

Bishop Colin's Farewell Sermon 3rd Dec 2007

FAREWELL SERMON COVENTRY CATHEDRAL ADVENT EVE, 1ST DECEMBER, 2007

'Blessed are those who hunger and thirst for righteousness, for they will be filled.'

I was out shopping early this morning in Sainsbury's, as one does in retirement. As I wandered down the aisles I was trying to compile a mental list of 'thank you's' as a way of starting this sermon. By the time I'd got to the frozen chickens I'd given up! So a general, but hugely sincere thank you to all the friends who have come today, from the diocese and beyond. And thank you to those from the cathedral who have arranged and who are hosting this service. I simply cannot tell you how much Veronica and I are going to miss both this diocese and you, the people. Every parish that I've been to, and that's virtually all 244 of them, has offered a warm welcome and generous hospitality, but none more so than this cathedral. Insofar as a bishop has any spiritual rootedness in what is a very peripatetic lifestyle, this cathedral has been the special place where I have always found it easy to be myself and feel included as part of the family. Not every diocesan bishop can say that and I know myself to be specially blessed. This is the place of some fantastic memories; amongst them, it's the place where our four children have been married. Nine grandchildren are here today contributing to the worship in their own particular way! Four weddings but, mercifully, no funeral. It might well have been different were it not for the vigilant care of two doctors, one who spotted my lung cancer over four years ago and another who operated on it. Their skill and your prayer are things for which I will always remain profoundly grateful.

In recent weeks I have been asked on numerous occasions what I regard as the highlight of my time in Coventry. That's a very hard question to answer. How, for example, do you weigh the honour of preaching at the hugely high profile ecumenical service in the restored Frauenkirche in Dresden; how do you weigh that honour against confirming a man dying in his own bed, a man who, after sixty years in the spiritual wilderness, has rediscovered his faith in Jesus? Or how do you compare meeting characters like Tariq Aziz in Baghdad with sitting in this amazing building, listening to an organ recital by Kerry Beaumont? How do you start to calibrate the kindnesses and the courtesies that Veronica and I have received from so many people, to say nothing of the wonderful quality of colleagues that I have been working with? Bishops have not always been so fortunate. I came across this very telling quotation the other day from our local novelist, George Elliot. This is from Middlemarch, and Mrs Cadwalader is complaining about her clergyman husband:

'He will even speak well of the Bishop, though I tell him it's unnatural for a beneficed clergyman to do so. What can one do when a husband attends so little to the common decencies?'

Whatever George Elliot's experiences were of Nuneaton in the 19th century such attitudes are rare nowadays in the Diocese of Coventry!

To be honest, the least troublesome way of preparing this sermon would have been to list the unbelievable range of privileges that have come my way in the last ten years. That would have filled a twenty minute slot quite nicely! Some of you will have heard John Petty, our former Dean, arguing with me about who had the best job in the Church of England. You're wrong, John; it's me!

So what do I regard as the highlight of my time in Coventry? I want to answer that by telling you in very simple terms what it is that I shall value most about these last ten years, and it's this. It is the ways in which I have seen God at work, and found him to be so much bigger than I had ever imagined.

Let me return to the Beatitudes, those, profoundly challenging words from today's reading, to illustrate what I mean.

'Blessed are those who hunger and thirst for righteousness, for they will be filled'.

Righteousness is one of those portmanteau words that has a variety of meanings. First, it speaks of the need for the individual to be in a right relationship with God. Righteousness is not something we can earn, turn on or manufacture. It comes through faith and as a gift. To use shorthand, it is the Cross of Christ which enables this to happen and it is the Cross of Christ which remains the spiritual reference point for the rest of our lives. Those who 'long for righteousness' are those who are able to say with St. Paul that 'Jesus is the son of God who loved me and gave himself for me'. More often than not this kind of longing goes hand in hand with an awareness of our own spiritual poverty, the sort of awareness that enables us to trust in God and not in ourselves, to quote the Coventry Litany.

The services of Confirmation that I have conducted over the past ten years, and indeed before, have invariably included some for whom faith is a relatively recent experience, and that applies to teenagers through to octogenarians. Quite frequently these are people who have been drawn into the life of the Church through an Alpha course, or something similar, usually through the love of friends who want to share with others what they themselves have found to be true. This longing for righteousness, this yearning for the ultimate reality that is God, will not go away for reasons that St. Augustine articulated centuries ago.

But righteousness is not simply a matter of personal piety; it is also about longing to see right prevail, about justice. Balanced Christianity is not only about the King; it is also about the Kingdom. Our threefold mission statement as a diocese makes it clear that we exist to worship God, to make disciples AND to transform society. This last point not only challenges the ghetto mentality of the Church to stop looking inwards, but makes it clear that God is concerned for the whole of human society and not just our little bit of it.

We pray with great regularity that God's Kingdom will 'come on earth, as it is in heaven'. And the wonder is that occasionally we really do catch glimpses of that happening, when the flimsy veil that we call reality is drawn back, and we gasp at the eternal reality that is God's Kingdom, that inter-locking of heaven and earth. I've seen this in the amazing dedication of those working with CORD, our local relief and development agency, working in some of the most desperate, war-torn areas of the globe. I've seen it in Dudley Lodge where the care for families that are fragmented and struggling speaks so eloquently of God's compassion for the broken and discarded. I've seen it in the practical involvement of the Arthur Rank Centre with farmers and agricultural workers who are under such pressure that they top the suicide ratings of the country. This longing for righteousness, to see justice prevail is not an add-on to faith but a natural outworking of it. And it is an emaciated kind of faith which has no room for it!

'Blessed are the poor in spirit, the meek, the hungry, the merciful...those who hunger and thirst for righteousness'

But it's peacemaking that Coventry is most famous for, and it's the peacemakers who are blessed by being called 'children of God'. That is to say, there is something of the very character of God, something of the divine DNA in the business of peacemaking. In their different ways Andrew White, Justin Welby and Stephen Davies, to name but a few, have taught me so much about all this. To see something of God's Kingdom dawning after the violent massacres in Kaduna, the atomic brinkmanship of North Korea, or the civil war on the streets of Hillfields has been truly awesome. The distinctively Christian take on conflict resolution has always been that it is about making peace and not simply about calming things down. God's peace is wholistic, dynamic and creative.

It was Richard Harries, the former Bishop of Oxford who coined a phrase that to my mind sums up one of the crucial elements in this process. He called it 'interpretative charity'. Most conflict situations, however complex they may be, nearly always polarise into two camps. What we need to do in such cases is to make three basic assumptions about those to whom we are opposed. First, we acknowledge that they, like us, are made in the image of God and therefore are precious to God. That means treating them with respect as fellow human beings. Secondly, we assume that they are rational, intelligent human beings and that they have thought through their arguments. That means listening with courtesy to what they have to say. Thirdly, we assume that their views, however bizarre they may seem to us, are held with sincerity. That means that we challenge them in love for what they are rather than simply rubbishing them. Sudanese teddy bears might be a good example of this!

This is all good stuff when we apply it to Northern Nigeria or the Middle East, specially if we are in the privileged position of a mediator. But how do we deal with it when it comes home to roost and we find ourselves in the thick of it? Let's be clear; the issues that are proving so divisive throughout Africa and North America are going to impact on the C of E, and there are signs that this is already happening. Maintaining the unity of the Spirit in the bond of peace will be no easy matter, but these challenges could prove to be, not a cause of disintegration and death but a catalyst for real spiritual growth. I am convinced that this cathedral and this diocese with their historic commitment to the work of reconciliation could continue to have a very significant role in all this. I do pray it will do so!

What will I take with me into retirement? The thrill of seeing God at work in his people and in his world, of discovering that God is so much bigger than I had realised. I'm so glad that we meet for this service today on the Eve of Advent, what for me is the most exciting of all the seasons of the Church's year, the season that reminds us that God has a future for his people, the season above all others that is characterised by hope. Like you I shall pray like mad for the meeting of the CNC on Monday week. Like you I shall await with eager anticipation the announcement of my successor. And like you I hope to continue serving King Jesus and working for the coming of his Kingdom. For now, I thank God for you and, in the words of St. Paul, I commend you to God and to the message of his grace.

+Colin Coventry