

## **Synod Sunday 23 June 2019 - Cathedral Eucharist Preacher: Rev Canon Zoe Everingham**

*May the words of my mouth and the meditations of all our hearts, be always acceptable in your sight, our strength and our redeemer.*

Friends, how wonderful to be together! We gather from across the Diocese as a diverse bunch! We are journeying side by side, not just through the business of Synod, but also as “Easter people” living in the newness of abundant life, gifted by Creator God through the faithfulness of our Redeemer Jesus Christ.

One of my favourite theologians is Tom Wright and his book “Surprised by Hope”, he talks at length about us living in the new creation period<sup>1</sup> – the resurrected Jesus being God’s first fruits of this new creation, according to St Paul’s theology. In this new creation period (as both Easter and Pentecost people) we are inspired and empowered by the presence and workings of God’s spirit to proclaim Jesus who is the good news and bring the gift of new life to others. That is “Mission in a nutshell”! That is our life. For many of us, this is a very different life to what we led 10, 20, 30, 40 or even 50 years ago. We have been transformed by the power of God’s Spirit, breathing change.

In our journey together this weekend, we have already faced, and will still face, many points of change. We have welcomed a new Diocesan Archdeacon and MDO, the Venerable Tiffany Sparkes. We will address the recommendations for restructure of the Diocese, fully aware of the need for change, but also aware of the sadness that some people may experience as buildings are sold or commissioned for different purposes. We will discuss implications of proposed motions, hopefully with respect, listening to each other – learning from one another – prayerfully passing some motions while prayerfully rejecting others. We will reflect on cultural changes and how the church in the 21<sup>st</sup> Century exercises its calling to full inclusivity and equality in Christ.

You could be forgiven, if at times you feel uncomfortable or even like running away! In the first bible reading today from 1 Kings, God’s faithful servant Elijah ran from Jezebel’s wrath

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<sup>1</sup> Tom Wright, *Surprised by Hope* (London: SPCK, 2007), 67.

and wants to die. In the text, we sense his desperation and feeling of helplessness. God's response comes not in negative chastisement for his seemingly lack of courage, nor from positive words of encouragement, but in the form of rest and nourishment for the journey ahead. Elijah's work for God is not yet finished. God also responds with his own presence.

The presence of the all-powerful almighty God is not demonstrated by shouting wind, or intimidating earthquake, or an all-consuming firey rage, the way some people in authority demonstrate their power. No. God's presence is felt in the gentleness of a whisper, or following the NRSV translation used today, God's presence is felt in sheer silence (1 Kings 19:12). Together we sit, live and work in God's gentle nurturing presence. Can we nurture and bless each other with similar whispering presence?

You could be forgiven for thinking the church in the postmodern 21<sup>st</sup> Century is facing difficult challenges like never before. Yet, we know from scripture and tradition that the gathered people of God have faced many challenges and had to adapt to changing cultures over the centuries. St Paul's controversial letter to some Christian churches in Galatia, tells us that he was a culture changer - he confronted the insistent demands of the orthodox Jews that to be a good "follower of the way" (follower of Jesus), one had to first become a good Jew. The Jewish boundary markers of circumcision and law-keeping at least were necessary to salvation. Paul fought this logic. He sees it as a denial of the gospel that he preached. He refers to the law as *paidagogos* in Greek (translated as *disciplinarian*) – a slave escort for children.<sup>2</sup> Paul argues that the law is like a child's escort or guardian who guides, protects and disciplines the child until the child matures. The period of guardianship is therefore temporary<sup>3</sup> – it comes to an end when confidence and "Faith" comes i.e. through faith in Jesus Christ. The child then moves into the sphere of Christ Jesus – they have been baptized into Christ. They have even clothed themselves with Christ. Christ lives in and through them and they live in Christ! Similarly, Christ lives in and through US and WE live in Christ!

This applies to ALL followers of Jesus – irrespective of ethnic-religious background (Jew or Greek) – regardless of socioeconomic divisions (slave or free) – or gender lines (Male and

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<sup>2</sup> Alan Cole, *Galatians* (Leicester: Inter-varsity Press, 1976), 108.

<sup>3</sup> James Dunn, *The Theology of Paul the Apostle* (Grand Rapids: Wm B Eerdmans Publishing Co, 2006), 143.

Female pair – where the female’s identity was dependent on her relationship with a male. Oh how times have changed!). Paul’s point is that the status we have at birth is no longer important because of our “rebirth” through Christ. These ethnic, social, and sexual distinctions continue to exist, in all manners of newly discovered complexities. But Paul’s argument is that these distinctions have no place in the Church of Christ - they are not to determine one’s spiritual or salvation or social standing in the body of Christ. The only identification that counts is that of Baptism in Christ. When reflecting on inclusiveness, it may be useful to ponder: “is our ALL maybe too SMALL?” The priorities of the church are freedom and equality, healing and transformation through baptism in Christ.

In the Gospel reading today, Jesus travelled to the other side – into foreign Gentile territory to heal and to calm a man greatly distressed and outcast from the community. He is homeless and helpless. The man is set free from an inner destructive force, illustrated by the subsequent possession of the pigs who rush into the sea. He no longer has to live in the tombs of mental death – he can now live in God’s house of life. But in Jesus’ mission to heal, there **is** collateral damage - the status quo of the pig owners was upset – their valuable pig assets were destroyed - their commercial enterprise was damaged – their lives were turned upside down/”topsy turvy”! They are overcome with fear and even ask Jesus to leave! Apparently they value their own livelihood greater than the wellbeing of this distressed man and the transformation that Jesus’ healing power brings.<sup>4</sup> With hindsight, we might say that the pig farmers had the wrong priorities.

As leaders of the church, this Synod is invited to go to the other side – to make decisions that heal and liberate – to instigate the Spirit’s calling for change, which might just upset the status quo! The face of **our** Christian “business” may be affected by Christ’s healing of others.

So friends, when God’s Holy Spirit breathes change, healing and transformation, what can we expect but upheaval! Expect “Topsy Turvy”! At the same time, hear the encouraging comforting words of God’s agents – the most common phrase in the New Testament: “Do not be afraid.” God’s gentle nurturing presence is with us in a whisper (or in sheer silence).

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<sup>4</sup> Brendan Byrne, *The Hospitality of God* (Strathfield: St Paul’s Publications, 2006), 82.

As we continue the business of Synod today, may we be blessed with the eyes to see God's bigger vision. Amen.