

London Meeting, Grosvenor Chapel, South Audley Street, London W1  
Sermon to Interchurch Families Sat 20 March 2010

A Victorian bishop of the Church of England once wrote an unusual will. It was very short and in verse, and he asked for it to be read to his clergy on his death. It ran:

*Tell all my priests when I am gone  
O'er me to shed no tears.  
For I shall be no deader then  
Than they have been for years.*

Well, it is true that not all Anglican clergy are exactly fireflies in the dark night of the world. I used to know one vicar whose motto in life was “start each day with a smile – get it over with”. We also know that we have been guilty of being a bit saggy from time to time, the Derek Nimmo priest, the bland leading the bland, leading to the Church of England being thought of as the lowest common denomination. And yet, I am proud to be a Christian in the Anglican tradition, for all its blurred edges, its reverence and its rebellion. And you, I hope, are proud of your marvellous living tradition and for the ways it has, and still, teaches souls to fly nearer the living God, teaches them to dive deeper into his living Mystery. And even though our Churches have their differences and a fractured communion, and we know that, nevertheless for Christian people water is thicker than blood. Our baptism creates a family, the Church, a school for relating: teaching us how to relate to God, to ourselves and to each other. Our shared baptism makes any indifference towards each other a scandal.

As well as our baptism, what we also share is the recognition of Cuthbert, that of the authenticity, the living truth, the freshness of Jesus Christ. When we talk of fearing God it is not because God is a nasty tyrant ready to get us, like some zealous traffic warden with a ticket of sin to slap on us. We adore God because he is real, and our surfaces and shams, the masks that have begun to eat into our faces, the deceits and self-deceits are all exposed in that reality. That is why ultimately judgment is a liberation, because our mess, chaos and destructive habits are exposed and named for what they are. What a relief that ultimately is. And so that piercing reality of God finds a body-language, a living expression, in Christ - who comes not so much to answer all our questions but to question all our answers, to lovingly but relentlessly ask of us who we have become. His Gospel, his good news, is clear: God loves us just the way we are and he loves us so much he doesn't want us to stay like that. When he bids us follow him, we begin a life of slow but gradual conversion.

Now this is a truth we share. It is the transforming truth of our Christian faith. It is a truth that we should not be apologetic about. It is the truth that it is the pulse of our communities.

And for you and me, it is clear that we are spending our lives in a world where people are oppressed, trapped, nervous and anxious; a time where we are in danger of losing wisdom because we are distracted by surplus information, a time of spending money we don't have on things we don't want in order to impress people we don't like, even in recession lots to live with, little to live for - and we need and yearn for words that resonate, resuscitate, refresh us, words that knead hope back hope into our humanity, and for relationships that are deep. We are also living at a time when there are so many voices shouting at us: “be beautiful”, “be thin”, “be rich”, “vote for me”, “eat

quickly”, “don’t trust them”, “get a better car” (in adverts, is the man having an affair with the woman or the car?). And because our humanity is fractured in these and so many ways, we also have loud voices inside ourselves telling us things: beating ourselves up or showing off – both so often variations on the feeling that “I’m not loveable”. But in the Gospels we learn that to be baptised is to begin to listen, not to the story being told about us by the commentators or the fashionable, and not even to the stories we tell ourselves, but to begin to listen to the story God is telling us about us, to hear his favour, to learn his lesson that we are cherished and for always. Once in a school assembly I asked the children what happened on Maundy Thursday, Good Friday and Easter Sunday. They knew! When I asked what had happened on the Saturday though only one girl put her hand up – “I think Jesus went into hell to look for his friend Judas” she said. That is the Gospel -to reach for people in their private hells, of others or their own making, to reach and hold them with hope. And it begins with ourselves, letting him enter our own inauthenticity.

There is one last thing we share, and I end with reminding us of its vitality on this feast of Cuthbert the shepherd. I am originally from Shropshire and a local shepherd was talking with me once and I asked him about his crook. My boss the bishop has one of those I said. Do you use it to hook a sheep’s head and pull him in? No, no, he said. The crook is for sticking deep into the ground so that you can hold on and learn to be so still that the sheep learn to trust you. As we seek to journey with the Good Shepherd we need to learn the insight of prayer, that allows us to be still, dig into the roots, the depths, the ground, humus, source of humility, and begin to see things as they really are. Prayer is like sitting in the sunlight. God’s light allows you to see new things and you begin to position yourself so that you can be defrosted a little more each time.

Prayer is our shared vocation. The Gospel is our shared truth. Baptism is our shared beginning. God is our shared end. May he bless you, brothers and sisters in Christ. And please pray for us as we do for you.

(c)Canon Mark Oakley  
Priest in Charge