

A Humble Moment by Jeremy Begbie 8th Jul 2008

by Jeremy Begbie

A sermon preached at the Ordination and Consecration of
The Reverend Canon Dr Christopher Cocksworth to be Bishop of Coventry, and The Venerable Dr
David Thomson to be Bishop of Huntingdon

Southwark Cathedral, London, 3 July 2008

John 20.24-29



Not so long ago on prime-time TV, Sir Alan Sugar had a humble moment. While some of us have occasional *senior* moments, Sir Alan has occasional *humble* moments. He was talking on the BBC's *Money Programme* about the 1980s, about how they designed the fantastically successful Amstrad home computer (You'll remember those cream plastic boxes that took a lifetime to start up) Evidently, one day his colleagues told him: "look, Sir Alan; we've got the right motherboard and disk drive and casing, and the rest. But if it's ever going to sell, it's going to need super-fast software, and in America they make...." But Sir Alan butted in. "Don't talk to me about software! Talk to me about something I can see and *touch*, something I can look at and get my hands on. I'll pay for transistors and tubes and screens. But I'm not putting my money into some fluffy software." And no doubt he went on to say something like: "why should I believe you anyway? Why should I take your word for it that it's going to work? Get me more data, more research, more hard evidence; *then* I'll invest in it." (In fact he had all the information he needed, but he still wasn't going to take their word for it.)

Just this once, though, he decided *to trust them*, and invest in something he couldn't see and couldn't touch. A humble moment. And the rest, as they say, is history. (Indeed – in every sense; they stopped making them 20 years ago.)

Maybe Sir Alan's never done a psychological profile test. But if he did, he'd almost certainly come out with a high 'S' on the Myers Briggs indicator. S stands for sensing. Sensing types believe in things they can see, touch, hear, taste and smell. They crave immediacy, things immediately in front of them; present, concrete, *there*. They believe in things they can check out for themselves – 'up close and personal'. And that makes them slow to trust what others say; wary, on guard. When they're with others, it's more a case of 'up close and *impersonal*'. Alan Sugar admits that once he sent his wife a birthday card, signed "Best wishes, Sir Alan Sugar". Sensing types are cagey about trusting others, even close relatives; they're always wanting more

evidence, more information (more than they really need). *They always need to know more than they need to know.*

Most of us have known this type:

- those who *have* to go back and check the front door is locked, even though you've told them twice *you've* locked it;
- those who want to go over the balance sheet yet again, even though the auditor's already approved it;
- those who won't believe Nadal crushed Andy Murray until they've *seen* the highlights *themselves*

People who need to know more than they need to know. People like Thomas (whose day it is today). Thomas, bumping into the disciples a few days after Jesus' death. "We've seen the Lord," they tell him. *Ten* of them tell him; and they can hardly contain their excitement. "We've seen him!" But that's not enough for the hard-nosed Thomas; the S-type. He's not going to invest in anything so precarious, so fluffy. "Unless I see the nail-marks in his hands, and *put my finger* in the nail-marks, and *put my hand* in his side, I won't believe". Unless I *see* and *touch*.

Thomas *could* just trust his friends, and he's got every *reason* to trust them. But he won't. He wants more than hearsay. He needs to know more, *he needs to know more than he needs to know.*

This morning, we're honoured to witness Chris and David being ordained and consecrated Bishop. The word 'bishop' in the New Testament translates a word meaning 'overseer'. A bishop oversees. But there are two types of overseer.

Type 1 is the Thomas kind (at least, the Thomas we've just met). Type 1 Bishops need to know more than they need to know. They oversee by *over-seeing*. By trying to see *more....*than they need to see. Micro-managers, we might call them; 'control-freaks' would be the less polite term. This is the Bishop who believes not that the *Devil* is in the detail, but that *God* is (along with the Bishop). He can't bear the thought of taking anyone's word for anything, so he develops an insatiable desire to be immersed in every last iota of business himself. Every meeting is attended, every Church magazine scrutinised, every CV memorised. All must be transparent to the episcopal gaze. ("Unless I see and touch...") He sort of hovers over a Diocese – to pick up words from a Psalm, "a very present help in trouble" (although here it's more a case of "very present and more trouble than he's worth").

His immediate staff live in a kind of perpetual edginess. They just want to get on with the job, but they have the distinct impression they're being constantly monitored, checked up on. And his clergy often feel much the same way – not quite trusted by the Big Brother with the mitre, the man "unto whom all hearts [must be] open", and "all desires known" and "from whom no secrets are [to be] hidden".

Even our friends Chris and David might need to be careful here. As I think of my dear colleague Chris Cocksworth, I think of someone with a quite awesome grasp of detail. If you're from Coventry, you need to know this man can spot a spelling mistake like an eagle spots a mouse from two hundred feet. Not for him a quick glance at a draft service sheet before getting on with bigger things. He cares so much about people, he wants us to have the very best every time. And that means loving attention to the particular.

But even Chris may find he's sometimes tempted to oversee by trying to *over-see*, by trying to know more than he needs to know.

David Thompson I know less well (something for which he's quickly becoming very grateful). But David's a medieval historian, with an expertise in the grammar of the middle English period. And people like that have a habit of wanting to know more than *anyone* really needs to know.

But there's another kind of overseer, another kind of bishop. A Type 2 bishop. The type Thomas became no doubt, that day when he joined the disciples behind locked doors. And Jesus appeared again. "Go on, Thomas, put your finger here, and put your hand into my side." But he doesn't have to. There's nothing in the text about Thomas doing any of that. Nothing of the Caravaggio drama here, with all eyes on Thomas driving his finger into the open wound. No; just words of belief: "My Lord and my God!". Thomas didn't have to touch Jesus; in fact, in a sense he didn't have to see him either. None of this was *really* needed. That's what Thomas had to find out that day; not just that Jesus was risen, but that *he could have taken the disciples' word for it* – that *they* had seen him. That's the punchline of the passage: when Jesus tells him "Blessed are those who have *not* seen and have believed." You can imagine Thomas blushing in front of his friends standing around him, the friends he should have trusted. A humble moment.

And it was a moment that must have turned him inside out. We don't know exactly what happened to Thomas. No doubt he became a leader, an overseer. Legend has it he took the Gospel to India. But whatever, he could never have been a Type 1 Bishop, only a Type 2.

Type 2 Bishops turn up all over the place in the New Testament. Type 2 bishops don't oversee by *over-seeing*, but by *trusting*. Trust is the air they breathe.

A Type 2 bishop has found he can trust *those in his care*. He doesn't need to micro-manage. Of course, a Bishop can't be naïve; people *do* need checking out. Clergy do need careful selection (even Alan Sugar would need to be interviewed). And yes, of course, sometimes the Bishop has to move in when a crisis looms. And yes, of course the Bishop needs to visit, and equip, and inspire. But the Type 2 bishop has learned that his people work best when they know they're trusted.

David and Chris need few lessons here. When I asked a friend the other day how he would describe David Thompson, they said: "a steady person you would trust". (And you only trust those...you know will trust *you*.) In Maltby and Banbury, as Rector at Cockermouth, and more recently as Archdeacon of Carlisle, David has shown that trust is far more effective than control-freakery for releasing a Church's energy. Chris Cocksworth has shown the same – at Epsom, as Chaplain at Royal Holloway, Principal of STETS in Salisbury, and Ridley Hall, Cambridge. I know of no one who takes more joy in seeing others flourish when they're believed, trusted. And so, if I may speak to any slightly anxious clergy of Coventry and Ely here – amongst the grouping of black and white around me, huddled together for safety (a bit like a group of penguins in a David Attenborough film) – "you have nothing to fear. You're getting Type 2 overseers, who'll trust you. They won't want to know what they don't need to know."

And not only those in their care – Type 2 Bishops have found they can *trust the wise saints of the past*. Chris and David are both steeped in the wisdom of the ages. They like to keep company with likes of St Augustine and Luther, Hildegard of Bingen and Handley Moule. They talk about them the way most of us talk about close buddies. Why? Because they've found they can trust these sages of years gone by, and follow their lead; instead of wasting time trying to know things they don't *need* to know.

Not only that, *most of all*, Type 2 bishops have found *they can trust the Apostles*, whose words stand at the heart of Scripture. The testimony behind all testimonies, indeed, much of it *eye-witness* testimony to Jesus, crucified and raised from the dead. So later, David and Chris will have a Bible put into their (no-doubt nervous) hands: "Receive this book" they'll be told, "as a sign of the authority given you this day to build up Christ's Church in truth. *Here are words* of eternal life. Take *them* for your guide and declare them to the world." Less eloquently: "you can trust them. You don't need to know more than you need to know."

And yet, and yet . . . all this trusting can sound very shaky. It might be alright for super-clergy like Bishops, and for the holy heroes of history. But what about the rest of us? Are we going to stake our Christian lives on mere testimony? Don't we need something a bit more secure, a bit more direct than hearsay? Just a *bit* more visible and tangible, a bit more 'up close and personal'? Oh, if only I could wake up one morning, draw back the curtains and get a straight message from the Risen Jesus painted across the blue sky, "Good Morning, Jeremy! Yes; I am risen from the dead!" (With a P.S. – "And yes; Richard Dawkins *is* seriously mixed up.") Well, that day will come, and occasionally we do get that kind of breakthrough in the meantime. But if Thomas could speak to us this morning, I'd reckon he'd be reminding us: "Blessed are those who have *not*

seen. God's already given what you what we need to believe, *people whose word you can trust*. You don't need to know more than you need to know."

And that's what we need to hear from our Bishops, our Type 2 Bishops.

Chris and David, *what do they need to know*, in the groves of Huntingdon and the streets of Coventry?

That in your Churches, *they can find people they can trust*. That in a culture of so much distrust and mistrust, whenever they see the line "Church of England" they'll find an oasis of trust,

- a place where the victim of sexual abuse, who's given up trusting anyone, will find those who *don't* twist words and deceive and betray;

- a place where the 14-yr old bullied at school can find a friend who's not ashamed to hang around with him;

- a place where people mean what they say and say what they mean;

above all, a place where all the lines of trust point in one direction, towards something unseen. *Someone* unseen yet alive...completely trustworthy.

What do they need to know, Chris and David, in the fenlands of Cambridgeshire and the villages of Warwickshire?

That they can trust the saints of the past. When they worship in some tiny ancient and freezing Church – in sub-zero mustiness, with half an organ and a quarter of a vicar – they need to be assured that thousands upon thousands have knelt and prayed and sung in this place before them: the pensioner riddled with terminal disease; the mother of the still-born; teenagers and toddlers, gentry and geriatrics – the great army of the faithful stretching back centuries, the cloud of witnesses who now invite us *to take their word for it* that all the lines of trusting point in one direction, to the risen One they believe walked with them through thick and thin, holding and upholding them even in the worst. *Someone* unseen yet fully alive...wholly trustworthy.

What do they need to know, Chris and David, in the Universities of Cambridge and Coventry, the places of learning?

That they can trust *these words*, these precious writings we call the Bible. That when all's said and done, we have massively strong grounds for reading them as reliable testimony. And above all, that all the lines of testimony point in one direction, towards one shining centre, one Person Jesus Christ; unseen, yet fully alive, excessively alive with the life of God. Totally trustworthy.

And what do you need to know, Chris and David? When like Thomas you're tempted to turn your back on all the witnesses that surround you. What will *you* need to know,

- during those dark days every bishop has to go through;

- when you're bombarded with negative news;

- overwhelmed by an ugly scandal, a crushing financial dilemma, unspeakable tragedy;

- when believing in a risen Lord just seems too fluffy, too uncertain, too second-hand to be true?

What do you need to hear from us, Chris and David, knowing you'll face days like that?

Just this: that behind two thousand years of testimony, and behind every word in the book you are about to take, there stands the One who took hold of you many years ago at baptism; the One who's already taken responsibility for all your distrust (the scars on hands and feet the pledge of his love for you); the One who will return again and again to take hold of you – as he did with Thomas, and as he will at this service, in words and song, bread and wine. Unseen, yet more alive than any of us here; intangible, yet more secure than any other we could rely upon.

Again and again, he'll return, longing for the moment we'll say: "My Lord and My God." Over and over again he'll return, until that day when we see him face to face – when we will know fully (as we have been fully known). The day when we will know all we need to know. A humble moment.

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