

The Bishop of Hertford, The Rt Revd Dr Michael Beasley

Sermon preached at the service of welcome – Saturday 16th May 2015

It's customary on occasions like today for the preacher to kick off with a well chosen joke or anecdote designed to put everyone at their ease. So you'll be glad to know that in preparation for this afternoon I shortlisted an array of different gag writers to help me on my way. Barry Cryer, Peter Kaye, even Sandy Toksvig all had their chance. But their efforts were overtaken by a dark horse that sped past them down the final furlongs of the competition. I refer of course to none other than the third evangelist, St Luke, who in verse 19 of the reading appointed for this afternoon in the church's lectionary came up with the immortal line for the welcome of a new bishop "Are you the one who is to come, or should we expect another?" Perhaps the only echo I can add to his words is to tell you the story of a diocesan bishop coming to the start of his ministry standing outside the great west door of his cathedral. Just as he was about to knock boldly on the door with his pastoral staff he whispered to his chaplain 'Are you sure we've got the right place?'

When you stop and think about it, "Are you the one who is to come or should we expect another?" is one of the most surprising lines in the Bible. When I think about John the Baptist, he doesn't usually strike me as someone wracked by doubt or indecision. I'd have thought that someone who'd heard Jesus, at his baptism, announced as God's own son, the beloved, would have had a pretty clear idea of how things stood. Yet in today's reading here is John expressing uncertainty "Are you the one who is to come, or should we expect another?"

John's words speak of God's extraordinary graciousness to us. God doesn't railroad us, force us into following him. Rather God woos us, invites us in the freedom of our hearts to come to know him and to love him – a love so free it even embraces doubt in someone as usually assured as John the Baptist. God's graciousness is echoed by Jesus' response to John's disciples. Jesus could have replied with an answer that left them knocked flat – "Yes, I am the one who is to come". But instead, like a good teacher, Jesus gives the disciples the means to answer their question for themselves and then stands back to let them work it out in the freedom of their hearts. Jesus makes the same invitation to us and I'm looking forward so much to working alongside you in this place as we seek to respond to him together.

So what does Jesus say? He begins by asking the disciples to reflect on what they've experienced, "What have you seen and heard of me?" he asks. The blind see, the lame walk, lepers are cleansed, the deaf hear, the dead are raised, the poor have good news. Like John's followers then, Jesus asks each of us too to reflect on our experience of him. When has Jesus given us insight, led us to health and wholeness, met us in the poverty of grief and raised us up? Part of the vision of this diocese is to transform communities. I'm looking forward to joining with you in Jesus' work of changing the world – through Foodbanks and Street Pastors, our care of the sick and lonely, the nurture of children in our church schools, the aid we offer to those displaced through war or disaster.

I look forward to us following Christ because we see and hear what he does in us, for us, through us.

Having sent John's disciples on their way, Jesus asks the crowds around why they followed the Baptist. Because he talked a good talk – a reed blowing in the wind? Or was he someone in soft robes who

made for a good “Hello Magazine” photoshoot? It was none of these. The crowds followed John because he spoke for God, took people deep into the word of God, and lived a life that was 100% consistent with the message he preached. Part of the vision of this diocese is to go deeper into God – increasingly to recognise God’s presence within us and around us, helping us lead lives of integrity that are at one with him. I’m looking forward to learning with you how to live out a faith so grounded in God’s deep reality that it’s more than capable of engaging with anything it encounters – our most urgent needs, our hardest questions, our gravest doubts, our darkest fears. I look forward to being with you as Christ leads us into reality and truth.

Together, I believe that these aspects of our lives together will help us fulfil the final part of this place – making disciples, speaking out of the confidence of our experience, the transformations we have seen and heard, the depth we have encountered, in order to invite, encourage, enable and resource others onto the journey of following Jesus.

The invitation is utterly gracious – in today’s reading Jesus recognises that some people will find their excuses just to say “no thanks” “We played for you, and you did not dance; we wailed, and you did not weep”. But those who say yes, or who want to say yes, it is an extraordinary invitation to experience Jesus life changing reality in our lives, helping us as people of grace and peace, to be as today’s reading says, children of wisdom.

It is an astonishing privilege to have been called to become the Bishop of Hertford in this Diocese of St Albans. Am I the one who is to come, or should you expect another? Did I get the right place? No sensible person could enter such a ministry confident that their strengths, skills

and abilities made it possible for them to answer either question with an unequivocal “yes”. As was said in the consecration service that took place on Thursday, no one can bear the weight of this calling in their own strength, but only by the grace and power of God. So I come to you grateful to have been called, seeking to serve you not in my own strength but God’s, and eager to experience and explore alongside you what it means to follow the one who calls not just me but all of us; Jesus Christ. To him be the glory for ever and ever. Amen.

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