

Investing in our Faith – Archdeaconry Meetings

6th November 2008

One of the things that I like to do when I have the time – which sadly is rarely – is to go out to the cinema or watch a video. The other week, however, we had a free evening and out of our tiny collection the film we decided to watch was that of Nick Hornby's novel *About a Boy*. Some of you may have seen it – the best-known star in it is Hugh Grant. Having just read another of Hornby's novels, I was impressed with how perceptive he is about the world in which we live.

The first main character is Hugh Grant who plays a shallow, unmotivated playboy who lives off the royalties of a 'one hit wonder' written by his father. The other main character is a schoolboy of perhaps fourteen years old. His mother who is into 'alternative living' is a single parent who, profoundly depressed, attempts suicide. This results in Marcus, her son, being more than a little eccentric compared to his classmates and so they continuously bully and humiliate him.

The film is moving but also full of insights. In the film Hugh Grant has nothing to direct his life. He does not need to work, he has no interests other than watching videos and trying to tempt women into his bedroom. That in itself has become almost an obsession! Young Marcus is amazingly resilient bearing in mind the humiliation he receives and the overall mental state of his mother who is his only support. I won't spoil the ending but, as you may imagine, despite his attempts to find yet more women to lure into his spider's web, the Hugh Grant character becomes trapped himself by young Marcus. So the young lad treats him not quite as a surrogate father but certainly as a supportive friend. As the story progresses young Marcus begins to receive some more balanced support and the Hugh Grant character at long last begins to find some shape and point to his life.

At no stage in the film is there any real reference to God, religion or belief. Yet, this is a story about friendship and mutual support. It is about the importance of togetherness and the impossibility of going it alone if we are to flourish. This may be an overused metaphor, but the film speaks to us of finding meaning in shared journeys. As such, there are some interesting parallels to be drawn with the Christian life.

Let me go back to my own life if you will forgive some self-reflection. Neither of my parents were churchgoers but when I was about five a well meaning couple offered to take me to chapel. Since it gave my parents two hours peace on a Sunday afternoon and the possible chance that it might make me a little more moral, I was bundled off to go with them. For seven years I went to '*Cecil Hall*'. It was never quite my thing but I received an enormous amount from it. I learnt what was in the Bible and I had my life touched by people who were Godly and through whom God's grace was poured out to others. When I was thirteen my mother decided I must be put back on track and I was sent to an Anglican Church to junior evensong – can you imagine anything less likely to engage a thirteen-year-old boy? I went along for a few months and it was the only time in my life I have ever played hooky. At the end of this time my father said I was now old enough to make up my own mind and I could decide whether or not to go to Church. It was a great release. I stopped going.

It was only some four years later when someone offered to take me to church – then kept forgetting to do so – that I wandered up the hill to (guess what?) sung evensong. It was a sort of country church on the edge of London. People were nice to me and so I thought it might be worth a second try. Eventually I was caught up into the choir and my active faith started up again. Thereafter I also met the friars from the Anglican Society of St Francis and that further took me along the way. I suppose if I had to point to key moments in my life of faith I would point to the influence of *people* along the way. Let me just mention two.

First there was Ben Ross the vicar of that church to which I returned. In the 1930s Ben had been part of a group called the *Brotherhood of the Way* who lived on a shilling (five pence!) a day and camped out in church porches and bus shelters. They taught the gospel in Franciscan style. Despite his eccentricity Ben had never lost some elements of that vision – before he went for ordination training he had also worked in a home for bombed out people run by Fr Potter of Peckham in South London. The other character, who is still active and lives at the friary in Alnmouth is Br Edward. Edward's father was Postmaster General in the labour government before the war. He had been a Liberal until that party collapsed and he came from a well off family. He gave up everything, however, to become a friar and lived in a tiny cell – the Franciscans were still more austere when I first knew them back in the 1960s than they are now. Edward still has a remarkable ability to tell people what a marvellous place God's world is. Through both Ben and Edward the grace of God shone forth. It certainly transformed my life and I know has transformed many others.

It is that realisation that God transforms us through others which stands behind all that we are about in the Diocese at present. Let me spend a few moments putting the whole pattern together. Some three years ago many of you will have got engaged with *Everyday God*. That initiative came out of a desire amongst all of us in the diocesan staff to show that God's grace does not simply operate on a Sunday morning when we are together in Church. It orders the whole of our existence and calls us to reflect upon God everyday of the week. It was after some further reflection upon that that we decided to go forward with *Transforming Lives*. Effectively *Transforming Lives* takes the process one stage further. If God affects us in every single moment of our existence then surely it is going to transform the way in which we live our lives. That is certainly what happened to me through the influence of people like Ben Ross and Br Edward.

I hope you can begin to see a pattern now building up. God is there as an *everyday God* and when God is there he *transforms our lives*. But for this to happen effectively we need to think carefully about the part each of us – both as individuals and together – play in this process of transformation. It is by God's grace that we are transformed but we too have an important part to play – it is by no means all done for us! Unless we organise ourselves effectively we cannot get that message across as we need. It is this that has led us into this third phase development *Investing in Our Faith* (and I hope you can see that each phase issues out of the previous one). You may think, that following the events of the past few months, *investment* might be a very bad image to use. Nevertheless those same events in those past months have shown how much we depend upon investment. By investment we simply mean how much of ourselves in every sense we are prepared to offer to God. If we do believe in an *everyday God* who *transforms lives* then it calls us to invest every ounce of ourselves in that process.

There is no doubt that this is demanding.

It requires of us enormous energy.

It requires that we should use our minds to the best of our ability. It means that we should give ourselves adequate time for prayer and worship.

It means that we should understand our own faith as well as we possibly could.

It means that we should be prepared to put as much of our own financial and other reserves into our faith as we might in any other aspect of our lives.

But we don't do it alone. Some four years ago as a diocese we took up what I gather is now called in industry and commerce a new 'strap line' which simply said *working together throughout God's world*. Working together stands at the very heart of the Church. It is a way of living and thinking that goes right the way back to the beginning of the gospel. Let me remind you of a piece from the Acts of the Apostles. It gets mentioned all too rarely. We are always in a rush to listen to the story of Paul and his shipwreck etc. It runs like this and it comes from Acts chapter 4 verse 32:

‘Now the company of those who believed were of one heart and soul, and no one said that any of the things which he possessed was his own, but they had everything in common.

And with great power the apostles gave their testimony to the resurrection of the Lord Jesus, and great grace was upon them all. There was not a needy person among them, for as many as were possessors of lands or houses sold them, and brought the proceeds of what was sold and laid it at the apostles feet; distribution was made to each as had any need.’

That may seem to offer a pattern that is unrealisable for many of us. After all we have people who depend upon us – families and those for who we have been called to care. Nevertheless at the heart of what those words imply is a sense of sharing with each other all the resources we have been given by God. God’s grace does not act simply individually, it acts through all of us in solidarity – that is through the whole of humankind.

What does that mean for us as a diocese? It means literally that we should be ‘working *together* throughout God’s world’. Some parts of the Diocese are poorer than others and we all belong to each other. A common text that is used here is ‘bear you one another’s burdens and so fulfil the law of Christ’. If we are the body of Christ, then we belong together. We are truly at home when we are together. This is who we are. We are the church, God’s people, his body, in this place. So I am going to suggest that we begin calling the Parish Share a contribution to the ‘Common Fund’. Like the first Christians, we hold our resources in common because after all we are working together in God’s world.

And we should be honest. There is no doubt about it that we do face a challenging scenario. Although we are one of the most richly blessed of all the churches in Europe in terms of vocations to the ministry, nevertheless there are far fewer people to go around than there were twenty or twenty five years ago. That means as a diocese we are going to have to accept our cut in numbers of paid clergy if the Church is to share them round fairly – once again working together throughout God’s world! The most sensible way for us to do that is to try and work in parishes and deaneries to see how best in each location the paid clergy we do have available to us can be deployed. Nevertheless we also need to remember that we have been hugely blessed in recent years with non-stipendiary or self-supporting ministers of different sorts. Once again, how can they be most fruitfully used and deployed for the proclamation of the Good News?

I realise that if I mention money at this point then much of what I have said about the Gospel may be lost – money is always a flash point. But not to mention it is to falsely bracket out what is an important part of everyday life. If all that I have said so far makes any sense whatsoever then we shall have to challenge people to see what that means for their own lives and giving. There are still many who give £1 or less per week (less than two *Mars* bars!). If we think what we are prepared to give in other aspects of our lives whether it is going out to a cinema, for a drink, for a holiday or even for our newspapers, we can begin to get some sense of proportion as to what we might give ourselves. We realise that the whole process of giving is not easy and not easily communicated. For that reason we are about to set up a diocesan-wide discipleship and stewardship project so that people may help each other. We are also proposing that as well as having a treasurer in each parish and congregation there will also be a finance officer whose main task is to see how might we persuade people to give more realistically.

I began with the way in which God’s grace can transform our lives. The most remarkable thing of all is the extraordinary gift that we receive from God in Jesus. All that we receive is gift from God. The life God gives us is a gift. The life which he calls us to live out for him is a gift, an amazing gift.

And perhaps we discover something about who we are in the unique way in which one values a gift. In other words, the way we respond to a gift says something about who we are, and how we receive God’s grace. As I said on Sunday, a grateful person will also be a gracious and giving person.

Living a life in this way runs utterly contrary to the sort of culture we have seen revealed in the collapse of the financial system over these past months. It is a demanding way to live our lives but ultimately

will mean something transformational. If our life individually is transformed then as we touch others we shall transform others. Certainly that was the case with Ben Ross and Br Edward as I was a young man. My life was clearly transformed by an encounter with them. Then it is not simply each of us as individuals it is how we live together as communities and mirror that generosity and love of God in the way we respond to others.

I have just returned from two weeks in Mara. If you have been then I need say no more. If you have never been there then it is almost impossible to communicate quite how contrasting our two worlds are. This last time, I visited a school there, which is now some thirty-two years old. None of the classrooms has windows; four of the classrooms have no concrete floors but only mud. There is nothing like enough desks to go round and in one class there are one hundred young children (*compare with St James school, Chapelthorpe*). The vicarages are buildings with absolutely nothing in them, which generally means no chairs or tables even. When we have eaten in vicarages they have moved a chair and a table in for us. At times I felt immeasurably angry that we could live in a world where there are such extraordinary and iniquitous gulfs between the rich and the poor. I tell the tale simply to illustrate how we ourselves are called to give to each other.

Our Mara link slogan is *Bega Kwa Bega* – shoulder to shoulder – because that is what we are all about as two linked dioceses across the world. But it is also what we are about as Christians across this diocese. If we work together – shoulder to shoulder – throughout God’s world then we shall mirror the gospel. We shall transform individuals; we shall transform communities, parishes, deaneries and indeed the whole of this diocese. Nothing less can be demanded of us and I am indicting myself and not letting myself off the hook. This is a challenge for each one of us.

At the meeting on Tuesday, I was asked, ‘But what, in the end, will all this mean? What will the diocese look like in 5 years time?’ It is a good question and I don’t know the answer. Much of how it will look is up to you as we continue with *Transforming Lives*, as we go about our Parish transformational plans, as together we look at deanery transformational planning. And if we believe that God gives – and gives abundantly – then we will be surprised by how the diocese looks. But if I was pinned down then I think I would say this:

- 1) It will be a leaner diocese with fewer paid clergy.
- 2) After all the transformational planning, it will be a better organised diocese with us working together more efficiently at a local level in deaneries and across parishes.
- 3) There will be more collaboration between lay, self-supporting and stipendiary ministries.
- 4) There will be more people in Church.
- 5) It will be a diocese marked by the energy and vision of the Christians who worship here.
- 6) It will be a diocese which is outward-looking, and an outward looking diocese will be a growing diocese.

And all that is because of what God has in store for us; because of all that God will give us. Without God we are nothing and we can do nothing – how can we offer something back? All of this will mean changes for all of us. It will not be easy. If we are effective in offering this vision then there is no question about the effects that it will have upon the mission of God’s Church in this part of Yorkshire, both south and west. We do face difficult challenges and we must turn things round in every sense – mission, money, and crucially also in our worship, prayer and all that our faith means. How can we do this better together? Tonight’s meeting is just one opportunity for us to try and work that out and offer ourselves to each other.