

# The Launch of Living God's Love - 15 January 2011

## St Alban's Cathedral

I am ashamed to say that I was not much good at science when I was at school. I found the whole thing rather puzzling. For me science is best summed up in a definition I heard recently:

*If it squirms, it's biology;*

*if it stinks, it's chemistry;*

*if it doesn't work, it physics;*

*and if you can't understand it, it's mathematics*

My shameful lack of ability in this area makes it all the more surprising that I was very struck by an article I read over Christmas about space. It said that if you imagine that the Earth is the size of a pea, then Jupiter is more than 3000 meters away, Pluto is two and a half kilometres distant, and our nearest star is 16 000 kilometres away. The distances in space are unbelievable.

But then the article turned to the building blocks of the universe, and said that something the size of a sugar cube contains no less than 45 billion billion molecules. I can't get my mind round it all.

So the next day when I turned to the passage that we have just heard from Ephesians, I read it in a new light: God's 'plan for the fullness of time' is 'to gather up all things in him, things in heaven and things on earth'.

Ephesians is telling us that not only has God created the vastness of space and the complexity of matter from 'before the foundation of the world' (1.4), but that in his amazing grace and generosity he wants to work in and through you and me to bring about his good purposes.

So as we come together to launch *Living God's Love*, we need to see all we are doing is part of the unfolding purposes of God in creation, working for the time where there will be 'a new heaven and a new earth'.

In recent months we have been hearing a great deal from the Prime Minister about the Big Society. But what I am talking about is a Big God - a generous, extravagant God who pours out his life for the world and who invites us to do the same.

The problem is it is easier for us to be selfish. You may know the story of the man who won £3.5 million on the lottery. He was ecstatic 'Wow, can you believe it. We must be the luckiest people in the whole town - three and a half million. His wife wasn't as elated as he expected. In fact she was worried. So he asked her what the problem was. 'Well', she said, 'what I concerned about is the begging letters. What are we going to do about the begging letters?' 'Oh, that's no problem at all - just you keep writing them.'

If *Living God's Love* is going to energise us then it will only do so if our eyes are opened afresh to the holiness and generosity of God.

It is not going to work if we see it as a rebranding exercise. No amount of exhortation to live holier lives will set us free either. Nor will it be enough to form committees to formulate strategy. As a lovely old nun once said to me, 'If you want to make God laugh, tell him your plans.' In the end only the grace of this generous God will inspire us.

Of course, when we look around at one another it is easy to become discouraged. We are all too aware of our faults and failings, our divisions and disagreements. We are frail and sinful and our lives do not always match up to our fine words. We know too that our resources are few and invariably too stretched. And yet, despite this, God chooses to reveal his divine purposes and entrust us with his mission and ministry.

Our message cannot and must not, therefore, be reduced to 'come to church because we are a friendly bunch' or 'we do a lot of good charitable work' – although I hope all those things are true. Instead our message must be one of invitation from a generous, bountiful God to go deeper into his love, and then to abandon ourselves to his service.

And here I want to say three cheers. Because wherever I go in the diocese I find examples of just that. I think of

- the prayer circle of elderly housebound people who phone each other and support the work of the church by committed prayer;
- the small Cursillo cells meeting regularly for intercession and apostolic witness;
- the early morning prayer meetings in Bedford, Stevenage and Chorleywood;
- the Julian groups of contemplative prayer at Brickhill, Berkhamsted and Bishop's Stortford;
- the parishes that go to Taize, New Wine or Walsingham.

I've been hugely encouraged that several thousand people joined in last year's Lent Challenge and even more in the recent Advent Challenge. I am praying that this coming year even more people will join in the Lent Challenge. Not because I like big numbers but because if we do not refocus on going deeper into God, then *Living God's Love* will remain just a idea which has no bearing on our world and our local communities.

But, you will say to me, surely we need resources and training before we can do all this? Well, our gospel reading reminds us that when we go out in Christ's name to transform communities and to make new disciples we never do it from a position of strength: 'See', says Jesus, 'I am sending you out like lambs among wolves. Carry no purse, no bag, no sandals'. We go as we are, carrying nothing but Christ in our hearts and in the miracle of grace, we will discover God is already at work.

This is the gospel secret. The gospel secret is the grain of wheat that has to fall into the soil and be buried before it can bear a harvest. The gospel secret is 'Those who want to save their life will lose it, but those who lose their life for my sake, and for the sake of the gospel, will save it' (Mark 8. 35). The gospel secret is the little boy at the feeding of the 5000 who gave away his packed lunch of loaves and fish. He had to take the risk of giving all his food away before the crowds could be fed.

Down through the ages millions upon millions of Christians have found that when they dare to live out this gospel secret, when they step out in faith and trust, it actually works. But we will feel vulnerable, like lambs among wolves.

Thank God that there are already many examples of people living out this gospel secret in our diocese. Recently I was down in Radlett. For the past 25 years those churches have been linked with a parish on a large sprawling estate in Walsall up in the West Midlands. It is a parish I know well because I ministered in that deanery for seven years. There have been

regular visits both ways, friendships have been built, each church prays for the other in its weekly worship. And several times a year the churches in Radlett collect clothing and furniture to stock up the church shop in that very needy area of Walsall. This is real practical caring. This is a visible demonstration of *Living God's Love*. This is transforming communities. And it is certainly about Big Society. You will be able to think of other examples in your parishes and chaplaincies.

In the gospel Jesus tells us that we meet him in the poor and the marginalised. Which is why throughout church history the poor have been our teachers. This is not an optional extra but is one of the main ways in which we receive Christ.

Perhaps you know the story about the man who was down on his luck and went to church in a wealthy area. Spotting the man's dirty clothes a churchwarden, worried about the church's image, went up to him and asked if he needed help. The man said, "I was praying and the Lord told me to come to this church." Perturbed, the churchwarden suggested that the man go pray some more in the hope that he might get a different answer and go to another church. But the next Sunday the man returned. The warden asked, "Did you pray again?" The man replied, "Yes I did. I told the Lord that they don't want me in that church and the Lord said, 'Don't worry about it son; I've been trying to get into that church for years and haven't made it yet'."

Finally, let me share with you a true story about a young woman I confirmed recently. Julie told me that for most of her adult life she had been an atheist. Some months earlier she had received a phone call at work from her elderly housebound mother. The pipes in the flat above her mother's had burst and water was pouring through the ceiling. You can imagine what a panic she was in. As soon as her lunch break came Julie dashed across town. When she got into the block of flats she was beside herself because she found the door of her mother's flat wide open, some of the furniture on the landing and the rugs hanging out to dry. This was the sort of area where you locked and chained every door and did not let anyone in.

When she walked in she found her mother's neighbours, a young couple, had arrived and had started to sort out the problem. At first she was very suspicious. What were they after? Had they stolen anything? Could they be trusted? She did not have much time so she had to leave them to it. When she arrived back in the evening she found that they had offered to return once the walls had dried out and help redecorate. Since she and her mother could not afford to employ a professional decorator she reluctantly agreed. Over the next few weeks they worked together re-painting the flat. As they talked, paintbrushes in hand, Julie discovered that the young couple went to a local church. They chatted about how prayer helped them and how they loved being part of God's family there. They invited Julie to a Back to Church Sunday service. She was still very nervous, but she went and ended up joining an Alpha course. Some months later she put her trust in Christ and that was how she came to be confirmed. As she said to me 'I want to make a difference like my friends did for me and my mother'.

Here is someone responding to the love of a generous God and finding herself drawn irresistibly deeper. Here is someone who through that encounter has been transformed as a person. Now she too wants to make a difference. All this shows us how people and communities are transformed because hearts and imaginations have been changed. This is how discipleship is deepened, and we can be caught up in a new vision of God's love for his world.

Today, as in previous generations, the harvest is plentiful but the workers are few. It's why in this service it is good to be reminded of our baptism by which we have died to self and been raised to new life in Christ, and to be sprinkled anew with the waters of baptism. We are to be commissioned, along with those who are going to help in the parishes as we roll out the

programme of Mission Action Planning. Finally, at the end of the service, as we leave the Abbey, singing songs and hymns, we will each carry a lighted candle, for God calls us to take the light of Christ into His world.

Today our generous and extravagant God calls us to make a difference and to share in his 'plan for the fullness of time, to gather up all things in Christ, things in heaven and things on earth'

To Him be the glory, for ever and ever, Amen

**The Bishop of St Albans**

**15<sup>th</sup> January 2011**