

28th March, Maundy Thursday 2013

The Eucharist of the Chrism and Renewal of Vows

Isa 64.1-4; 2 Cor 4.5-12; John 15.1-17

“My Father is glorified by this, that you bear much fruit and become my disciples.” (John 15.8)

Last week saw the inauguration of the ministry of the new Pope Francis and the new Archbishop of Canterbury, Justin. Both emphasise service and humility, recognising that no matter what it looks like on large church occasions, it is not convincing in our day to proclaim the authority of institution and hierarchy. The Church today has much damage to repair.

So we recognise the authority of a Pope who declines to live in the grand apartment and chooses simpler rooms and today will wash the feet of prisoners.

Standing inside the door of Canterbury Cathedral, in dialogue with a young girl, Archbishop Justin declared,

“I am sent as Archbishop to serve you, to proclaim the love of Christ and with you to worship and love him with heart and soul, mind and strength.

Our new Archbishop, Eton and Cambridge, successful in business said,

“I come knowing nothing except Jesus Christ and him crucified, and in weakness and fear and in much trembling.”

Pope and Archbishop exemplified St Paul’s insight that we have this treasure in clay jars, so that it may be clear that this extraordinary power comes from God and not from us. (2 Cor 4.7)

The trouble is that so often weakness shows only as weakness whereas followers of Christ are people who having been forgiven much, love much.

“Abide in me as I abide in you”, Jesus said in that long discourse in John’s Gospel. He is speaking to the disciples after washing their feet and giving them a new commandment to “love one another as I have loved you”. Four disciples are named:

Judas went out into the night.

Simon Peter said he wanted to follow Jesus and will lay down his life for him. “Will you lay down your life for me?” asked Jesus in reply. “Very truly, I tell you, before the cock crows, you will have denied me three times.”

Thomas said, “Lord we do not know where you are going. How can we know the way?”

And Philip said, “Lord, show us the Father and we will be satisfied”.

Having travelled with Jesus, in various ways these disciples didn’t ‘get it’; just like us.

We are disappointed and feel let down when the Church today doesn’t ‘get it’ - we are all too human.

But the ineptness of the disciples is met not with condemnation but with reassurance and encouragement:

“Do not let your hearts be troubled. Believe in God, believe also in me”

“I will not leave you orphaned”

“I will ask the Father, and he will give you another Advocate, to be with you forever”

“Abide in my love”

The Archbishop of Canterbury’s Lent Book by Ben Quash is called ‘Abiding’. In it he uses a typology developed by Sam Wells of Christ *working with* and *working for* his beloved people. Ben Quash writes:

Jesus’s active three years of ministry, in which he calls and trains his disciples to continue his work in the power of the Spirit after he has gone, can be understood as God, in Christ, *working with* his people: bringing them along with him as he teaches and getting them to help him in his mission.

... from the moment of his arrest in Gethsemane until his... death.... can be seen as God, in Christ, *working for* his people. Jesus must fulfil this part of his ministry alone. No one can share this part of the journey with him, and where he is going we cannot come. This is what traditional doctrines of the atonement have explored as its ‘substitutionary’ aspect: Jesus takes our place; he is for us in a work that we cannot accomplish on our own behalf.

But [there’s] another way in which God is in Christ – not the three years of active ministry, nor the week of lonely suffering, but the thirty years before Jesus’s public ministry... without which ... Jesus’s *working with* and *working for* could not have happened. It is *being with* his people..

Ben Quash, Abiding, Bloomsbury 2012, pp78-80

This *being with* God’s people is essential if we are to love, as Christ has loved us. Sam Wells names this “the Nazareth time”, about which we know so little. It culminated with Jesus in the synagogue at Nazareth reading from the scroll of the prophet Isaiah:

“The Spirit of the Lord is upon me because the Lord has... sent me to bring good news to the oppressed” (Isa 61.1)

Ben Quash points out that we don’t use the word ‘abide’ very much in ordinary conversation, but we do sometimes say, “I can’t abide them” when we don’t like someone. “Abide in me”, Jesus said, “and I in you” and he taught us to love our neighbour, including our enemies.

The late Daphne Jones, for over 50 years a lay parish worker in Poplar, where she worked alongside the Nursing Sisters who inspired ‘Call the Midwife’, asked me as a new incumbent in the parish next door, “Do you visit, dear? Oh I am so glad. They’ve almost stopped it here. They spend all day looking at their computer screens thinking that what they are doing is for the kingdom of God”. Like Martha we are distracted by many tasks and hide behind the in-tray rather than build abiding relationships in the manner of Jesus Christ.

All ministry and mission is about relationships in a particular time and a particular place, which is why we're talking about the personality and character of the diocese, of what it means for us to abide in Christ and him in us. I have begun to receive some marvellous responses to 'Let Us Talk' with people telling about the ways in which the Gospel is being lived and made known in their place.

In the last few weeks I have licensed chaplains to the law courts here in Salisbury, a complicated place of judgement and truth, and to Alabaré, a regional charity working with homeless people and others in great need. With the Dean and Canon Mullaly and a few other clergy, I have joined the Mothers' Union and admitted over 60 new members, five of us men (which some will say is a category error but the MU got over that one a long time ago, finding precedent in their founder, Mary Sumner's husband, working with her).

One of our Mothers' Union branches recently asked what their members do in the community. Besides a whole lot of church activities, including raising money for the Sudan, they also ran the Village Youth Club, a Community Cafe, were School Governors and Community Library Helpers. We know that people from the churches keep the food banks going, run women's refuges, care for homeless people, prisoners and ex prisoners, those who are sick, the elderly and those who have fallen on hard times. Most would say, it's just what you do for your neighbours; *and* it's done by Christians who seek to love God and our neighbour as ourselves. It is an act of witness.

In truth 'Let Us Talk' has also produced a few very critical letters including one that came anonymously and said that the Church seemed to be organised for the benefit of the clergy rather than the other way round.

For the vine to be fruitful there has to be pruning and judgement.

I like the way George Fox, the Founder of the Quakers wrote a letter to Ministers in 1656 from his imprisonment in Launceston Gaol:

Bring all into the worship of God. Plough up the fallow ground... And none are ploughed up but he who comes to the principle of God in him which he hath transgressed. Then he doth service to God; then the planting and the watering and the increase from God cometh... And this is the word of the Lord God to you all, and a charge to you all in the presence of the living God: be patterns, be examples in all countries, places, islands, nations, wherever you come, that your carriage and life may preach among all sorts of people, and to them; then you will come to walk cheerfully over the world, answering that of God in every one.
(George Fox (1624–1691))

In John's Gospel there's a great deal about the glory of God. In the great Prologue that we read at Christmas:

"And the Word became flesh and dwelt among us, and we have seen his glory, the glory of a father's only son, full of grace and truth." (John 1.14)

Over these next three days that is we will see: the glory of God come among us in loving service, *working with us*; of Christ lifted up on the cross, *working for us*; and this being possible because of his *being with us*. Here is the glory of God, in the transformation of the ordinary, through acts of service and love.

The ineptness of the disciples is met with words of reassurance: "Abide in my love". "My Father is glorified in this, that you bear much fruit and become my disciples"

And it is here, at the start of the great three days that we gather together to renew our ordination vows and rededicate ourselves in loving service of him who calls us; to whom be the glory now and for ever.

Amen