firmly believe that the Good News of God's love in action can find its expression in human stories, just like Jesus's parables; stories of faith and compassion that abound in Christian communities – and certainly it's no different in this Cathedral community I am pleased to say. Stories, for example, that you won't all know about..... of little heroes and heroines in our Cathedral Choir. Some of them have overcome enormous odds to sing for us and have enabled us all to draw closer to God in our worship. As we come to the end of the year and you go on your holidays, I want you particularly to hear from your Precentor what a privilege it has been to listen to you, day in, day out, year in, year out and I want to say how proud of you I am, and a heartfelt 'thank you' and 'Well done! You've got it right!' Along with Howells and Stanford and Mozart and Bach who always get it right.

(Phew! I've just got through a potential tearful moment)

But it's not just the children, although of course we know that whoever becomes humble like a child is the greatest in the Kingdom of heaven. It's all of you, each of you having your own story of faith. I've shared with so many of you over the years as you've come to baptism or confirmation or made your communion after a long gap or you've come to a crisis in your life that has brought you to the conclusion that you can't manage without God. All this goes deeper than just casual conversations, doesn't it? We've sat together in hospitals ; in the Chapter Vestry; in my office; over the phone and cried and laughed and worried and prayed. We've talked together in the Chapter House after worship or in the car park after a meeting. We've even got angry together after some of those meetings. We've worked side by side in committees. We've worked together at

wedding services and your baby's baptisms and your parent's funerals. I've had the honour of hearing many of your stories. Stories of hope, of perseverance, of answered prayer, of faith in the midst of unanswered prayer, of living out what you believe by helping others. Your stories are inspiring and moving and an incredible testimony to the love of God in this world. 'Well done! You've got it right!' And thank you for sharing those conversations with me.

So I want to encourage you today to keep telling that story. I think it is true that "We become ourselves as we tell our stories." And after all, that is where God wants us to be.

The Chapter here has spent a fair amount of time thinking about the north west doors and the west doors. It's the same with most PCCs. We have all come to realise that the doors to these great buildings mark that moment when people change 'status' in a sort of way – they come from the world outside where they experience all sorts of different pressures and enter a new 'status' – a place of peace, of mystery, of love and inclusion. Least that's the promise. There will be people coming through those doors who don't know your story, including your next Precentor. And they need to hear it.....not so easy when you are part of a cathedral congregation but not only is it your story, it's God's story. This cathedral has a great story and I have felt honoured to be a part of it these last six and a half years. And when I come to tell my story, you will have a special place in it.

And now, this particular chapter comes to an end. This particular work that we've done together. At the end of a prayer we always say 'Amen'. Amen means "let it be so" or, as they say where I'm going in Yorkshire, "Aye.....'appen!" It's the sort of exclamation point at the end of a sentence that affirms the truth of what's been said and commends it to God.

There's more chapters to come both for you and for me. I know there's still so much more to be done and so much I have left undone, but I'll just have to hand that over to God and say with confidence, trust, faith and so much love, goodbye and Amen.

Canon Wendy Wilby
Precentor January 2006 – July 2103

I Kings 19:1-15

In the early 1930s a team of archaeologists excavated an isolated hill twenty miles north of Jerusalem. They found what they had gone looking for; they found the ruins of a three thousand year old palace. The hill was Samaria and this was the palace built by Omri, the soldier king of Israel. Then the archaeologists found something else, they found ivory. With every step they walked on flakes of ivory, their trowels turned up ivory carvings. Too sophisticated for the hill farmers of Israel, this ivory was Phoenician and it told a story

Omri died in 869 B.C. and was succeeded by his son, Ahab. Ahab was another soldier, good at that, but nonetheless, one of the most infamous kings Israel ever had:

Ahab son of Omri did evil in the sight of the Lord more than all who were before him.

He took a wife, a princess from Phoenicia called Jezebel. It was Jezebel who brought the artists to decorate the palace on the hill. Those archaeologists in the 1930s were walking in the ivory halls where fragrant, deadly Jezebel once walked.

It was part of the story of Ahab and Jezebel that we heard in our reading about Elijah. The problem was that Ahab was also an apostate, he did not serve the Lord; instead he worshipped Jezebel's Phoenician God: Baal.

If you have heard any of the story told in the First book of Kings you may remember that there was a showdown, on Mount Carmel, where Elijah, took on the prophets of Baal and called down fire from heaven. Elijah won that contest and killed some of his opponents, but he was still outnumbered and feared for his life. As we picked up the story, this morning, Elijah had fled south, beyond the reach of Ahab and Jezebel. He sat under a broom tree and despaired. *O LORD, take away my life.* An angel came to him and sent him on to Horeb, the mount of God. At Horeb the Lord himself appeared to him.

It is a great story but you can miss what is going on here if you are not careful. First of all you need to know that Horeb is another name for Sinai; so Elijah has arrived at the mountain where Moses once saw the Lord pass by. In that story Moses hid in a cleft in the rock just before God revealed himself and now Elijah hides in a cave. It is quite deliberate, the story of Elijah is meant to sound very like the story of Moses. We are learning something about God.

At Horeb the word of the Lord comes to Elijah and he is told to leave his cave and to go and stand on the mountain because the Lord is *about to pass by*. It is a fairly well known passage

Now there was a great wind, so strong that it was splitting mountains and breaking rocks in pieces before the LORD, but the LORD was not in the wind; and after the wind an earthquake, but the LORD was not in the earthquake; and after the earthquake a fire, but the LORD was not in the fire

Now then, in the Authorised Version, the text continues

And after the earthquake a fire; *but* the LORD was not in the fire:
and after the fire a still small voice I Kings 19:12

A still small voice; that is a memorable phrase and too good to waste. So, in the hymn Dear Lord and Father of Mankind, we sing,

Speak through the earthquake, wind, and fire, O still, small voice of calm.

Lovely, really lovely and really wrong. The story of what Elijah heard and saw has become a story about a God with good manners, a God you can bring to tea who will speak gently and not frighten the cat.

It is not what the story is about; it is not what the story says. What happened on Horeb was not just a bit of theatre, wind machines and lightning flashes and then a gentle God. This was a different theology altogether. The references are specific. The false God, Baal was a god the weather, a god of wind. If the wind was blowing a gale, you thought Baal was about. So, when we hear that the Lord was not in the wind we are being told very clearly that the Lord is not like Baal. I Kings goes to some trouble to tell us that God is not a nature God, the sort of God they worshipped in Phoenicia, not a God of special effects, or earthquakes. Instead, God appears before Elijah and there is not still small voice. Instead, as we heard this morning,

after the fire a sound of sheer silence I Kings 19:12

A sound of sheer silence. That is a tricky idea. There is a Eucharistic prayer we do not use very often in the cathedral because I pull faces when I hear it. It is prayer G. It says, 'all your works echo the silent music of your praise'. I cannot

make sense of that. What is *silent music* when it is at home and how does it *echo*? A sound of sheer silence is a real challenge, and it is meant to be. God is not like the gods, nothing like a God who conjures up wind or a God whose party trick is earthquakes. That is precisely the point that is being made here. Not that God is polite, and softly spoken, but that God is not like the gods who throw thunderbolts or turn into swans.

There is an important idea here and when we do not understand it we get into difficulties. The gods, that strange figure Baal who appears in statues holding a kind of mace posed to do some smiting; gods like that are gods who do things. On Thursday they make it rain, when they are upset they send lightning. And our God, the God of Elijah, the God we meet in Jesus Christ, is not like that. The sound of sheer silence. We really do have to get it into our heads that God does not do things.

God does not get restless and set off a volcano to keep things interesting. There is an Eddie Izzard monologue in which he describes creation,

*the second day [God] created fire and water and egnog and radiators
and lights and Burma*

It is very clever, but it depends on that idea that God is just the biggest version you can possibly imagine of someone who does tricks and make decisions. Too often we think God is the absolutely ultimate boss the person who fixes things. We have God rushing in and out his own creation moving the pieces, curing this person of gout, smiting the Philistines, providing a parking space in Clifton when we have popped out to buy a paper. That is Baal I am afraid and really not *the sound of sheer silence*.

God, says, John the evangelist, in the bible, is love. God is love and God is nothing else. God is love, God is not cross sometimes, righteously indignant in the mornings and merciful at tea time. God is love, unchanging, eternal love. There is nothing God is about to do, no yesterday, no 'after this'. God has no agenda, no work in progress, no decisions to make, nothing that he might do.

From the beginning and forever God loved creation into being and loves in it and through it. You cannot put on your spectacles and set creation over here and God over there and see how they are different. All things exist in him and for him.

Now that is perhaps enough doctrine for one morning though it is just the point that story on I Kings was trying to make. There is though one question I

still have to answer. If I am right and God really does not change his mind or make decisions. What on earth are we doing when we pray, why do we ask for things? What will Margaret be doing, in a moment, when she begins the intercessions? The problem we have here is that we get a bit distracted by Margaret. Now let's be clear that is really not her fault, she is not doing anything wrong, actually Margaret is rather good at intercessions. The problem is to do with us and our determination to think about who is doing things. We like people to be in charge, we want God to be the boss; we like to notice that Margaret is *doing* the interceding. So we notice Margaret and then we think we join in what she is doing. But, we have missed something. All of creation, remember, is in God and for God; everything happens within God's love. So, in the intercessions it is not Margaret praying and us joining in, it is God praying and *Margaret* joining in. Prayer is the place where we go to connect with that constant loving purpose that is God. If you like it is a bit like launching a little boat into a mighty river. To begin with you are not sure which way the current goes, not sure even which way you want to go. So prayer always starts with us being honest and asking for what we want. Looking at the challenges we see and then little by little we look for the love of God at work.

That is not easy. Listening for that sound of sheer silence is really hard. We prefer the bells and whistles, the wind and the earthquake, we get that. Our problem as T S Eliot once explained is that we have the experience, but miss the meaning. The shootings in Orlando, the Referendum, IS, football hooligans, Jo Cox, we hear the clamour; can we, can we really see beyond, listen through these things and know that there is constant loving purpose? We are put to the test at the moment. The news is bad. We are surrounded by the horror and noise of terror. The men and women of terror want us to be distracted, they want us to pay attention to the noise and the drama. They want us to live in fear and give up on our commitment to hope, give up on our belief in love. Prayer is an exercise in love, so is faith, so is life itself. We must not be distracted. God is a God of love. At the heart of creation there is love. We must not give way to fear, we must not be seduced into thinking that it is more action that it is needed, more noise and fury. We will not be saved by anything we do, our calling is just to receive and return the love that is the beginning and end of everything.

2 Timothy 1:1-14

Years ago I led a retreat for a parish, a whole weekend. A good weekend, we all got on and gave glory to God, but we were a bit different. They were guitars and Graham Kendrick and I was organs and Orlando Gibbons. They were denim, I was linen. And they were *demonstrative* whilst I come from the sort of family where you wear a tie to do the gardening. I am only demonstrative when I have a letter from my doctor and another letter from your doctor and I know your mother's maiden name. So, at the end of the weekend, when they came to thank me, I hoped for a polite ripple of applause, but instead two very large men came and put their arms around me and prayed for me - at length. Which was lovely, but when people hug me in public I quite often do a passable imitation of a hat-stand.

Why am I telling you this? The reading we have just heard, from the Second Letter of Timothy, takes us into tricky territory. It is important, but it is not easy, and it has to do with what being religious looks like and feels like. Is it hugs, or is it hat-stands?

First I need to tell you about this letter; about Two Timothy. In your bibles it will say *The Second Letter of Paul to Timothy* and you will find it after the *First Letter to Timothy* and after most of Paul's other letters: Romans Corinthians, Thessalonians... Clever people who write books and who like nothing better than an unusual Greek verb, call the two letters to Timothy and the letter to Titus the 'Pastoral Epistles'. That's because these are letters unlike Paul's other letters. These letters are all about *pastoral* matters, they are letters about the church and how it works. So, the First Letter of Timothy tells you what you should wear, how you should say your prayers and it has a lot to say about bishops and deacons

whoever aspires to the office of bishop desires a noble task. (1 Timothy 3:1)

And there is something else that makes these Pastoral Epistles different from the rest of Paul's letters. These letters think that there is a problem, a serious problem. This morning we got a hint of that, towards the end of the reading we heard

Hold to the standard of sound teaching that you have heard from me

Now, you only tell people to hang on to sound teaching if you think that there is a risk that they might have some odd ideas. And that is exactly what is going on here. The First Letter to Timothy talked a lot about 'truth' and 'deceit' and then wagged its finger and said

Have nothing to do with profane myths and old wives' tales (1 Timothy 4:7)

These are not letters *about* something; they are letters *against* something. There is a problem and the problem is false teaching, heresy.

These letters really are not like the other letters Paul writes. In fact, they are so unlike the other letters that those clever people with their Greek verbs are inclined to think that they were not written by Paul at all. They may well have been written a little later by someone determined that we should go on remembering what Paul told us when things get tricky.

But the important thing here is not whether this letter was written by Paul or someone close to Paul. The important thing here is the problem this letter tackles. It has something to do with hugs or hat-stands. It has something to do with what faith looks like. In these letters is the very beginning of what got takes us from Calvary to College Green. How are we going to explain the fact that after Jesus told us to repent and love our neighbour we looked at one another and thought it would be a very good idea to have deans and vergers and apses and Finance Advisory Committees. We started with a gospel and we got a church. Two Timothy is part of what got us from there to here.

Jesus preached something very simple, 'Repent and believe, the Kingdom of God is at hand'. That is the heart of what he had to say and his disciples kept asking 'Excellent, but what exactly does that mean, what

do you want us to do?' Paul came after Jesus saying 'There is only one thing that matters and it is the cross; you have to die with Christ and live with Christ'. And Two Timothy follows and tries to say something about just precisely how you do that.

Jesus said 'Repent and believe, the Kingdom of God is at hand'. That is the gospel. But the really important thing we need to know was that he did not just tell us the gospel, he *was* the gospel. When Jesus healed the sick that was the Kingdom coming, when he raised the dead, that was the Kingdom coming. When Jesus taught us to love another that was the Kingdom coming, and when Jesus said 'not my will be done' and died that was the Kingdom coming. The whole gospel is Jesus Christ. Paul was right the whole of faith is found in Christ, it is to be like Christ.

And that is all at once dead simple and an overwhelming challenge. How do I live like Christ when the question is about genetically modified humans, or Brexit, or the cathedral budget, or the argument with a friend, or the person who is sick? What do I do, what do I say? That is hard and the church has lots of answers and they are not all the same. For some it is hugs and some of us are hat-stands because the hugs don't do it for us. When the truth gets contested, when we disagree we need help and that is why Two Timothy was written.

And it says two things that we need to hear. I told you that these letters tell us things about bishops and deacons; in fact they tell us more about bishops than any other letters in the New Testament. And the striking thing is *what* they tell us. Listen to this:

Now a bishop must be above reproach... an apt teacher, not a drunkard, not violent but gentle, not quarrelsome, and not a lover of money | Timothy 3:2-3

That is pretty good advice, none of us want a bishop waving a broken bottle and demanding money with menaces. But it is not what we ask for now when we appoint bishops or deans come to that. Now the adverts talk about leading engagement in the public square, or facilitating mission, or financial management. That was not what mattered in the Letters to Timothy. Instead of worrying what skills the bishop had these letters want to know that the Bishop is authentic, that he lives out the holiness he talks about. That is really important the question we need to ask of ourselves and of each other has much more to do with what we are and rather less to do with what we say or put on a CV. What kind of life do we lead? We talk about Christ can anyone else see Christ in us.

That is the first thing. The second is this business of telling the truth, knowing the sound teaching. That really matters in Two Timothy. Later in the letter you come across one of my favourite verse in scripture:

The time is coming when people will not put up with sound doctrine, but having itching ears, they will accumulate for themselves teachers to suit their own desires

2 Timothy 4:3

This letter keeps asking do you know the truth? Do you know the truth or do you prefer opinions that agree with your own? Do you know the truth or do you follow your nose? This letter wants us to live like Christ, it wants us to be authentic. And it is absolutely convinced that we can only do that if ask ourselves hard questions. We can only live like Christ if we learn and remember what Christ taught us.

We do not make faith up as we go along. It is not an instinct, a gut feeling, it is more than that; it is saying our prayers, reading the bible, learning the faith. Of course it is love and joy and hope, but it is also discipline and repentance. Sometimes you hug and sometimes you might be a hat-stand because there is a deep conversation to be had about what the faith looks like and we come at that slowly throughout our lives. 2 Timothy invites us to think about what real faith looks like and sounds like. We are perhaps tempted to think we are most authentic, our faith is most real when it is spontaneous. 2 Timothy suggests that what is real and authentic might be spontaneous and also informed and disciplined.

It is harvest festival and you probably feel cheated that I have not spoken about fields of corn or tins of baked beans. The idea of harvest is deep in scripture, the Kingdom of God that Jesus preached gets compared to the harvest. We are the harvest, we are what God gathers in. What we are, and what we will be, depend on God, but remember what Jesus said when he preached about the sower,

these are the ones sown on the good soil: they hear the word and accept it and bear fruit

Mark 4:20

Hear the word and accept it; know the sound doctrine, remember the sound teaching. As followers of Christ we offer God our lives, that is the harvest, but they are lives shaped by teaching, by truth, by the practice of faith. We are summoned into truth because the truth is the one thing that will save us from ourselves.

Legal Service 2016

think about these things (Philippians 4)

To the ... Lord Hubert de Burgh, Justiciar of England, his always and everywhere David, by divine permission Abbot of St Augustine's of Bristol, Greeting.

That is the beginning of a letter written in 1220, and written here. This cathedral church was then St Augustine's Abbey, and David had just been made its abbot. 1220, you might be a little vague about 1220, so here is a little history. England is divided and dangerous. King John has died, in 1216, in the midst of a Baron's War. His nine-year-old son, Henry III, has been crowned in Gloucester in haste. Note the fact that it was Gloucester. The West Country was loyal to the crown, and Bristol was especially so. This city was where you imprisoned pretenders to the throne. England is regional, one community set against another. By 1220 the royal party had actually won the Barons War, but they were losing the peace. The king was still a minor, the Earl Marshall (his regent) had died and there was no national government. Bristol was lawless, Abbot David's letter talked about people adding 'evil deeds to wicked ones'. Now, if a Dean gets really cross he can look at you over the top of his glasses, medieval abbots had more clout. Abbot David wrote to announce that he had put the keeper of Bristol Castle and the burgesses of the town under an interdict. No public services, no masses, no marriages, no baptisms in Bristol. They were allowed to hear sermons though; and that must have cheered them up no end.

David imposed the interdict because of

...those who demolish and destroy the laws of the kingdom in favour of their own laws

They destroy the laws of the kingdom in favour of their own laws. The law mattered. The law really mattered, being the people you are, you may not know about 1220, but you will know about 1215. That was the year King John was brought to Runymede and set his seal to Magna Carta. And Magna Carta was the defining moment in a story about what kind of people we are and about the place of law in the life of the land.

'to no one will we sell, to no one deny or delay right or justice'.

Magna Carta is not just a document it is a statement of intent, it is direction of travel, it describes and defines us, in Samuel Johnson's words 'it was born with a grey beard'. Magna Carta set its face against all that was arbitrary, personal, particular.

Eight hundred years ago that was what we were talking about in Bristol. This year, in this city, we have been telling the story again. That is because, according to a Kalendar drawn up by the town clerk, Robert Ricart, in 1479, Bristol got its first Mayor, in 1216. What that means is that we got our mayor in the midst of all this lawlessness. In that chaos we committed to this kind of order. The scholars will tell you that our mayoralty was born out of bloodshed, violence and competition. As one historian puts the powers of the mayor

'came from desperation'. We did not get laws and mayors and judges and high sheriffs because we are good, rational and wise. We got them because we are none of those things. We got them because we were weary of our divisions.

Remember Abbot David's complaint, they *destroy the laws of the kingdom in favour of their own laws*. That was what really grated with him. The fickle, partial, personal nature of justice, the lack of justice. That grates with all of us. Magna Carta put the king under the law, one law for all of us. As we got our mayor England was establishing the common law, determining its reach, justices in eyre, applying the same law. No more laws of our own. As Lord Bingham so memorably put it when he tried to explain what the rule of law really means,

if you maltreat a penguin in the London Zoo, you do not escape prosecution because you are Archbishop of Canterbury,

It is a more serious point than you might think, in 1156 Archdeacon Osbert was accused of murdering William Fitzherbert who was the Archbishop of York, and Osbert was never brought to justice owing, they said, 'to the subtlety of the laws and the canons'. Eight hundred years ago we set our face against that privilege, that exemption, that arcane complexity. One law, one city.

Law is not just a practice it is a fundamental assumption about community. Law assumes and determines that we should experience life in community. Law assumes we should be looked at whole, understood as more than competing claims and rights. Law assumes a life we hold in common, under common law, the life of a city and a nation.

We shall come back to the law, let's do the theology. The High Sheriff chose the reading that she read for us, Philippians 4,

Finally, beloved, whatever is true, whatever is honourable, whatever is just, whatever is pure, ...if there is any excellence and if there is anything worthy of praise, think about these things Philippians 4:8

This is a letter Paul wrote from prison. He is under pressure, choosing his words carefully. He is writing about the things that matter. He is also writing to a community that is divided, contentious and bad tempered. Chapter three is littered with warnings

Beware of the dogs, beware of the evil workers (3:2)

And chapter 4 opens, just before we heard the words that Helen read, with a curious bit of detail

I urge Euodia and I urge Syntyche to be of the same mind in the Lord. (4:2)

These two women were leaders in the church community and they were fighting like cats. It is not cities that get divided and dangerous, churches do it too. And Paul is determined that the Christian community will not live like this. He looks for something else, something other, *stand firm in the Lord, my beloved* he says (Philippians 4:1). It is a demand, *stand firm in the Lord*. Don't fight, don't compete. That is what this letter says, it is a letter about community, morality and living together. Now Christians can be a bit sly with morality.

Too often Christians tell you to be good because God says you must be good. Too often we lay down the law and claimed an authority a power that cannot be checked or gainsaid. Don't argue with the Dean because the Dean has power of attorney for the Almighty. But Paul, notice, does not do that. *Stand firm in the Lord.* If you want to know what Christian living is, says Paul, look at Christ. *Stand firm in the Lord.* And then he says what we heard in our reading,

Finally, beloved, whatever is true, whatever is honorable, whatever is just, whatever is pure, ...if there is any excellence and if there is anything worthy of praise, think about these things

Look to Christ, stand firm in the Lord and then live like that yourselves. Look to your own lives, the lives you live together and commit to that experience. *Whatever is true, whatever is honorable, whatever is just... think on these things.* Right at the heart of the Christian faith is looking to the life lived in Christ and living that life together. Think on these things. It is absolutely not an appeal to a mysterious higher power, a claim to know the will of God. It is a life we know and share. It is a common inheritance, a common experience, a life lived in common. That's the benchmark for Paul, not some mystical experience, nor a blind insistence on obedience to a distant deity, but a profound commitment to the life we can share in Christ. Think on these things. The life we hold in common, the one in which there is neither Jew nor Greek, male nor female. That is what he wants us to think about. *Whatever is true, whatever is honorable, whatever is just... think on these things.*

Three years ago our annual conference had the deans of the Church of England assembling in Westminster. It is an odd business the deans' conference, deans are like the nose on your face, one is really quite enough. Thirty-six deans unsettle most people. Most people, but not everyone, the three Justices of the Supreme Court who graciously gave us their time, took us in their stride. We talked about law and faith. It was an interesting meeting and I was struck that the justices really went out of their way to tell us that Christian faith no longer has any bearing on the law. Christian assumptions can no longer offer any kind of map or compass to justice.

I have no real argument with that. But we will be the poorer if we stop talking to one another. This morning I want to suggest that when you bring together the legal profession and the church at a service like this there is a fundamental assumption that we *do* hold in common. We may get there differently but we have a shared reverence for a community in which all are equal. We believe that we can test our conviction by the quality of our common life. For you, if you are lawyers, it is a community in which all persons and all authorities are bound by the same law, publicly made and publicly administered. For me it is a conviction that there is a common life in Christ that is available to all, the same promise, the same hope, for all. We both believe, because we believe in law, and perhaps because we believe in God that we exist in relation to something else, and that other thing, the law, the work of God in Christ, secures a common status. We think on these things.

And that makes us unusual. And that makes us serious. The clamour now is that we are not the same and that the common life is not secure. Our faith in democracy is shaken, majorities begin to frighten some of us. Our national life is fractured, we are getting regional all over again, we are conscious of what divides north and south, rich and poor, privileged allures and the excluded. Worse than that, we have grown anxious, we have become suspicious. And our modern Caesars, of right and left, who want to build walls or

call people 'migrant' or just 'foreign' divide to rule they ask us to trust them and make their own laws It is leadership we lack they tell us. Mr Trump wants to be president so he can put Mrs Clinton in jail, you do not have to be her greatest admirer to find that sinister. Abbot David must lie unquiet in his grave and he lies quite near. It is private laws all over again.

Think on these things. We will be poorer if those of us who look to a common life under a common law do not together assert over and over again that public law publicly made will not give way to the trolls and bigots who sit in judgement at an anonymous screen. We will be poorer if we surrender the precious, redemptive conviction that it is a common hope we share, and a true commonwealth that we seek. Think about these things, the Epistle to the Philippians makes its appeal to,

whatever is true, whatever is honorable, whatever is just, whatever is pure

It assumes we will know truth and honour and justice. Think on these things. It assumes we can name truth and honour and justice. And that is why what we do here today is worth doing.

Ecclesiastes 11, 12

On Monday I had a meeting with the Bishop. We had a conversation about planning for the future and we talked about things like strategy, and hope, and ambition. Then I drove just beyond the edge of the diocese to visit my mother, who is now 86, and rather less than fighting fit. We did not talk about strategy and ambition; we did not even talk about hope. Instead, she told me, as she tells me every time I see her, that she does not like being old.

From that I turned to the reading we have just heard

*Remember your creator in the days of your youth, before the days of trouble come,
and the years draw near when you will say, "I have no pleasure in them"*

Ecclesiastes 12:1

Ecclesiastes 11 and 12 is, at least in part, about being young and about being old.

It is an odd book, Ecclesiastes, there is nothing else quite like it in scripture. Most of us know it for the famous passage in chapter three

*For everything there is a season, and a time for every matter under heaven: a time
to be born, and a time to die; a time to plant, and a time to pluck up what is
planted; a time to kill, and a time to heal...*

Ecclesiastes 3:1-3

Notice that too is about times and seasons, about the need to do this now and do that later.

a time to love, and a time to hate; a time for war, and a time for peace

Ecclesiastes 3:8

It is a presiding idea in Ecclesiastes. What we heard tonight was that when you are young you must seize the day. It was slightly startling stuff: urging young people to break the rules, to enjoy it,

Follow the inclination of your heart and the desire of your eyes

So, no surprise that in Ecclesiastes chapter eight we stumble across another familiar phrase, the one that, in the Authorised Version, reads

*a man hath no better thing under the sun, than to eat, and to drink, and to be
merry*

Ecclesiastes 8:15

If you think the phrase is 'eat, drink and be merry, for tomorrow you die'; you need to know the bit about dying (after you have enjoyed the eating and drinking), is not in Ecclesiastes; that comes from Isaiah. Ecclesiastes it seems just wants you to have fun.

Now before we all decide that we would be better off this afternoon in the Dog and Duck. I need to explain that it is just a touch more complicated than that and try to explain what is going on here. It is unusual and it is interesting and it worth taking note.

Books of the bible were written at different times. The oldest are three thousand years old and there are stories in others that took shape even before that. The youngest books in the Old Testament were written not that long before Christ was born. These books, written at different times, were written in different styles. There are history books, there are prophecies, there are laws and there is much more besides.

Ecclesiastes is a very particular kind of writing; it is called 'wisdom literature'. This is the book of the bible to accompany a glass of very dry sherry. It is slightly upmarket, intellectual writing. Wisdom literature came out of the learned society near the royal court, clever sayings, thoughtful observation, the sort of thing you talked about at the best dinner parties in Jerusalem. And most wisdom literature sets out to tell you that being wise is a very good thing to be. The wise know the world, they understand.

Happy are those who find wisdom, and those who get understanding, for her income is better than silver, and her revenue better than gold Proverbs 3:13-14

What Wisdom literature tells you is that, if you do look around you, you will see the world makes sense and that you can be sure that God is good and God is just. That is what the Book of Proverbs says, it is what will also you find in the Book of Wisdom. Wisdom Literature tells the wise that they are happy and tells the rest of us to listen to them. The wise know how it all adds up.

And Ecclesiastes begs to differ. In Ecclesiastes the wise are not happy, the world does not make sense and the ways of God are past finding out. This is a radical, awkward, interesting book.

Ecclesiastes was written late, after the Exile when things had not gone well for the Israel of God. Ecclesiastes looks around and it does not seem obvious that everything adds up and makes sense. It does not even seem that God is at hand. Ecclesiastes is riven with a kind of nagging doubt. There is a phrase that keeps cropping up

all is vanity and a chasing after wind

Things go wrong, plans fail, we die, ambition will be frustrated just a chasing after wind. That is why our reading tonight was so keen on youth and so pessimistic about old age. In Ecclesiastes the more you know the less it all makes sense; the more you see, the worse it looks. Ecclesiastes can sound very bleak indeed.

So I hated life, because what is done under the sun was grievous to me; for all is vanity and a chasing after wind Ecclesiastes 2:17

This is the book of the bible that says what my mother says; knows what she knows. Pleasures pass and old age brings grief. It expresses its sorrow beautifully, but it is very sad indeed.

all must go to their eternal home, and the mourners will go about the streets; before the silver cord is snapped, and the golden bowl is broken, and the pitcher is broken at the fountain

Ecclesiastes writes out of an experience of failure and despair and it says something we have to hear. I have sat with my mother old age; old age is hard and her wisdom is that the world does not always make sense, and God does not always feel near.

Round about the time I saw my mother I finished the novel I was reading. It was the new Robert Harris, set in the conclave meeting to elect a new pope. The story gets a bit carried away with itself, but it is a hard book to put down. Without giving the game away, I can tell you that, in this book, a sermon is preached and it is a sermon on the virtues of doubt. The idea in the book is that a church that really knows doubt is a church that commend faith. The cardinal commends a faith that engages with doubt. Let's have more doubt says the preacher. Now interestingly the Book of Ecclesiastes is also known by another name; it is sometimes called Qoheleth, and Qoheleth means The Preacher. But this preacher, Qoheleth, is not quite saying that we have to live with doubt. Doubt is corrosive, if you live with doubt you live with anxiety and suspicion. It is a popular idea at the moment that doubt is somehow commendable, grown-up, thoughtful, but change the frame of reference for a moment. Imagine someone tells you that they love you. To respond 'I doubt that' would be deeply damaging. It is quite legitimate not to understand or comprehend how someone can love you, but doubting love is dangerous. Qoheleth does not ask us to doubt, it says instead that we have to live with disappointment and with mystery.

In part, this book tells us that we must seize our opportunities when we have them, for nothing is certain. Qoheleth confronts us with a God we will never encompass, describe and define. It throws open the curtains, pushes back the horizon, there is more than we can see, more than we can know. It confronts us with the height and depth of things, the mystery and the pain that unsettle us. That is a fundamentally religious lesson that we have to learn. God is more than we imagine, truth is not easily bought. The church does not preach doubt, but we are rightly humbled by the majesty of God and by the limits of our understanding. Ecclesiastes, the Preacher, teaches that lesson powerfully. We might want to say rather more than this Preacher says, but this is one of the things we need to say. And hearing it we are reminded that whilst faith might bring joy and comfort, might strengthen and reassure, sometimes it also invites us to be courageous and resilient. *When the golden bowl is broken, and the pitcher is broken at the fountain will still be faithful and still just.* But that does not mean that we will not have to acknowledge and deal with the fact that life and old age bring disappointment as well as hope and joy.

Matthew 22:34-46

Sunday 29th

I have been in Milan. My son knows that you go to Milan to watch AC Milan. My daughter knows you go for Prada, Versace, Gucci, and Dolce & Gabbana. My wife thinks you go for the Duomo, Leonardo da Vinci and perhaps chicken Milanese. But I, sad man that I am, I believe Milan is the place where, in 374, they showed us how to choose a bishop. When the Diocese of Bristol has to choose a bishop, in 2017, committees meet, agendas are flogged through, statements written, online surveys arranged, brows furrowed and pencils sucked. In 374, when an election began in Milan, Ambrose, the local governor, went to a bad tempered meeting to call it to order. While he was speaking, a cry went up 'Ambrose for bishop'. He did not have a degree in theology, he was not even baptized, but they made him their bishop. Now, it would save us all a lot of time and stress if, at the end of this service, you could shout 'Nicola for bishop' and carry her shoulder high to consecration. You would have to carry her all the way to Lambeth and then persuade the Archbishop, and indeed the Queen, but that is just detail.

Ambrose, the bishop, became a great theologian. His background in politics also served him well. He lived at a time when the church had local customs. In Rome, they fasted on a Saturday, in Milan they did not. When asked, by a visitor, what he should do, Ambrose replied,

Si fueris Romae, Romano vivito more

Which, in time, became our saying *When in Rome, do as the Romans do.*

Now, this business of how you behave, what you do in one place, and not another, is very interesting. In our conversation about what sort of a bishop we are going to have, we have been talking about whether Bristol has some local rules. You see the Church of England is committed to something called mutual flourishing. What that means is that if I am someone who believes that women can be bishops and you are someone who believes that women cannot be bishops we are both entitled to take a full part in the life of the church, we should both be able to flourish. So, I can argue that the next bishop might be a woman, and you can argue, not just that a woman should not be our bishop, but even that a man who will not ordain women could be our bishop. That does happen, the Bishop of Chichester does not ordain women, and you may remember a lively debate in Sheffield, when it was announced, last January, that the new bishop, Philip North, would not ordain women. Would we welcome a bishop who does not ordain women?

That is a complicated argument and this is not a sermon about ordaining or not ordaining women. This morning, I am interested in the idea that you can have one rule in one place and another rule somewhere else. I am interested in that because of the gospel reading we have just heard

a lawyer, asked [Jesus] a question to test him. "Teacher, which commandment in the law is the greatest?"

Let's think about the story we heard, for a moment. Jesus is surrounded by a hostile audience, there has been a sequence of trick questions. The Herodians wanted to know 'Is it lawful to pay tax to Caesar? Say No and you anger the Romans, say Yes and pious Jews hate you. Then Sadducees (who do not believe in resurrection) ask him about a woman who married seven

times, 'In the resurrection who will be her husband?' Now there is a third question, equally contentious. This time it the Pharisees, the experts on the Law

"Teacher, which commandment in the law is the greatest?"

This was the question Pharisees always asked at their parties. It was *the* topic of conversation. You are interested in law, but which law come first? Which is great and which small; which demand is light, which is heavy? Jesus himself, seems to enter this territory. You may remember him saying,

"Woe to you, scribes and Pharisees, hypocrites! For you tithe mint, dill, and cummin, and have neglected the weightier matters of the law: justice and mercy and faith".

Matthew 23:23

The Pharisees will know what answer to expect, they are putting Jesus to the test. He answers by citing the bible. His answer is a quotation, from Deuteronomy (6:5) and Leviticus (19:18)

"You shall love the Lord your God with all your heart, and with all your soul, and with all your mind." This is the greatest and first commandment. And a second is like it: 'You shall love your neighbor as yourself.'

Now, just to tidy up some possible misunderstandings, that business of heart soul and mind. Jesus is not saying you will love with your heart AND with your soul AND with your mind. It is not as if he says, you will love like this on Monday AND Tuesday AND Wednesday. Jews would not think of heart soul and mind as separate things. Jesus just meant we must love God *utterly*. Then, we need to notice too, that Jesus says that loving God *is the greatest and first commandment*. Now, this time, he does mean it is both the greatest AND the first. There is a greatest AND first commandment, which is *to love God*, but a second commandment, which is to love your neighbor. Jesus gives a 'both / and' answer and he avoids the trap the Pharisees set.

What has all that got to do with Ambrose, doing as the Romans do and ordaining, or not ordaining, women? Because we live in a morally complicated world we do accept the idea that you can live with more than one way of thinking. In England, same sex marriage was legalized in 2014, the same year that in Nigeria they passed the same sex marriage (prohibition) bill. The Anglican Communion lives in a very uneasy tension over that and over ordaining and not ordaining women with different assumptions in different places. Which law is the greatest? Now, one of the ways we get round this is to argue that law is a blunt instrument. If the law says you must hang a murderer, but you think the murderer was acting under the influence of drugs given by someone else, or deluded, or under duress you might argue that the law is one thing and loving action another. There is a whole branch of ethics that says that laws do not work, what matters, what *really* matters, is that we do the loving thing. *Not always do this*, never do that; not even *do as the Romans do*; but do the loving thing.

And Jesus says *Love God and love you neighbour*. Jesus says, *do both things*. Jesus says *you cannot have one without the other*. You cannot love God if you do not love your neighbour; you cannot love your neighbour if you do not love God.

It is just possible, by now, that you feel a headache coming on. Let me put it another way, with a nod to a friend who once explained this to me. Let's imagine a game of rugby, Roger Dubois' Verger XV against Canon Gainsborough's Marines. That is a game we would all like to see. If

this game is to played well there are two things the players must get right. They must play well, play with skill *and* they must play by the rules, they must not cheat. If they play without skill, if they cannot kick well, or they cannot catch the ball in the air they will lose the game. If they play outside the rules, if they think they can pass the ball forward. or go on playing outside the pitch, well then, they are not playing badly; in truth they are not playing the game at all. A game in which Glynn can throw the ball forward, or Roger can race up into stands pursued by a Royal Marine Colour Sergeant is not rugby at all.

That is the point Jesus is making. Jesus knows that love comes from God. As the First Letter of John puts it

Let us love one another, because love is from God! John 4:7

I cannot love my neighbour, I cannot know what it is to truly love my neighbour, unless I know what love is. And love is a gift of God. We do not make it up as we go along. If we think we choose what loving looks like, what loving action might be, we have lost faith. We are doing something interesting, but we are not people of faith. We are no longer Christian. The first commandment, and the greatest, is to love God. You cannot love your neighbour if you do not love God. And, of course, if you love God and do not love your neighbour, well then you do not truly love God.

There is here, enough to be getting on with, a conversation I might continue another day, or you might have over lunch. Today, I have just tried to explain what Jesus meant when he told us to love God and love our neighbour. I think he meant that we are supposed to love another, but understand that is a *discipline*. Love is not just nice feelings, the cosy reassurance that if I think I am nice it all OK. Love is the gift of God that I am summoned to understand and accept. Love is a practice, a mindset, a habit to acquire. Love has boundaries. Much to our surprise, there are some rules, things we must, or must not, do.

To return to the problems that a church faces as it makes difficult decisions and tries to do that in a loving way we begin to understand the dilemma. Compromise and accommodation feels a reasonable way of proceeding, you blur the boundaries and keep pretending you are playing the same game. The problem is that the love of God is not founded on compromise or accommodation, it is absolute. Love does not make a series of compromises until we reach the place that gives least offence, least often. Love is the furnace that fashions something new and takes us where we never expected to go. We love God, then we love our neighbour and doing that we see the world afresh.

Zephaniah 1:7-18

That day will be a day of wrath, a day of distress and anguish, a day of ruin and devastation

I have a friend whose great-great-grandfather was Rev. Dr Henry Harries, a Welsh Baptist minister of the hell and damnation kind. My friend has the manuscript of some of his sermons; which is rather splendid. Unfortunately, they are in Welsh and he cannot read them. I thought about my friend as I looked at our readings this Sunday

That day will be a day of wrath,

It is strong stuff. It is also *unfamiliar* stuff. In all my time here I have never heard Nicola tell us that the Harbour will turn to blood next Tuesday. Not once has Robert announced that death, riding a place horse, is shortly expected to charge through the breakfast buffet at the Marriott Royal.

We do not talk like this; but the bible does. That quotation, about the *day of wrath* comes from Zephaniah, but it was in our reading from I Thessalonians too,

Then sudden destruction will come upon them I Thess 5:3

It is what the biblical scholars call *apocalypse*, which means *uncovering*. It is supposed to *show* us something. The trouble is we are not sure what it is telling us. It might as well be in Welsh.

It is high time we thought about the day of wrath... *a day of trumpet blast and battle cry*. Now, the first thing to get straight is that kind of writing, all this *blood poured out like dust* has its roots in our history. That is not what we expect. Read passages like this and history is not what springs to mind. History is hyperinflation in the Weimar Republic leading to the rise of the National Socialists, all those essays you have to write about one thing leading to another, causes, consequences, and progress. Apocalypse feels like a different thing altogether, everything is out of proportion. It is as if you asked you aunt if she wanted tea, or coffee and she has set fire to your trousers. One thing does not seem to lead to another. Let me explain.

At Easter 1251 three men started to preach up a crusade. One of them was a runaway monk, called Jacob. He always had a letter in his hand and said the Blessed Virgin Mary had given it to him. She had reminded him that the news

of Christ's birth was given first to shepherds. So he summoned shepherds to his cause. He created an army of thousands. He said the sea was going to part so they could march to the Holy Land. Then it all began to go badly wrong. They marched to Amiens not Jerusalem, they started stealing food and then they took to killing the clergy. It was all very bizarre. And it begins to make a bit more sense when you know that in 1250, just a year before, the French King had been captured on crusade and was being held hostage. There was a crisis in France and this was the response to crisis. The story had its roots in history.

It is the same story when we turn to Zephaniah. Zephaniah is one of the 'minor prophets'. It is a bit harsh, Isaiah, Jeremiah, Ezekiel, and Daniel are the Champions League of prophecy and there are twelve *minor* prophets and it is not a helpful label, they are not the same. Zephaniah begins his book

The word of the LORD that came to Zephaniah son of Cushi son of Gedaliah son of Amariah son of Hezekiah, in the days of King Josiah son of Amon of Judah. I will utterly sweep away everything from the face of the earth, says the LORD

Zephaniah 1:1-2

What catches the ear and the eye is the drama: *I will utterly sweep away everything*. We are, though, supposed to notice what he says *first*. Zephaniah son of Cushi...son of Hezekiah, in the days of King Josiah. That is history. Hezekiah was a king, so was Josiah. It is history that is red in tooth and claw. Josiah died in battle, on the plains of Megiddo. His life and his death were part of a titanic struggle in which the Babylonian Empire overwhelmed Judah. When Zephaniah prophesied about

a day of trumpet blast and battle cry against the fortified cities and against the lofty battlements

that was not once-upon a time language, that was the way things were. It was history. Zephaniah is a way of making sense of destruction; of defeat and death.

the sound of the day of the LORD is bitter, the warrior cries aloud there

We need to notice that scripture is not trying to tell 'It's OK, everything will be alright really'. In the row about *Thought for The Day*, in the last few weeks, Justin Webb suggested that the religious message is just

If everyone was nicer to everyone else, it would be fine

Zephaniah says he is wrong, so does Jeremiah, so does Amos. The message of the prophets is that death, and war, and catastrophe are terrible to behold. These are moments when the words fail us; you can only weep. There is no explanation to give, no message of reassurance. *Be silent* says Zephaniah. Nothing will save you, there is no sense to be made of this; there is nothing that will help you see.

I will bring such distress upon people that they shall walk like the blind

We keep reading these passages of destruction and death as though they provide us with an account of what will happen; this surely is the way God will work it all out, make it better. That really is not what the prophets are saying. The emphasis falls on the fact that everything goes dark. It is impenetrable, mysterious. It is bewildering

a day of darkness and gloom, a day of clouds and thick darkness

Later, in different passages there can be words of reassurance, a new hope, but it is not a story in which one thing sensibly follows another. It is discontinuous. You shut one book. You pick up another. It is a new story.

It is, in fact, just the way we have to think about Jesus on the cross. Too often we suggest that he was dead and then he was alive again, as though it was a bit horrid and then he got better. We are supposed to hold two radically different ideas in our heads, see two pictures at once. He died, he is dead and he is risen. Death is real it still exists and there is something else.

This is one of those sermons where there ought to be ice creams and an intermission a chance to lie down and rub the temples. We are nearly there. The fundamental idea in all this is that we speak of things that are greater than we know. Put very simply, we are not in charge of this story. Zephaniah's shattering prophecy of darkness and destruction announces that we are caught up in something we do not control. We can make all sorts of statement about how we think it is going, we can assess and we can tidy it up and make it manageable, but at some point we have to let go.

To believe in God is to accept ultimately that there is a truth beyond our words, a reality that burns so bright it is blinding. We have got dangerously careless in the way we speak about our faith and it has happened because we do not take prophets like Zephaniah seriously. All the casual talk about a God

who speak to us, gives us a word, a God who *wants* this or that, a God we can meet; all of that fails utterly to convey what an encounter with the living God might be like. In scripture, you cannot meet God; the experience would consume you. There is no process we can work; no levers we can pull. We do not drive this business of belief. We are not the pivot on which everything turns.

You see, the story we tell is not about it being OK and making it a bit better. The story we tell is about death and the sheer horror that has been unleashed in Syria, or in senseless shootings in a church at Sutherland Springs. It is a story from which we need to be rescued and redeemed. It is not a story we tell as if we can make it add up; make sense. It is a story that has to include Christ going to the cross. In Rowan Williams words Jesus has to *leave himself, his nature, his calling his mission* and step into something else.

That is why Zephaniah is important. I would be a bit careful of saying that is what Zephaniah means, because Zephaniah is telling us not to jump to that sort of conclusion too quickly. This morning though it is a reminder that we are people who need to be redeemed and that the real story about us is told by Christ. Here we join in that story, we learn the story, become part of it, so that when we leave we might just possibly have a little less to say about ourselves and a little more to say about the Christ who comes to meet us here.

Advent Sunday, 3rd December 2017

+ Advent marks the start of the church's year and the start of the period of preparation, the need for readiness, that our Bible readings have been hinting at for weeks. And the collect for today, Advent Sunday, sets the scene:

Almighty God, give us grace to cast away the works of darkness and to put on the armour of light, now in the time of this mortal life, in which your Son Jesus Christ came to us in great humility, that on the last day, when he shall come again in his glorious majesty to judge the living and the dead, we may rise to the life immortal.

As the words of the Advent Sunday collect state, we're to be ready and prepared for two things: the time in this mortal life when Christ came to us in great humility – which starts with his birth in a stable, *and*, the lesser known focus of Advent, his return on the last day when he'll come again in his glorious majesty. Today's readings reinforce the Advent imperative – be ready! These are momentous events.

The OT passage opens with Isaiah's cry: 'Oh that you would tear open the heavens and come down,' and in the Gospel Mark roars onto the scene like the lion that is his gospel symbol. *Be alert*, he warns. *In those days, after that suffering, the sun will be darkened and the moon will not give its light, and the stars will be falling from heaven, and the powers in the heavens will be shaken. Then they will see the Son of Man coming in clouds with great power and glory. Then he will send out the angels, and gather the elect from the four winds, from the ends of the earth to the ends of heaven.* Little wonder the recent readings have been cautioning us not to be caught unawares like the unready bridesmaids, to make sure our lamps are trimmed, full of oil, not to be the ones left behind 'sleeping in sin'. And then today's Gospel continues, with its warning that Christ might return at any time, no one knows when. It might be in the evening, or at midnight, or at cockcrow, or a dawn. But on that Day of Judgement when Christ returns in glory the dead will be raised, the darkness of this present age will pass away, God's Kingdom will finally be established on earth and everything will be made perfect.

The opening words of today's collect are reflected in much of our Advent worship, full of symbolism as we strive to cast away the works of darkness, putting on the armour of light and new life. We'll experience this symbolic movement from darkness to light later today at the Advent Procession, when a chorister carrying a tiny candle, a pinprick of light, will process the length of the dark Cathedral. In the Eastern Lady Chapel behind me the choir's candles will be lit and the light glowing behind the high altar will symbolise the breaking dawn of a new age. Slowly everyone's candles will be lit, until the entire building is suffused with candlelight.

Over the next few weeks Christians the world over will build on this symbolic movement from dark to light. In the company of the patriarchs, the prophets, John the Baptist and the Virgin Mary we'll recall the history of our salvation as we move together from the darkness of unknowing to the birth of Christ, the Light of the World. In penitence we'll be reminded that through his sacrifice on the cross we are set free to shed the dark cloak of sin and become alive to new life, putting on the armour of light, a new beginning with echoes of our Baptism. And at Christ's second coming, on the last day, the darkness of the world as we know it will disappear and bathed in the light of Christ, we will rise to the life immortal, as all things are reconciled in God.

Our Advent task is to be ready for all this, as Isaiah says, God is our potter and we are the clay. We must be prepared to be moulded, to be transformed.

This is complicated, deeply serious stuff, and a million miles from the ways most people today choose to keep Advent. In a large department store last week the assistant at the till offered me the chance to buy a pampering Advent calendar at a knock down price. She assured me it was excellent value, each day would reveal another little box containing hand cream, a face mask, massage soufflé. Wouldn't it be lovely, she enthused, to enjoy these daily treats and spend Advent ensuring I would

be Christmas-ready, smoothly moisturised, soft-skinned, buffed and toned. Maybe, but as the old adage goes, you should never judge a book by its cover ...

Every year my Grandmother gave each of her grandchildren an Advent Calendar and I loved the ones she chose. There was always a huge dark sky - with plenty of glitter - and a mysterious shadowy stable with soft lamplight shining over the empty, waiting manger. Day by day the dark sky changed and grew lighter, as windows were opened onto the usual mixture of the sacred and the questionable: robins, snowmen, angels, bells, holly, even the odd duck and a reindeer. Then, on Christmas Eve the final huge window would be opened and at last the entire scene was revealed, there was a baby in the manger, the moment we'd been waiting for.

Fashions change and a recent newspaper article featured a Kindness Advent Calendar. The idea being that each window opened suggested an act of kindness: Put an extra item in the food bank. Allow a waiting car to go in front of you in a queue of traffic. Visit your elderly neighbour with a cake. It's a hopeful initiative in our consumer-led times. Let's see if it catches on.

The pampering Advent calendar I was offered the other day might have brought me to Christmas Day feeling superficially good, a skin deep improvement perhaps. But all those lotions and potions would have done nothing to reveal what really matters: my spiritual readiness to celebrate the birth of Christ, or my inner preparedness to cast off the works of darkness in penitence, anticipating the day of judgement. Few of us like the truth about ourselves, none of us is without sin and daring to cast off the works of darkness is revealing and potentially risky. God might tell us who we are – he might demolish the dark veil we throw up to cover the bits of our relationships with others and with God that we don't like. At times our lives are dominated by insecurity and fragility, but paradoxically the more we seek to defend ourselves the weaker and more vulnerable we become. Resolving to remove those defences, those barriers we have erected, enables us to become stronger. The triumph of Christ was his vulnerability. So opening the windows onto my soul will be challenging. Standing back, and looking at myself from another perspective will take courage; what if I don't like what I see?

In his letter to the Corinthians, St Paul gives us advice as we embark on the challenging and daunting demands of Advent preparation: I give thanks to my God always for you because of the grace of God that has been given you in Christ Jesus...He will also strengthen you to the end, so that you may be blameless on the day of our Lord Jesus Christ.

Put another way, both St Paul and the Advent collect remind us that it's only through the grace of God that we will be given the strength to cast away the works of darkness and put on the armour of light. God's fingerprints are on our clay, he knows and loves us because he made us. Whatever is revealed we must trust that God will be with us seeing us for who we are, and loving us. Amen.

Midnight Mass 2017

Luke 2:8-20

Let's start in Lidl. I know you hoped that there would be no more supermarkets for a couple of days, but let me take you back to Lidl. For Christmas 2017 Lidl gave us the *cavalier carver*, the man who can really boss the turkey. And, in a separate advert, they introduced the *double dipper* the woman at the party who takes a bite and then puts the spring roll *back* in the chilli dip. Now, if you did not know it already, you really must not do this if you are invited to a party in Clifton. It is slow motion horror all round. Christmas, Lidl tells us, can be a challenge. Meanwhile, in an Aldi advert, which I really wish I could not remember so clearly, we met a carrot. This was a carrot that had fallen in love (the way carrots so famously do). To reach the carrot of its dreams, it had to make a terrible journey across a laden Christmas table. Christmas, you see, can be a challenge. And, because this is the cathedral and you may not be an Aldi, or a Lidl, sort of shopper, Waitrose also had a story to tell. There, it was a group snowed in, high up, at the pub on Tan Hill. How would they cope? Would they have food? Christmas *really* can be a challenge.

Christmas adverts tell a story and the story they tell has a pattern. Christmas can go wrong; there is a risk. Then, in the happy ending, Christmas becomes safe. The adverts tell us that. Now, they have got part of the story absolutely right. We know the Christmas story here. The story we tell, about a pregnant girl so nearly abandoned by her fiancée, a perilous journey to Bethlehem, and no room in the inn, *that* story tells us that Christmas was a challenge from the beginning. This is *exactly* what St Luke wants us to know. He wants us to notice that all this nearly did not happen. It nearly went wrong. He keeps telling us that. St Matthew makes the same point, Herod wanted to kill a child who should really never have been born. Christmas, God's great project was fragile from the first. It was a risk. If what you offer is love you are taking a risk. It can go wrong.

Let's stay with the adverts a moment longer. If you have seen the John Lewis version, you will have met a monster under the bed (which may, or may not, belong to Chris Riddle). It is a monster that nearly ruins Christmas, but rescues things at the last moment. At Marks and Spencer, Paddington Bear is the savior.

That's enough, you want me to take you to Bethlehem not down the seasonal aisle of Sainsbury's. But notice the story these adverts tell. Christmas is a risk, it needs saving. And when it has been saved, by the monster under the bed, or by Paddington Bear, it ends happily, indoors, with presents and round a table, with a turkey.

Part of that Christmas story is quite right. The risky part, the story about it all being about to go wrong. And part of the story is absolutely wrong. So, now let's set out for Bethlehem.

What did we hear tonight?

...there were shepherds living in the fields

Notice, that they were *living* in the fields. New Testament scholars scowl at each other at seminars when they talk about the shepherds. There is an argument about whether the shepherds had court orders and a history of disorderly conduct, or, alternatively, were just a bit short on the social graces. What is certain is that shepherds were outsiders, literally; they lived outside. They could never be here, with us. They were not religious and they were not reliable. You would not take them to that party where they are passing round the chilli dip. They did not belong.

That is the first point. Whatever else we say about Christmas it really is not an indoor feast. It does not draw the curtains and sit by the fire. The scene is a hillside, or it is a barn. There was no room inside, remember. There never was, read on in this gospel and you will hear Jesus remark that animals have homes, but he does not. Jesus is not an 'insider'. This story is never that contained, that cosy.

Then there is the bit of the story we nearly always overlook. The shepherds see angels

...the glory of the Lord shone around them, and they were terrified

They were terrified. The translation tidies it up, *they feared with great fear*. That is a theme in the gospel. When Zechariah met an angel and heard he would be the father of John the Baptist, he feared, in Greek, *tarasso*. When Mary hears the news she will give birth she is troubled, in Greek, *diatarasso*. It is a word you can use for boats on a stormy sea. They all had to be told not to be afraid. They were not wrong to be afraid, they were absolutely right, they saw the seriousness of things, the difference between light and dark. They saw what love and peace can really look like and knew how wrong we are about both. They were right to be fearful, they had been brought to the edge of the cliff for the best view. They had to be told to manage that fear, to listen to what comes next.

The Christmas story we started with, thanks to Lidl, Aldi, Waitrose and all the others is about a risk that can be managed, at least if you have help with the packing. The Christmas story here is about risk and then it is about *fear*, something altogether bigger than risk. It is not going to be managed. It is not going away. It never moves indoors so you can draw the curtains on the cold. When the glory of God breaks out, fear is what you feel. It is what you will always feel. The host of heaven appears on the hillside, the shepherds stare straight into glory and they are afraid.

Up in the night sky, the angels sing about peace.

Glory to God in the highest heaven, and on earth peace among those whom he favours!

That is not cosy; that is politics. Peace where there is violence and repression. Peace for some and not others. Christmas does not move indoors it is loose in the world and it wants things different, sees things differently, it is a story that is not moving swiftly to a conclusion it is story that has a long way to go.

Tomorrow, we will mitigate the risks, we will draw the curtains, and we should. I will do that too. If we are lucky enough to be able to do it we should celebrate. Bring Christmas inside and make it safe for a time. Make no mistake though, the view tonight is endless, eternal. The love of God at risk in a world that always draws the curtains against the cold. The peace of God hard to see and hear in Syria, Myanmar, Yemen, Iraq, Afghanistan, South

Sudan, That is what the Christmas story is about. It is absolutely an invitation to go outside and look at the view. See what the angels saw and announce a change. God comes amongst us to ask us to live in peace, to summon us to love one another. God comes amongst us and tonight he is not at home he is on the streets and in the shelters. He comes to make a difference and that is where it begins.

Epiphany Sermon 6.1.18

+ One hundred years ago, the year 1918 was to be full of promise: the end of the bloodiest war in history was close, amongst other things, this was to be the year in which women's suffrage made a great leap forward. At the start of a year we can never tell what the months ahead hold, but the 2018 headlines haven't given much cause for optimism so far: Michael Wolff's deliciously scurrilous but nonetheless troubling new book casts further doubt on the credibility of the most powerful man on earth, the NHS is in crisis, teaching is in crisis, Brexit limps on, the Middle East is in perpetual turmoil - and the media's New Year advice is as ever limited to tips on how to become a superficially new you: Buy a new bed and sleep better, go on holiday and de-stress. Eat less, drink less, exercise more. Predictably at a much more profound level, Pope Francis in his New Year message exhorts us to jettison life's 'useless baggage', recommending we set aside a daily moment of silence to be with God. Francis said this would help us by 'freeing us from being corroded by the banality of consumerism, the blare of commercials, the stream of empty words and the overpowering waves of empty chatter and loud shouting'. By ditching 'all sorts of useless baggage', we would rediscover what really matters, what is really significant in our lives.

Today, on the Feast of the Epiphany, we're celebrating the hugely significant visit by wise men from the East to the Christ-child. The word Epiphany means 'showing' or 'manifestation' and today's Feast is important because this was the first occasion Christ's divinity became apparent to gentiles. Though no-one can be certain exactly who they were, we do know that the wise men were not Jews, they were not the expected beneficiaries of the birth of the one who was the Messiah. Their presence represented an inclusivity which was to prove deeply troubling to those who expected a traditional Jewish king. The birth of this child was pivotal, marking as it did the start of a confrontation between the kingdom of God in all its apparent frailty, weakness and insignificance, and the mighty power of Rome. This really mattered and it's why, throughout Christendom today is a major celebration, a public holiday. A Spanish friend told me that until very recently gifts were exchanged on the Feast of the Epiphany, rather than Christmas Day, symbolising the gifts presented to the infant Christ by the wise men - gold, frankincense and myrrh.

So today being a holiday in Europe, a Saturday and the start of a New Year, I decided to cheer myself up by having a look for something light hearted for Epiphany. Googling Epiphany got me nowhere, but wise men was more fruitful and predictably given the subject, the results were rather sexist: the message found on a greeting card 'If the wise men had been women, they would have asked for directions and got there on time, helped deliver the baby, cleaned the stable, cooked a meal and made arrangements for a return visit.' Then slightly subtler: Two women were sitting at the back of a church discussing their faith. One of them said to the other: 'I totally get the Virgin Birth, but *three* wise men ...'

The account of the Epiphany in Matthew's Gospel has been embellished and our understanding of it enhanced by myriad legends and local traditions. One such legend originates from the author Henry van Dyck, who wrote of the fourth wise man who set off a little late and tried to catch the previous three up. (*An adaptation of his story*) He was carrying his own gifts for the Christ-child: a precious emerald, a blood red ruby and a luminous pearl. On his dash to Bethlehem, he was further delayed by the need to tend a sick man, who needed water and food. The fourth wise man hurried on his way as soon as he could. He arrived in Bethlehem and hearing a child crying, he went into the house full of hope and found a baby boy of about the right age, but the young mother who was tending her son told him that Mary and Joseph had fled in the night, rumour had it they'd gone to Egypt. As they spoke they heard screaming, marching soldiers and the visitor went out to look. The bodies of little boys were lying bleeding in the dust and the wise man blocked the door as a soldier with a bloodied

dagger tried to barge in. He held out his beautiful emerald and the soldier stopped. 'Take it', he said, 'and go on your way. There's nothing for you in this house.' The soldier pocketed the jewel and continued to the next house, on his murderous search for the Holy Innocents.

The wise man continued sadly on his quest to find the Holy Family, travelling in hope to Egypt. On the way he saw terrible poverty, illness, slavery and oppression which he couldn't ignore. By selling his beautiful blood red ruby he managed to help many people, but this meant he arrived months after the Holy Family had left Egypt.

Not knowing where to go next, he journeyed on for several decades, until eventually – an old man by now - he arrived in Jerusalem and learnt that he was almost too late, Christ was dying on the cross. They told him that the child Jesus had become a great teacher, he'd healed, he'd performed miracles, he'd brought light to a dark world that wouldn't accept him and now he was being crucified. Crushed, the wise man was standing gazing at his last remaining jewel, the luminous pearl, when a young girl threw herself at him, clutching him and pleading with him in his own language to save her from being raped and sold into slavery. He had no choice, her captors accepted the pearl and let her go so now the wise man had nothing to offer. He made his way to Golgotha, knelt before Christ in the dust and whispered that he had nothing left to bring, his gifts were gone. He heard a voice: *I was hungry and you gave me food, I was thirsty and you gave me something to drink, I was a stranger and you welcomed me, I was naked and you gave me clothing, I was sick and you took care of me, I was in prison and you visited me.... Just as you did it to the least of these who are members of my family, you did it to me (Matt 25:35...)*

His gifts had been accepted, his precious jewels had been given to Christ, through his acts of kindness to those in need.

We have no idea how many wise men there really were, what they were called, whether they rode camels or horses and where they came from. But we do know from Matthew's Gospel that they travelled to visit the child Jesus, on arrival they were overwhelmed with joy, they paid him homage, they offered him gifts. Then they left. As far as we know they didn't try to convert the Holy Family to their religion, they didn't become Christians, they didn't try to negotiate a return visit to see how this child grew up – in other words, they gave of themselves, with no expectation of anything in return save that which really matters, the privilege of worshipping God. There was no side to them, no desire for notoriety, power, no spin They had jettisoned all sorts of useless baggage, they had spent a few moments in silence with God, and their actions played a part in conveying to the world the greatest news it has ever known. News which has and will continue to eclipse the grim headlines, the banality of consumerism, the blare of commercials, the stream of empty words and the overpowering waves of empty chatter and loud shouting. The useless baggage.

The birth of our Saviour showed the world how to seek the Kingdom of God, and perhaps the Epiphany message for us this New Year in our ever-troubled world is to seek out the wise men – and women – in our midst who we so desperately need, but to be wary of those who struggle to abandon the baggage of desire for earthly power and privilege. Amen.

Baptism of Christ Mark 1:4-11

It rained on Tuesday. We had Storm Eleanor to thank for that. It rained so hard, and the wind blew so strongly, that they closed the Thames Flood Barrier, and the Humber Bridge. The Environment Agency issued flood warnings for the Avon between Pill and Shirehampton and for Portishead. They do a good job the Environment Agency; they should be commended. They did fail, however, to issue the flood warnings I needed to hear, the one for my spare bedroom, or the second one, for my study, and the crucial storm warning, for my own bedroom. I had running water in rooms that do not even have taps.

So, Tuesday night was a sharp and unwelcome reminder that water is not tame. Rain is fine when it is beating on your windows and you are toasting your toes by the fire. It is not fine when it is pouring in through the light fitting. If you think of water as something that gets delivered in bottles by Sainsbury's, or you imagine water in your bath, still and topped with scented suds... well, you may be missing something and you are going to struggle with our gospel reading today. You see, the story, we heard this morning, the story of Christ's baptism takes some very familiar concepts, water amongst them, and it turns them inside out.

It was Mark's gospel we heard this morning, and it needs some unpacking. It tells you one thing, but hints at another. Mark wants you to stumble; wants you to notice the difficulty. This morning we need a bible study.

Mark's gospel, it starts oddly. Years ago, I completely wrecked our understanding of the UK series of *House of Cards* by putting on the DVDs in the wrong order. Mark's gospel has the same feel. It starts in the middle, there is no Christmas, just John the Baptist suddenly bellowing out prophecy in the wilderness. It begins before you are sitting comfortably. You are off balance and that is how Mark wants you, This is unpredictable, dislocating, urgent.

John the baptizer appeared in the wilderness

What, you should ask, is a baptizer doing in the wilderness? Baptizers need water. More seriously, the wilderness is the place Israel left behind when Moses died. John is asking them to come out of the cities God gave them and walk backwards into the story they thought was over. And he is an awkward figure this John. His father is a temple priest; that means he should become a temple priest himself. He has left *that* behind. He is also a radical. His message is unsettling; they think he is dangerous. The king will kill him very soon.

He is preaching baptism. That too is tricky. Jews are never baptized, they are Jews by *birth*. It is as if I have asked Mrs Hoyle to sit GCSE Home Economics, it is offensive. This is telling the Jews that they lack religion, their faith will not save. He is preaching repentance; radical, repentance. Repentance is not the same thing as feeling a bit shifty because you were rude to the cat, or sorry you had the last of the mince pies for breakfast. Repentance is the admission that you were wrong, looking in the wrong place, satisfied with the wrong answers. Not this, but *that*, a change of heart, a different way of doing things.

They lapped that message up. The crowds came. Bizarrely, they came, back to the wilderness, telling John and one another they had been wrong all this time. They came to John who was

dressed as Elijah used to dress. Elijah, the one who was supposed to return at the end of days; the herald of the Lord. They came looking for a new beginning.

And then Mark offers us a really strange phrase

He proclaimed, "The one who is more powerful than I is coming after me"

John is describing Christ. He says, Christ will be more *powerful*, 'stronger' might be a better translation - *o`ivscuro, tero, j*. Not *holier*, notice, not *wiser*, not even *greater*. Christ will be *stronger*. He will *need* to be stronger. That is a really interesting idea. We rather assume that religious people are sometimes a bit weird, fanatical even, or we think they are polite, prone to saying 'please' and 'thank you' and likely to express profound emotion by singing a hymn. Mark thinks the defining characteristic of Christ, (and Christ is the person who shows us how to be human) is that Christ is *strong*. Christ will need that strength. He will fight evil, face prejudice, and endure agony. His strength will be generous, forgiving, hopeful, and persistent. If you think strength is hostile, angry and comes loaded with weapons, Christ will not seem strong. He will be resilient. He will be, above all things, himself. And that is what he invites us to be – strong.

This is not what anyone expects. Mark has told us to expect something. He began with prophecy; Prepare the way of the Lord he said. We were told to look for something. This is what we see: *Jesus came from Nazareth of Galilee*. It is all wrong. Everyone knew that nothing good comes from Galilee.

Let's just remind ourselves... not only are we in the wilderness where we are not supposed to be, asking for a baptism we should not need... we have gone to see, John, and now John turns tells us he is not the person we hoped he would be. When the right man does arrive he is firstly anonymous in the crowd, and then we discover, he comes from exactly the wrong place. He comes from Galilee, he is foreign, wrong, he is not *religious*.

And then, at last, we come to the water. John is baptizing with water. Don't think of water in a font, this is the kind of water that comes through the ceiling. Jews think that, before creation, there was just water and it was terrifying.

the earth was a formless void and darkness covered the face of the deep,
Genesis 1:2

Jews think water is the opposite of creation. It is chaotic and meaningless. It is also destructive. Moses got through the sea and then watched it destroy Pharaoh's army.

You blew with your wind, the sea covered them; they sank like lead in the mighty waters. Exodus 15:8-10

That story, the story of Jonah and the whale, and the story of Paul's journeys, all depend on the special fear that is to be felt on the sea. When prophets describe a terrifying army they compare it to the roaring of the sea. So, when *Jesus came from Nazareth of Galilee* to be baptized with water, when he goes down into the Jordan it looks a bit like dying. It also looks a bit like a new creation, a challenge to the old chaos.

There is more. There are the heavens torn open; there is that voice, *You are my Son, the Beloved*. By now, though, I think you may have heard the message of Mark. It is unsettling; it is not what we expect.

In the lectionary, the cycle of readings we follow through the year, this Sunday is *The Baptism of Christ*. We think we know about Baptism, it is a baby (possibly in lace) an uncle in a tight fitting suit, proud parents, and brothers hoping there will be plenty to drink later. Baptism is predictable and baptism is a routine. That is a set of associations that sets us off in the wrong direction. Christ, who turns out not to be what we expected at all, goes out into the wilderness and accepts a baptism he does not need. He is baptized into repentance. That, of course, is all wrong too. Christ is sinless. There is nothing for him to repent. He repents because not because he has been wrong, he repents because we are all of us wrong; all looking, in the wrong place, for the wrong answers. Christ repents; he renounces the culture he lives in. Christ turns away from the way we do things round here. That, of course, is precisely why he has to be strong. He will need the strength to resist doing things the way we always do them, and making the judgements we always make. He will need the strength to hope for something more.

If you want to know what Christian commitment means, what is expected of us, that is it. It is very simple. Christians hope for something more. It does not always have to be the same; the 'way we do things here' is not the creed. Christian vocation is very simple to understand; it is less easy to live that vocation. It requires strength. Christ's 'repentance', the course he took from his baptism, put him at odds with all the assumptions made by religion and power. This was a vocation that ended on the cross. He had that strength. He had the strength to live a fully human life in which hope was never extinguished. He resisted all the tired compromises that get the rest of us by.

Christian vocation is a call to live life fully. It is a lot easier to accept that you will never live in that hope. It is a lot easier to settle for less. We get by if we settle for less. I had ten minutes with the newspapers this morning and they pretty well demanded I settle for less. It is not that the news is bad or gloomy. It is bad and gloomy, but there is a more significant problem. The news is bizarre, governments struggle to govern, plans are frustrated, policies are not delivered. There is no narrative any more, there is no sense that one thing follows another and the only commentary is twitter. We settle for less.

Mark insists that there is a narrative, still. Jesus comes to the Jordan and there is hope in the wilderness. Jesus comes to the Jordan and meaning rises out of the waters of chaos. There is repentance there will be redemption. You need resilience to go on believing that, you need strength to assert it, but that is the vocation of the baptized.

Deuteronomy 18: 15-20
Revelation 12: 1-5a
Mark 1: 21-28

This week, I began a new lecture series at the University – a course for undergraduates on development, international development if you prefer.

So, I rather enjoyed the opening lines of our reading from Mark's gospel (it brought on a wry smile!):

“They were astounded at his teaching, for he taught them as one having authority”

I wish!

But Jesus, who is God, the One we follow as Christians, taught as one having authority – not like the scribes, not like anyone else.

We heard that in today's gospel.

How do we – I wonder – detect, discern those things that are of God in our world today? Those who speak with an authority, which is of God.

The prophetic voice in a confusing world, where there's so much clamouring for our attention.

They say a few funny things about prophets and how to recognise them, and how not.

(That's what they are talking about in our reading from Deuteronomy.)

How do you know a prophet from a false teacher?

One of the things they say is that if a person keeps telling you they are a prophet, then they are probably not. I knew someone like that once.

Self-publicising is probably not the hallmark of a prophet!

But it gets complicated – as the bible can attest. The prophet Micah in 1 Kings claims that the other prophets have been intentionally deceived by God in order to trick the King, with the implication that even a prophet who speaks in the name of God, and genuinely thinks what they are saying is of God, may in fact be a false prophet.

Tricky!

Our reading from Mark's gospel, where we heard of Jesus' casting out the unclean spirit and our reading from the Revelation of John the Divine, where we have this graphic image of a woman in labour, about to give birth, “clothed with the sun”, and with a red dragon circling round...

These two readings have something interesting in common if we are thinking about how we discern God at work in the world, in the communities of which we are part, and in our own lives.

And what they have in common – remarkably – is convulsions, crying out. Birth pangs (in Revelation) – the agony of giving birth.

And more disturbing still, Revelation speaks of the imminent birth of a child, with a dragon standing by, waiting to devour it “as soon as it [is] born”.

New life at risk of being snuffed out.

It is strange. It's edgy. It's unnatural. It's threatening.

So, what does this tell us about discerning God in the world?

What are the writers of both Mark's gospel and Revelation trying to say?

We perhaps get a clearest sense of an answer from studying Revelation but it is there in Mark's gospel too.

In Revelation, there is a strong, strong sense of the corruption of the world – in stark contrast to God's heavenly realm.

And I don't just mean 'corruption' in the sense that the World Bank or the British government like to speak of it.

Those 'nasty countries' over there – not us, we're clean, we're beyond reproach, which is how the contemporary corruption discourse operates.

No, what Revelation has in mind is a corruption of an entirely different magnitude, where things really are warped.

Where truth is turned on its head.

Where powerful people tell us that the cat is white when we all can see the cat is black.

It is the kind of corruption that is so ubiquitous that we scarcely notice it any more.

We are all tainted.

It is this kind of world that the author of Revelation is conjuring up, but envisaging that when God's reign comes, it will be swept away, reversed.

Mark's gospel too.

The man with the unclean spirit – analogous to a disordered world, if you like. Cast out. Reversed.

But this transformation, this move from the old order to the new one does not just happen quietly, peaceably. Far from it.

What we are hearing is that it involves rupture...a wrench...struggle...birth pangs...convulsions.

The old order – whether it is the things that hold us back in our lives or the deceit and corruption of the world...

Its clings on, resists change, even if in the end the victory is assured.

And it is into this mire – with battle lines drawn – that the One who teaches with authority, speaks.

And there is a profound connection between what he speaks and what he can do.

When Jesus speaks he sees through the untruths of the world, the deceits and the lies. The things that are out of kilter.

That's why his teaching is authoritative.

The principalities and powers hate it when Jesus speak because they are shown up.

Their darkness and deceit are brought into the light.

And there is nothing they can do about it when the One who teaches with authority speaks.

“He commands even the unclean spirits, and they obey him.”

And Jesus' teaching is transformative.

The out of kilter world is righted.

That is the vision of the Revelation of John. It's what lies behind Mark's gospel too.

It is the Christian vision.

The power of Jesus to transform, to right our out of kilter world.

So, I wonder, whether when we seek to discern Jesus at work in the world today – because he does work, he is alive – I wonder whether we look for the wrong things.

And perhaps even look in the wrong place.

We expect a warm fuzzy feeling. That's what faith is about, we think.

When what today's reading tell us is we should be looking for birth pangs, convulsions, even agony. Fragile new life.

This week at the Cathedral we launched – fairly quietly, without great fanfare – our outreach to the homeless in our immediate vicinity.

Simply showing compassion and kindness to people on the streets.

An offer of a hot drink, checking that their housing needs are being attended to.

We are not looking to cast judgement on people, to fix anyone, or solve their problems overnight.

We are just trying to do what the Church does best.

And it's probably true to say that as Bristol Cathedral we've taken a little bit of time to get here.

We've struggled a bit with conflicting visions, voices of concern.

May be not agony and convulsions but birth pangs certainly!

And it is easy – certainly it's easy for me – to find this irritating, annoying, a distraction from what we really should be doing.

When in fact, my epiphany is to realise that may be the diversity of opinion, the voices of concern, aren't any of these things.

Rather, it is through them that we learn to be the body of Christ.

Surprise, surprise, the journey is as important as the destination.

And maybe, just maybe, what comes out in the wash – our homelessness work, for instance – what comes out in the end, is better for the fact that it is co-created, even created *ex nihilo* (created out of nothing)

More of God, on account of the birth pangs.

So, as you look out into the world, at your own life, the communities of which you are part – this community, particularly those places and situations which are fraught at the moment, which involve some element of struggle...

Ask yourself what might be being birthed?

May be not quite what you had imagined.

But which might just be of God, of the One who teaches with authority...

The one who shines light in the darkness.

And who puts our out of kilter world to rights.

Amen.

Bristol Ash Wednesday Sermon: 14.2.18

+ Yesterday we tossed pancakes, symbolically using up rich ingredients in the pancake batter as we prepared to embark on the fasting we associate with Lent. An odd choice of words then for George Herbert, the seventeenth century priest and poet, who wrote: *Welcome, deare feast of Lent*. Hardly a feast you might think, without biscuits, or alcohol, or coffee, or over indulgence - even the Points West presenter yesterday was weighing up whether or not she could eat her Valentine's Day chocolates. (You should be so lucky, I thought!)

This *deare feast of Lent* Herbert refers to starts today, Ash Wednesday, *the day in the year when Christians are exhorted to repent of our sins*. Repentance is a recurring Lenten theme and to the casual observer it may seem that Christians are unhealthily obsessed with our sinfulness, and the attendant guilt.

Christian or not, I suspect many adults live with fairly constant, nagging feelings of guilt about the things we have done which we ought not to have done, and perhaps more commonly nowadays the things we ought to have done and have not done. Thankfully most of us don't commit serious sins such as murder and theft. Less obvious but nonetheless guilt-inducing are the easily-glossed-over sins of omission: my failure to give generously, my tendency to avoid loving others who are different, or difficult, or embarrassing. Succumbing to the temptations of greed. Inappropriate images on the computer. Drinking too much. And I'm sure we can all think of other examples of human failing to add to that sad litany.

I had an interesting discussion with someone recently who wasn't prepared to even consider whether he had ever committed any sins, because he refused to be made to feel guilty. He wouldn't accept that if we think we are without sin we deceive ourselves. Sin is real. Sin has been part of our human condition since God created us, because we alone of all his creatures are aware of the implications of our actions. My cat attacks the local stray, who comes into our garden in

search of breakfast. This is his instinct, he could never be taught to treat his furry neighbour as himself, and then feel guilty if he didn't.

So on Ash Wednesday and week by week at the Eucharist, we Christians repent of our sins, we try to do better and we crave affirmation: did I do as I was supposed to, we check anxiously? Needing to be told, yes, yes, you did really well. Did I do a better job than him or her? Hoping for praise. Wasn't I kind to that irritating so and so? Yes you were, your halo must be shining brightly! There's nothing wrong with giving or receiving praise and affirmation from one another, providing it's given honestly, but we should never expect to receive it from God. To the God who loves us unconditionally we must surrender unconditionally.

There's a story about a woman who had a strange dream:

The woman described the dream she had just woken up from. She'd died and gone to heaven, dragging two bulging suitcases labelled, "Good Deeds". She rang the bell of God's door. No answer. While waiting, she checked her precious baggage, her passport to heaven. The suitcases seemed to have grown smaller. Anxiously she pressed the bell again. Still no answer. Once more she checked the cases. They'd disappeared completely. Utterly distraught, she fled in confusion from the one place she'd spent her entire life trying to reach.'

Now I'm no Jungian analyst, but even to the psychologically illiterate it seems to me that the interpretation of that dream points to this evening's Gospel – 'Do not store up for yourselves treasures on earth, where moth and rust consume and where thieves break in and steal'. In other words, as we'll shortly be reminded, there's no point in trying to store up my treasures on earth, because neither my possessions nor my good deeds can be put into a suitcase and taken with me when I die. Remember you are dust, and to dust you shall return.

This is a hard lesson, we want God to see how well we're doing – even if we heed the advice not to practice our piety in public, we want him to at least privately acknowledge our efforts. But God loves us unconditionally, and he can't be bought. Remember the parable of the workers in the vineyard, some of whom toiled all day and some for five minutes at the end of the afternoon. They were all paid the same, because as they learnt, you can't buy God's love. Or what about the Prodigal Son – the one left behind feels slighted when his brother returns from his spree of dissolute living and is welcomed home with great celebrations, but when he complains the Father explains that he loves them both equally and is just overjoyed to have his lost son returned to him.

Always more ready to love us than we are to love him, and needing nothing in return, God our Father sent his only Son to live among us, to experience our human condition – though he himself was without sin. And by dying for us, Christ – fully human and fully divine – became the bridge linking us, here on earth, eternally with God our Father in heaven. But lest we forget, this hasn't always been the case; before that first Good Friday mankind was separated from God by sin, there was an unbridgeable gulf between God and man. This is not a good state to be in, because we human beings need proximity to God in order to flourish. Christ died, that we might live.

By living, we don't of course mean the mechanics of breathing, eating, sleeping. This kind of Christian living means being the person we were truly created to be. Flourishing. Becoming more Christ-like. And sin is what so often prevents us from living like this, it holds us back.

Some years ago I remember being with pilgrims at the Shrine of Our Lady of Walsingham, watching a very elderly man slowly and painfully making his way to the place where confessions are heard. No one will ever know what it was that the old man confessed, but when he came out his whole demeanour had changed. He held his head up and walked tall. He said he felt as though he'd gained ten years. He felt relieved of a burden he'd carried for decades and his only regret

was that he hadn't jettisoned it long ago. Finally, better late than never, he had received God's forgiveness and been set free to live his life as the person he was created to be.

In a few moments we'll participate in the solemn penitential rite for today, Ash Wednesday. As we prepare for that, we'll hear the hauntingly beautiful *Kyrie Eleison* from Allegri's *Missa che fa oggi il mio sole*. We may choose to use these four minutes to reflect on those sins which separate us from God, giving thanks that we don't need to impress God with suitcases bulging with good deeds; God is always ready to forgive those who turn to him in penitence and faith. Lent is to be welcomed as a *deare feast*, because at its best it offers us amendment of life, setting us free to live as children of God, created in his own image and loved unconditionally. Amen.

Talk and Sermon for Evensong, 18th February, 2018

+ Our Lent theme this year is Remembrance, and amongst other important centenaries, a hundred years ago in 1918 women were finally permitted to vote. Not all women, but the tide had turned and within a decade men and women had equal voting rights. The right to vote was won at great cost: Emmeline Pankhurst and her daughters Christabel and Sylvia went to desperate lengths, campaigning relentlessly, going on hunger strike and being force fed. Their fellow campaigner Emily Davison was tragically killed for the cause, when she stepped in front of a horse at the Epsom Derby in 1913.

Their struggles were worthwhile: Since 1918 millions of women have exercised their vote, we've had two female prime ministers and numerous female MPs.

In the Church, one of the last remaining glass ceilings for women in this country was smashed in 2015 when the first female bishop was consecrated. The campaign to ordain women priests and then bishops was long and often acrimonious. It led to ill-feeling and like the suffragettes before them activists were accused of being aggressive, un-Christian, ignoring Biblical teaching and going against centuries of tradition.

The need for change continues. Most recently it's become apparent that in many occupations women are paid considerably less than their male counterparts for doing exactly the same job, and the #Metoo campaign has uncovered the sad truth that women have been and are still being sexually exploited by powerful men.

Throughout the world, girls are frequently either deprived of education or removed from school years earlier than their brothers.

Sadly, inequality is still rife and we should be grateful to those women who over the centuries have campaigned and continue to campaign for change. They are the ones we should urge our young people to look to as role models: brave, courageous women who are determined to fulfil their potential and make their voice heard. The sort of women who change lives, force political debate, travel to dangerous, inhospitable parts of the world to report on current affairs, strive to make the world a better place. Women who are prepared to push boundaries and take risks. Women who have always been around, though for much of history invisible, and who though separated by millennia, hold a great deal in common with the very first woman to live on earth, Eve, part of whose story we heard in the reading from Genesis, and who I'd like to consider a bit more closely today. Thousands of years after the account of creation was formulated in such a way that the people of Israel could accept it and understand it, Eve continues to have a bad press. Eve it is still claimed went badly wrong in the Garden of Eden and she is held responsible for humanity's fall from grace. It's Eve's fault that giving birth is so painful, she was a temptress and she is held up as an archetypal example of female disobedience. Was Eve really that bad?

Even a superficially closer inspection of the reading from Genesis can help us to tell Eve's story in a completely different way. * God had told Adam, the first man, not to eat fruit from the tree but for some reason the crafty serpent speaks to Eve, not Adam, asking her a leading question: Did God say, "you shall not eat from any tree in the garden?" Somehow, although God had spoken to Adam, Eve knows the answer – God told them that they mustn't eat from the tree in the middle of the garden, or even touch it, or they'll die. The serpent reassures Eve that God has lied. They won't die, they'll simply become wise, like God. Adam isn't included in this exchange, though presumably he's nearby. Eve takes another look at the tree, a delight to the eyes with tasty fruit. The serpent has reassured her that she won't die if she eats the fruit and understandably she thinks that to be wise would be highly desirable. So why not? She takes the fruit, eats it and gives some to Adam, who also eats. Adam is a silent, willing partner in the action. He too is prepared to push the limits of their God-

given freedom. The results are tragic, 'Then the eyes of both were opened, and they knew that they were naked; and they sewed fig leaves together and made loincloths for themselves.' Before they ate the fruit they had no need for clothing – they were innocent and they had nothing to hide.

Over the centuries commentators have called for Eve's unquestioning obedience. She should have done what God said, even though God hadn't spoken the command to her. Because of her actions, all human-kind is sinful, and it'll be a long time before humanity is redeemed. The woman has been blamed, and so all women are condemned.

In fact, Eve as the first woman is portrayed as someone with initiative and courage. She pushes against God's boundaries and she tests his authority in order to understand her freedom. She recognises the beauty of the tree and she is a seeker – she wants to be better, wiser. The serpent doesn't lie to Eve. It states its understanding, she listens and she makes a conscious choice. She eats because the tree is beautiful and she seeks wisdom, not because she is wilful and wicked. She is an adventurous risk-taker. She is courageous - she eats the fruit without really knowing what the future will hold. Eve's choice to eat the fruit is the first human act of independence. Eve is given inferior status because she considered her options, made her choice, and acted on her decision. She exercised power and became the scapegoat for humanity's sin.

If Eve has become the archetypal disobedient, wilful woman, fast-forward a few thousand years and we encounter the archetypal obedient, humble woman in the person of the Blessed Virgin Mary. Theologians compare these two women in what's known as 'reverse typology'. Typology is a way of understanding scripture by comparing events or persons along a scale of time. So Christ is the new Adam, Elijah is a type of John the Baptist, and so on. The reverse typology focussing on Eve and the BVM is fascinating, because in it Mary's correct actions reverse all that is wrong about Eve's disobedient actions. Mary doesn't disobey God, she weighs up his request to bear a Son and makes the right choice. Mary doesn't tempt her partner, Joseph, to do wrong. Mary doesn't aspire to be greater, or wiser or more powerful – she submits to God: *let it be unto me according to thy word*. Eve's sinful actions lead to the death of humanity, Mary's role as Mother of God give birth to redeemed humanity.

There's a prayer *Ave Maris Stella* (Hail Star of the Sea) dating back to the 9th century, which cleverly, through a pun in Latin, puts this reverse typology in a nutshell:

Taking that sweet Ave, Which from Gabriel came, Peace confirm within us, changing *Eva's* name.

Ave means Hail, as in Hail Mary, and Ave spelled backwards, is Eva, the Latin for Eve. So the poem is saying that by accepting Gabriel's message, Mary reversed all that Eve did.

The problem with all this 'bad disobedient Eve vs good obedient Mary' typology is that in life nothing is that clear cut and, crucially, the theologians who have promulgated these views have been almost exclusively male. Over the years it has suited patriarchal society and the church to blame a woman, Eve, and it has suited them to place a woman, Mary, on an unrealistic pedestal. The reality is that neither Eve nor Mary have been presented to us as real women, neither all good, nor all bad, but human.

If change is to continue and women the world over are ever to become the true equals of men, then we need more brave, courageous women to make a stand. Women who are willing to push boundaries and take risks. Women like the suffragettes, like Eve, like the BVM, women who know that like men they are made in the image of God and are equal in the eyes of God. Amen.

* *Bad Girls of the Bible*, The Pilgrim Press, 1999

I Peter 3:18-22

Shortly after midnight, on 28th December, 1694, Queen Mary II died at Kensington Palace. She was just 32, she had contracted smallpox. Her husband King William III was distraught and planned a swift private funeral. There was an outcry, Mary was popular, the nation wanted to mourn and William gave way. She was finally buried in March 1695. It was a bitterly cold day, the Thames was frozen, musicians struggled with the cold as they played for a funeral procession that marched from Whitehall to Westminster Abbey. And this morning you will hear a piece of music, composed by Purcell, for that funeral. *Thou knowest Lord, the secrets of our hearts.*

It is funeral music. A good choice for the first Sunday in Lent. Those of us marked with ash on Wednesday had the words *Remember that you are dust and to dust you shall return*, said over us. It is what God said to Adam and Eve when sentence was passed in Eden for their sin. It was an echo of the funeral service earth to earth, ashes to ashes, dust to dust. One of the old liturgies for Ash Wednesday pleaded with God to spare those that are penitent

Bless and sanctify these ashes that they may be a wholesome medicine to all them that humbly call upon thy holy Name

Ashes were not just a symbol of the grave, when these customs began you might have used ash as an alternative to soap. They are abrasive it can make you clean.

Do you see? On Wednesday we said something radical and disturbing. We died, we repented, we were washed, we changed. We face in a different direction today.

We are changed. Let's just explore that idea, with a little help from our second reading from I Peter. Our reading plunged us into the middle of a conversation

For Christ also suffered for sins once for all (I Peter 3:18)

But, if you want to know about a letter it is wise to begin at the beginning. I get letters that start 'Dear David, it was so good to see you...' I get others - Dear Rev Hole, (which is wrong on a number of counts) we invite you to an exhibition of vestments made entirely from hemp'. These letters are not the same. The way a letter is addressed is significant. I Peter begins,

Peter, an apostle of Jesus Christ, To the exiles of the Dispersion in Pontus, Galatia, Cappadocia...

Now, that is a very odd beginning indeed. Just occasionally, we get letters addressed to us in a way that supposed to remind us of something. A charity will write 'Dear Donor' as a way of telling us we have given to them before. If the Bishop writes to me 'Dear Dean Emeritus', I will know I have just been sacked. You can address a letter to confer a status. That is what is happening here. The letter is written to *the exiles*, or (closer translation) to *resident aliens*. It is the author is saying *you are people who do not quite belong; you are different*. More significantly these exiles live in something called *the Dispersion*. The Dispersion, also known as the *Diaspora*, is a technical term, it describes Jews living outside Israel. And that is odd, I Peter makes it sound as though it is written to Jews living outside Israel. It is not. This letter is

very clearly written to Gentiles, not to Jews. The letter begins by claiming that Christians are exiles, different from everyone else. And Christians are cuckoos in the nest, they have elbowed out the Jews, they are the new chosen race. Christians have inherited the old story and made it their own. It is a way of saying the Old Testament now belongs to us. I Peter is talking about *status*. Jesus has claimed us as his own and a story that stretches back to Abraham and Noah is now our story. We are changed. Whatever we thought about ourselves, Christ has made us something else, something more.

God has acted. Things are different. I Peter verse 3

Blessed be the God and Father of our Lord Jesus Christ! By his great mercy he has given us a new birth into a living hope...

Because we are changed, I Peter tells us we ought to behave differently. That is what most of the letter argues. So, for example

Do not adorn yourselves outwardly by braiding your hair... I Peter 3:3

Hair braiding, I can tell you, is not a temptation that I have struggled with much. Keeping my tongue from evil (which the letter also demands), that has been more of a challenge. I Peter is determined that we are changed. We are changed, we must know that and we must live up to that.

But, and this is the big idea, the change is a gift. Suppose I really want to be slim and admired and suppose we overlook the fact that I have left it a bit late. I could stop eating quite so much cheese, I could buy shorts and run up Park Street. This is hypothetical, you will never see me run up Park Street in shorts. I could make myself slim. I cannot make myself admired. Admiration has to be given. In just the same way in lent we can learn to be penitent. Being sorry is a discipline. It is actually quite hard to be properly sorry. We can be sort of sorry, as in 'I am sorry you were upset when I shouted at you'. We can be extravagantly and meaninglessly sorry as in 'I know I shouted at you I am useless and a worm and you should ignore me'. Being properly and precisely sorry is much more difficult. I can work at that. I can however only be forgiven by you and by God. I cannot make it happen.

I Peter knows that. Remember, this is the letter that begins

Blessed be the God and Father of our Lord Jesus Christ! By his great mercy he has given us a new birth into a living hope

God has acted and we are changed. God has done this and there are three things we must notice. First, as our reading began

For Christ also suffered for sins once for all

God acts, but what we see is Christ suffering. I told you this letter is all about how we should behave - no hair braiding no evil tongue. The letter has been arguing that we should behave well

Do not repay evil for evil or abuse for abuse I Peter 3:9

We should do that even if we suffer for it. We might suffer for it, *Christ also suffered for sins once for all*. The first thing that is being said is that we suffer and so does Christ. Christ was no hero on a charger, nor a magician with a spell, Christ was one of us. That is important. If all I have to say about God is that God does something and I am changed then that can leave me feeling like a pawn on a chessboard. But, it is not like that. I have seen God act and what I saw was Jesus suffering. I know something about God and the way God loves me, I feel something. That is part of what I have to think about in Lent

There is more, I Peter then says that when Christ suffers, he suffers as, *the righteous for the unrighteous*. That is another, a second, thing to say about the cross. First, we see the love of God. Then, second, we see the justice of God. Make no mistake, evil is real and evil is dangerous. Evil was abroad in Parkland, Florida where schoolchildren were gunned down. That evil is scandalous and it cries out for healing. Blaming Nikolas Cruz or a weird, national obsession with guns will not suffice. There are families in Florida in agony and redemption needs to be met that need. The second point about what God does, in Christ, is that he takes our place, *the righteous for the unrighteous*. What happened in Parkland will only begin to be bearable when we can look at it and tell a story that is not just about senseless violence. That is what has happened on the cross, a different story was told about us. Not just love, but sacrifice.

And thirdly, as I Peter explains,

He was put to death in the flesh, but made alive in the spirit

Not just love, not just sacrifice, but a change. Where we saw death we meet life, despair gives way to hope; sin meets redemption. I Peter really wants us to know this and that is why there was a strange sentence in our reading

he went and made a proclamation to the spirits in prison, who in former times did not obey, when God waited patiently in the days of Noah,

What does that mean? Well it is a bit mysterious and if you are at a loose end next month there are several PhDs to be done here, but it is probably a reference to a curious story in the Old Testament (remember this letter says the Old Testament is now *our* book). Genesis told a story about fallen angels who (in Noah's day) had children by the women of the earth. In Jewish literature, that turned into a great myth about the origin of evil spirits. I Peter knew that story and now it tells us that Christ triumphs even over those spirits. There is nowhere Christ's victory does not reach, no power of evil Christ has not overcome.

I know this has been a bit dense this morning. If you have been listening, you are in fact ready to start that PhD. I have not just been talking about I Peter, I have been talking about Lent. We turn Lent into a trip to the spiritual gym. It becomes something I do. Do that and you have Lent all wrong. We are changed, but it is God that does that. In Lent the story is not that I have done three good things and avoided a bad thing before teatime, but that God has given me hope. We do not come to the cathedral to be made slightly better; we come because we have been redeemed. In Lent we have time to repent and time to pray to the God who loves, acknowledge the Son who sacrifices himself and know the power of his victory. In Lent we can be changed.

Genesis 17: 1-7 and 15-16
Romans 4: 13-25
Mark 8: 27-38

It is not difficult as a parent to cause embarrassment to one's children.

Especially if they are of a certain age.

Suggesting, for example, that they might like a 'discotheque' for their birthday party and that Dad might like to be the DJ, that would cause embarrassment.

And, of course, any mention of sex causes embarrassment.

I rather enjoyed the other day suggesting to our 11-year old that maybe Mummy and Daddy should have another baby.

That definitely caused embarrassment, bordering on horror, I would say.

(And, just for the record, we have no aspirations in that department!)

But our reading from Genesis chapter 17 takes things to a whole new level.

As God makes an eternal covenant with Abraham, promising that Abraham will be 'exceedingly fruitful' and that he will give rise to a 'multitude of nations', he says that Sarah will give birth to a son.

The trouble is Sarah is 90 and Abraham is 100!

As good as dead, Paul says, rather rudely, in our reading from Romans.

And Sarah is barren.

It is surely a tricky one. No son, no covenant. God's promises become empty, hollow. And that's no good.

Abraham's reaction to the news that Sarah will give birth is rather lovely.

The relevant verse occurs just outside the passage that we heard.

But we hear in verse 17 that Abraham falls on his face, which seems about right.

After all, this is God who is speaking to him.

But then Abraham laughs, which seems somewhat lacking in decorum.

'Can a child be born to a man who is a hundred years old?', Abraham says to himself.

'Can Sarah, who is ninety years old, bear a child?', he goes on.

'Reasonable questions indeed', one might say!

And as one of the commentaries puts it, it is as if Abraham's body knows what to do – he falls on his face – but his mind hasn't quite caught up.

Either way, it is clear that Abraham is at the very least uncertain as to how to take what God is saying.

We get a similar reaction of incredulity – although this time laced with outrage – in our gospel reading from Mark, chapter 8 as Jesus begins the slow process of explaining to his disciples that the Son of Man must undergo 'great suffering' and 'be killed'.

It is so not what the disciples had anticipated.

How can such a death possibly be of God, possibly be victory?

Peter has answered the question about who Jesus is correctly – it would appear – by saying that Jesus is the Messiah.

But then Peter shows that he has no comprehension whatsoever of what this means, rebuking Jesus for speaking in this way, prompting Jesus in turn to give Peter a dressing down.

'Get behind me, Satan', he says in that famous phrase.

(And in the Greek the language Jesus uses is the same as when he rebukes the unclean spirit in Mark chapter 1.)

So, two reactions to the ways of God:

One doubting God. Surely this isn't possible.

We see that in Abraham's response to God's promise that Sarah will give birth to a son.

And another kind of response, which we see in Peter's misunderstanding of the kind of Messiah, the kind of King, Jesus is.

Failing to grasp where Jesus' life on earth is heading, and, in turn, what this means for anyone who wants to follow him.

Rejection, suffering, death.

The way of the cross.

And we can surely sympathise with both these responses.

How often the things of God seem impossible to us.

Death will be no more. Mourning and crying and pain will be no more.

The guns will fall silent in Syria.

Homelessness will be no more.

Hunger will be no more.

Prejudice towards people who are gay or foreign or disabled will be no more.

And how often too we fail to grasp what a life of following Christ implies.

Or if we catch a glimpse of this – the glorious truth – we struggle to live it out.

We put self before others. We go after worldly things. We have to be in control.

I know I do.

The other day I was having lunch with a colleague and I chose my words poorly, they belied an attitude which was inappropriate, and thankfully I was put right.

And suitably chastened, a little while later still smarting from the exchange, I heard these words not directed at me at all but it felt as if they were.

‘If it is not of God, God will tell us. If it is, grace upon grace’.

But can we live a life of obedience like this?

Trusting in God. Not looking out for self.

It is not easy.

But, just as Sarah did give birth to Isaac and Abraham did give rise to nations.

And Peter, impetuous Peter, became the rock on which the Church was built.

So, there is hope for us, the ones that Jesus came to save.

Lent, as we know, is a time of self-examination, penitence, self-denial and study.

An opportunity for a spiritual MOT, if you like.

But it is easy to let Lent pass us by, to pay it scant attention amid all the other pressures of life.

And arrive at Easter less prepared than we could be. And I speak for myself here.

So, can we all commit – even in the busy-ness of life – to do something however small to mark the season?

We need to pray for faith – for ourselves and for others.

Let us acknowledge the times when we have not believed.

When we have failed to grasp what following Christ means or have chosen a different path.

And with Abraham, let fall on our faces – even laugh – at the crazy promises God has made to us...

The God, who out of love for the world, sent his Son to die for us...

The God that gives life to the dead and calls into existence the things that do not exist.

And let's pray for those things that do not exist.

And let us recommit ourselves this Lent to a right relationship with God and with our neighbour.

And these are not just pious words.

This is hard graft. Eye of the needle stuff.

Obedient love.

The kind of love which very often goes against all our instincts, fallen creatures that we are.

Not my will but yours be done – this Lent.

It truly does require God's grace, a leap of faith, trusting that Jesus points us to a better path.

And that it is the way to life.

Amen.

John 19:25-27

Four days ago, I stood down there and watched my mother's coffin leave the cathedral. Thanks to Paul, who had to learn it, she was swept out on a surge of Wagnerian confidence, the *Prelude* from *Meistersingers*. That was for her benefit, not mine. My mother loved Wagner, she used to tell me that The Ring Cycle was the highest form of art, and I used to pull faces. She liked her music big and romantic. I have been looking at the CDs I brought away from her room – Mahler, Brahms, Prokofiev. She liked history with drums and flags, the Civil War, The Armada, Prince Rupert, Wellington.

I have been thinking about my mother - of course I have. Actually, I have been thinking about her *again*. I have been thinking differently. One of the odd effects of her dementia was that it was not just her memory that was impaired. I could not show her a picture from fifty years ago and ask her who was in it. I could not ask her about my childhood, or hers.

Before you begin to think this is all a bit close to the bone so close to her funeral, perhaps I should explain. My mother had lost her past pretty comprehensively. She was married for sixty years, but could not remember that. Telling her a story, three weeks I referred to my father. She looked blank, I pointed at his photograph and said, 'Michael, your husband, my father...'. She grinned, impishly, and said, 'He was your father? So why were you keeping that a secret?' She was also losing the power of speech, she could not find the words she wanted and conversations proceeded by guesswork or just petered out. Frankly it was pretty miserable and my mother told me over and over again that she wanted to die. This was a good death and a welcome death. It is not comfortable, of course it is not comfortable, but this chapter in her story needed this ending.

And now, because we are both released from the small room she inhabited, from the life that was getting smaller and smaller, I can think about her *again*. I can begin to see her more clearly.

And this morning that business of seeing clearly, is really important.

Let's change gear. The gospel reading today, one of the readings set for Mothering Sunday. It directed our attention to Jesus' mother, Mary,

standing near the cross of Jesus were his mother, and his mother's sister, Mary the wife of Clopas, and Mary Magdalene.

Four women and one man, John, the beloved disciple, *near* the cross. Right *under* the cross were the soldiers dicing for his tunic. John is writing carefully of the two groups - we are supposed to understand that it is 'on the one hand' those soldiers and 'on the other hand' these women. Compare and contrast, the soldiers paying a game, the women absorbed in the horror. They watch, they pay attention to the agony.

It is all about *seeing*.

Jesus saw his mother and the disciple whom he loved

Then our translation let us down a bit. What we got was Jesus saying,

"Woman, here is your son." ... "Here is your mother."

What he said was 'Look'. 'Woman, behold your son... Behold your mother'.

John has already told us,

I, when I am lifted up from the earth, will draw all people to myself." John 12:32

That has begun, these three women and one man drawn to the cross. What we have here is the beginning of the church. Jesus drawing all people to himself. Here in this horrified clutch of people near the cross. The church begins at the foot of the cross. That is one of the things we are supposed to know. It is the journey we have to make, salvation lies the other side of the cross.

It is something else, though, that we should think about today. It is this business of *looking*. Jesus sees his mother, he tells his mother 'behold', *look*. Jesus, Mary and John caught in that triangular gaze. *Look*, 'behold'. They see each other, they *really* see each other.

I worry about mother's day, it is a good thing to do, but there is a concern. On Friday, the Church of England reported the results of a survey to find the ideal mother. We make motherhood wonderful and then we make it impossible and unreal. Four per cent of those asked named their own mother, as the ideal mother, but five per cent thought it was Diana Princess of Wales. The *ideal* mother? Really? What would the *ideal* Dean look like - for all time and all places? And just suppose you found such a paragon which of would want to have a cup of coffee with him or her? I had to preach to Rowan Williams a few weeks ago, it was fine, but I did feel slightly second rate. I am very glad I never had the *ideal* mother.

It is not an ideal we need. What we do need is to see clearly. I am on uncertain ground here; I am not any kind of expert on motherhood. I am a father and one of the things I remember about my children - especially when they were small - was the intensity of their gaze. I think it is that might be even more true of motherhood. Not always, but quite often, a mother and a small child have looked at one another, they have really looked. Think of those paintings of Virgin and child and their mutual gaze. The business of looking, the significant business of seeing someone else, seeing *otherness* begins for many of us with our mothers.

There is a rather startling wedding sermon by Rowan Williams, startling because, given that it was a wedding, it was serious and intense. He talked about the lifting of a veil, at an old-fashioned wedding, and about bride and groom looking at one another

Unveiling, undeception, clear and just vision... because there can be no love without truth. Without clear vision love...is a fantasy. And there can be no truth without love. Without trust and tenderness and courtesy, truth will vanish, behind the walls of fear and pain.

That has to be right love and truth. Not an ideal mother, absolutely not the terrible conceit of an idea mother, but love and truth. The steady gaze near the cross that takes in all that could be seen there and does not turn away. Love and truth.

I know this is a slightly odd sermon for Mothering Sunday. This is an odd week for me. I do think that our church began at the foot of the cross as Christ, Mary and John looked steadily

at one another. I do think I am free now to look at my own mother again. I can and will remember that she loved me. I shall tell the truth about a relationship that was not frankly, ideal. I am free to remember that she was not an ideal mother, but she did help me to see that there is otherness in the world.

Children and mothers, children and fathers, brothers and sisters, lovers, friends, when they see one another know that they are not the centre of the turning world. We can see and be seen, not just by mother, but by God, who knows the truth of me and will love me still

Making my mother ideal, trying to be ideal myself is a fool's errand, it will always be a lie. It is truth that makes love possible and it is love makes the truth bearable. Truth and love for my mother, for me, for you.

So on my first Mothering Sunday without my mother, thanks for the Wagner, and the drums and flags of history, and the big piano concertos, and the books she read and let me notice too her faults and foibles. The truth that makes love possible and the love that makes truth bearable.

Jeremiah 31: 31-34
Hebrews 5: 5-10
John 12: 20-33

We wish to see Jesus.

So said some Greeks, as we heard in today's gospel reading.

Among those in Jerusalem for the festival of the Passover although they may just have been soaking up the atmosphere.

The Greeks spoke to the apostle Philip.

And I rather like what happened next.

Philip speaks to Andrew, and then Philip and Andrew decide that perhaps they both ought to go and tell Jesus – 'sorry, boss but there are some Greeks to see you'.

Canon Nicola and I do something similar when we need to speak to the Dean!

Today marks the start of Passiontide.

Lent continues on.

But we step up a gear, journeying ever closer to the foot of the cross, grappling with what that means and what that implies.

We never hear very much about the Greeks.

Even whether they get their audience with Jesus.

But it appears that Jesus' mind is on other things.

'The hour has come', Jesus says (which would probably just have confused the visiting Greeks!).

'The hour has come for the Son of Man to be glorified.'

'My soul is troubled', Jesus continues.

'Should I say: 'Father save me from this hour?'

'No,' Jesus says, 'it is for this reason that I have come'.

And then: 'Unless a grain of wheat falls into the earth and dies, it remains just a single grain; but if it dies it bears much fruit.'

'If it dies, it bears much fruit'.

What needs to die in us to bear fruit?

That's my question: what needs to die in us to bear fruit?

Christ-like fruit.

This week – on Wednesday – as part of our social justice programme here at Bristol Cathedral we held a public meeting on homelessness.

The Chapter House was packed.

It was the rowdiest meeting that I think I have ever been to.

(and as the chair, this was certainly challenging!)

Some of the people at the meeting were themselves homeless and in some cases they arrived with all their worldly goods, and in one case I even noticed the face of a dog poking out from a carrier bag.

It was good to see such diversity at the Cathedral!

At the meeting, we were specifically addressing the issue of how one strikes a balance between compassion and kindness towards people on the streets – people who are often vulnerable and the hard fact that at times rules and regulations governing what people can and can't do have to be enforced.

Tents on College Green, that kind of thing.

There is some controversy surrounding this.

And it falls to an organisation called StreetWise to enforce the rules although only after all other 'softer' avenues have been exhausted.

But compassion and rules

How do we get this right?

And from the off, the meeting was volatile.

There was a lot of anger at the meeting.

'Never mind the housing shortage,' someone shouted, 'what about all the empty housing around now?'

'Rich people don't care. The rich people take everything. That's the problem.'

And to the speaker from Streetwise: 'Why are you moving on me when I'm just selling the big issue...I'm not anti-social. What's anti-social about selling the big issue.'

And so it went on...interruption after interruption.

And for many of us present – all of us perhaps – the occasion was quite disturbing.
Unsettling.

Alarming.

And the temptation for all of us – surely – is to turn away.

To extricate ourselves from such an unruly and intimidating situation.

And to back off.

I certainly had an element of foreboding in the days leading up to the event, and as the audience gathered on the night.

'Father, save me from this hour'.

So I understand the temptation to turn away – as does Jesus.

But turning away, backing off, is not the path of discipleship.

It is not the way of the cross.

This week as I have talked and reflected with many of you about Wednesday's events, I have had a profound, profound sense that this is where God wants us.

Yes, it is messy.

Yes, it is disorderly, threatening, unsettling.

But it is where we need to be.

We need to hear the anger.

(And not rationalise whether it is fair or reasonable or whether it is right or wrong.
Just to hear it.)

And if we are unsettled, worried or anxious in this situation – or indeed other situations you may be experiencing in your own lives – we need to ask ourselves why this is.

Why are we unsettled, worried or anxious?

What needs to die in us if we are to bear fruit?

What needs to die in the institutional church if Jesus is to reign?

It is hard listening to anger.

When you are prosperous, live in a nice house, with carpets and soft furnishings, central heating, and with food on the table.

It is hard listening to the anger of people who don't have these things.

It is hard because though the issues are inevitably complicated – of course they are – and individual lives are complicated – we know deep down that the anger is justified.

That the things they are talking about are not right.

And people like you and me probably do sleep too soundly in our beds.

And yet, in the complexity of the world and the complexity of our lives, we don't know how to fix things, to make things better.

That is an uncomfortable place to be.

What needs to die in us to bear fruit?

What does?

And while it is not really for me to tell you what needs to die.

That is between you and your God.

I will tell you this.

For me, what needs to die is my sense that I can turn my face away.

I cannot – not if I want to stay faithful to Christ.

'Father, save me from this hour.'

'No, it is for this reason that I have come to this hour', Jesus replies to his own question.

And what else needs to die in me?

What else needs to die in me is any sense that I am innocent.

I am not innocent.

I am complicit in the sins of the world.

I play a part in putting Jesus on the cross.

And what needs to die in me still?

What needs to die in me is any sense that I can sort matters out myself – whether it be homelessness, refugees, Russia or anything else.

I cannot sort things out. I cannot.

And that place of powerlessness is not a comfortable place to be.

No wonder we want to run away.

But I believe – passionately – from the depths of my being that if we can remain present, standing in that costly place that says we cannot turn away, that says we are not innocent, that stops looking to cast judgement on the victims or the perpetrators, or to defend ourselves, and if we can embrace that place that says I cannot solve matters, then we will create a space where Jesus can come in.

And we will catch a glimpse of glory.

‘The hour has come for the Son of Man to be glorified.’

I’ve just started reading a book by the theologian Miroslav Volf.

It’s called ‘Exclusion and Embrace’.

It reflects on the aftermath of the war in the former Yugoslavia and some of the awful things that happened there as community turned on community.

And Volf says: take care with the language of victim and perpetrator, of liberation and freedom.

(Don’t abandon it but take care; such language is not always helpful. It can get in the way, prevent healing.)

And instead Volf says: open your arms wide for the other.

Open them wide.

And then wait. Wait.

May be they will come towards you, may be they won’t.

That’s not in your gift. It could take years.

But if they come towards, embrace them in all their strangeness, their strange customs, their strange clothes, their strange smells, and their strange food.

And then release them.

Don’t hold them in bondage yet again but let them go...as a child of God unique and precious in His sight.

Are we ready to do this at Bristol Cathedral?

Are we ready to embrace the homeless person in our midst or any other stranger in our midst?

Are we willing to do this?

Remember it is a journey where death comes first.

But it is also the path to life, abundant life.

I sense we have drawn close to something precious this week here at Bristol Cathedral.

Let us not turn away.

Let us listen for God's voice in the days ahead.

May we listen to each other, people like us and people not like us, fellow disciples on the road.

And may God give us strength this day and always. Amen.