

Chrism Eucharist March 2018

St Albans Abbey

2 Cor. 3. 17 – 4.12 and Luke 22. 24-30

We are always being given up to death for Jesus' sake, so that the life of Jesus may be made visible in our mortal flesh. So death is at work in us, but life in you.

Whenever I hear those sobering words of St Paul, particularly on Maundy Thursday when we gather to renew our ministerial promises, I think of Dietrich Bonhoeffer. 'When Jesus Christ call us,' he wrote, 'he bids us come and die.' It's not an attractive sales pitch.

Contrast the article in a Human Resources magazine I read last week called 'A Case study: Hiring at the Church of England'. I quote: '...how many ... people have ever considered that they could find a fulfilling career in the church?' The Director of HR of the Church of England was quoted: 'Clergy can create their own profiles and receive alerts when roles matching their preferences are posted ... with many building their own candidate profiles to make themselves available for future roles that match their needs.'

I have a feeling Bonhoeffer and Paul saw ministry somewhat differently. I detect no reference to 'fulfilling careers' in the Second Letter to the Corinthians, nor is ministry framed to suit our 'preferences' let alone designed to 'match our needs'. Whatever ministry is about, it is not about the fulfilment of our personal needs: that would be to place our ego at the centre of our world.

The words of Jesus in today's gospel reading are equally forthright: *the greatest among you must become like the youngest, and the leader like one who serves.*

At the heart of our calling is the invitation to serve: to take up the cross and to follow Jesus Christ. Our readings are a stark reminder

about the nature of Christian discipleship and what authentic ministry is all about.

I'm wondering whether we are asking the right questions when we are selecting people for Reader ministry or for ordination or when we interview someone for a parish post. Of course, it's good to ask 'What do you consider are your greatest strengths?', 'How would you develop youth ministry in the parish?' or 'How do you deal with conflict?'

But perhaps we should also be asking 'When did you last die to self?' or 'Give us an example when you've taken up the cross and followed Jesus this week?'

Some years ago I had a conversation which pulled me up sharply. I'd just been appointed Bishop of Shrewsbury but the appointment had yet to be announced. I'd shared my news with a couple of close friends who were excited for me and – as all my friends were required to do - told me how marvellous I would be.

I then went to see my spiritual director. Now John was not one of the fluffy, cuddly types of spiritual directors. He was schooled in the SAS style of spiritual direction. I had gone expecting some sort of positive affirmation. Instead when I shared my news there was a long pause and, much to my consternation, he said, 'Oh dear – oh dear, oh dear. I mean, are you really up to it? I mean *spiritually* up to it? We are really going to have to move your prayer life up a few gears if you are going to stand a chance of surviving. Oh, dear!'

And of course, he was right. It was good to have my smugness exploded. All mission and ministry has to be rooted in the cross of Christ and when we encounter someone who is bearing Christ's cross, we cannot but help see something of God's grace at work. It was what attracted people to Mother Theresa, the little old wizened woman who been born in poverty, had little formal education and few contacts with the rich and powerful. Of course

she was a child of her time and culturally conditioned as we all are; but despite all her limitations, something of the life and beauty of God shone through her as she poured out her life for the sake of Jesus Christ.

It was significant that when the atheist journalist Christopher Hitchens wrote a very negative article about Mother Theresa from the comfort of his critic's armchair in middle England it was met with a deafening silence. He'd not spent his life kneeling in the gutters of Calcutta, picking up the sick and dying and caring for them. Mother Theresa embodied the truth that Paul describes: *So death is at work in us, but life in you.*

Let me offer a word of caution at this point because talk of 'taking up the cross' and 'dying to self' has sometimes been picked up by those with a pathological self-hatred to justify beating themselves up. Some people are so desperate to prove that they are loveable that they end up driving themselves mercilessly and have a break down. That's not what Paul is talking about and it's not what I am trying to say.

Nor does taking up our cross mean that we should ignore the insights gleaned from sociology or economics or leadership seminars; or that we don't need to bother with ministry reviews or invest in our on-going ministerial education. Our forebears blatantly and audaciously pinched all the best ideas from the surrounding culture and put them at the service of the gospel, and so should we

But what we must never lose sight of is the basis of the Christian life in dying to self and allowing the life of Jesus to shine through us: *we may be common earthenware pots, but we contain transcendent treasure.*

The reality is that there will be times for all of us when we don't find our vocation is a 'fulfilling career', when what we are asked to do

falls short of our 'preferences' or fails to 'match our needs'. But when we embrace the way of the cross we are promised something far richer, far more compelling: the life of Jesus works in and through us transforming us and those we are called to serve.

Let me conclude with a story from my days as chaplain to the Lee Abbey Community in Devon. On one occasion I was leading a retreat, helped as usual by a team of community members. The various teams generally worked well, but this particular week from day one there had been tensions in the group. One of the team members kept turning up late; another forgot to prepare the chapel properly; another was sulking and in a bad mood. Things came to a head on the Wednesday afternoon when tea should have been served. I arrived to discover that guests were waiting but there was no one to serve the tea. I grabbed one of the team members and asked her to help me, even though it wasn't her responsibility. She was pretty fed up and when the person who should have been on duty arrived 10 minutes late, all hell broke loose. There was a slanging match in the kitchen. In desperation I banged the table and said 'I don't care whose fault it is that we are late, we are not going to stand here rowing. We are going to go out of that door and serve the guests because that's what we are here to do whether we feel like it or not. We will sort out our differences later'. You could not have had a more resentful team, who stomped out and – or so it seemed to me – scowled at the guests in a most ungracious manner.

Imagine my surprise when at the end of the retreat I was having a final one-to-one with a guest who told me that the retreat had not only been deeply moving, but that he felt that it had been akin to a conversion experience. I enquired what had helped, secretly hoping that he was going to point to some deep insight in my retreat addresses which, if truth be told, had been cobbled together at the last minute illustrated with quotations from Thomas Merton, Henri Nouwen and R S Thomas.

Instead he said 'In the early days of the retreat I hadn't really engaged, but on Wednesday I came down early to tea and sat in the corner. For some reason tea was late which gave me extra time to ponder. When eventually the tea did arrive I watched the young members of the community here as they moved to and fro. They were so intent on serving us that they didn't seem to notice each other – they just concentrated on us. The quality of their service moved me so much that I went straight up to the chapel and prayed that I might have a faith like theirs'.

As St Paul put it: *So death is at work in us, but life in you.*

Our God is full of surprises. It has been true in my ministry and I pray that it may be true in yours too. May the God of all grace transform us in his service. Amen.