

I Am No Longer My Own

Day of Prayer for 'Investing in Our Faith'

November 2nd 2008 All Saints

What, you might ask, are we up to today as a diocese? Why a day of prayer, and why am I turning myself into a sort of travelling circus across the diocese? Thinking about this takes me back three years when I took a small group of people out to Georgia. Bishop Malkhaz, whom some of you have met, was our host. We saw much that moved us but nothing that measured up to the orphanage/school at Zemo Bodbe. I knew it would be hard but I had no idea how sharply it would hit me. The building made for two hundred now housed eighty children. Most were orphans, many had mental health problems, all had learning difficulties.

The building was indescribable. Former parquet flooring had given way to mud floors. The ground floor windows were all gone. There were four desks for thirty children. In the winter there was virtually no heating. I don't cry easily in public, but my eyes were full. Others were similarly upset. Just as moving was finding out that that Lent Malkhaz had spent part of most weeks there in that desolate place. His room was bare and freezing. He was there simply to be with the children.

I returned convicted. What did I do in Lent? Maybe go on a diet – perhaps even get sponsored for it? Say some more prayers perhaps? Floundering around I looked for a response. Remembering an earlier visit to Holly Bank at Mirfield, I offered myself for three days in Holy Week the next year. Holly Bank cares for those living with cerebral palsy. It is an amazing place. Some who live there die in their teens. Others can only be fed through a peg in their stomachs. It is both heart rending and remarkable in what it says about the grace given to us. It is amazing how God's grace empowers those who work at Holly Bank.

Of course, I was almost entirely useless. I had no qualifications, no expertise. I could simply be with the young people. I certainly learnt much – partly about myself, but largely about God. Think of what I have been given by God. Think of what those young people received through God's grace in their carers. Indeed think too of the work at Zemo Bodbe. So much of this issues directly from Christian giving. Remember our first reading:

'See what love the Father has given us, that we should be called children of God; and that is what we are..... what we *will be* has not yet been revealed.'

The most powerful lesson in all this for me was the extraordinary sense of God's gift to us all. Someone put it most poignantly for me in reflecting upon Jesus. What did Jesus mean for us, and what might the kingdom or *reign* of God look like? He said it is 'that life is gift to us, our own lives and the lives of those we encounter.' He went on: 'the true value of all that exists is discovered in the unique way in which one values a gift; that we should not crush by grasping, or tear by trying to pull away.' In other words, the way we respond to a gift says something about who we are, and how we receive God's grace. A grateful person will also be a gracious and giving person.

It was this gift, offered in Jesus, that transformed John Wesley, made his heart, as he put it, strangely warm. This convicted him, rather as it had St Francis five hundred years earlier, to give himself utterly to God. Later it issued in the powerful words of the Methodist Covenant service which we have just uttered. Let us listen again with hearts open:

'I am no longer my own, but yours.
Put me to what you will, place me where you will.
Put me to doing, put me to suffering....

Let me be full, let me be empty.
I freely and willingly yield all things to your
pleasure and disposal.’

They are amazing words – even more amazing if we act upon them. They are bound to lead to ‘transforming lives,’ as we have been reflecting in this diocese. We shall be transformed, others will be transformed through us, communities will be transformed so indeed parishes, deaneries, this diocese. The events of these past weeks internationally show how needy our world is of such transformation.

It is such transformed and transforming lives that are described in that unique gospel for All Saints, the beatitudes from the Sermon on the Mount. It describes what God in Jesus would have us be:

‘Blessed are the poor in spirit, for theirs is the Kingdom of heaven, the reign of God.....

Blessed are the pure in heart, the peacemakers, the merciful....

Blessed are you when people revile you and persecute you and utter all kinds of evil against you falsely on my account. Rejoice for in the same way they persecuted the prophets who were before you.’

And how is that transformation effected? Wesley makes it clear: ‘I am no longer my own, but yours.’ *We give our everything to God* – our energy, our love, our generosity, our prayer our silence, our money, and our whole lives. This is truly *Investing in Our Faith*, investing everything – all that we are – in our common faith.

At the end of our annual holiday, my wife and I spent three days in Assisi. One morning early we walked a mile down the hill to the edge of the town to the monastery of San Damiano. It was quiet and still. In the tiny simple chapel there, eight hundred years ago, St Francis heard Jesus speak to him from the crucifix hanging there. Jesus said to him only four words:

‘Francis rebuild my Church.’

It is these words that God is speaking to us now: speaking individually to each one of us and also together to all of us as a diocese. ‘Rebuild my Church.’ The message is desperately urgent if as a diocese we are to live the Vision of God in Jesus. St Paul wrote to the Christians at Corinth: ‘We have opened our heart wide to you all – I beg you, open your hearts also!’

Amen

READINGS

I John 3: 1-3

Matthew 5: 1-12