

2019 18 April - Eucharist of Chrism and Reaffirmation of Vows

Genesis 32: 22-32

Philippians 2: 1-10

Luke 22: 14-27

Standing by the Sea of Galilee or walking the way of the cross through Jerusalem with some of the curates in January, what came through time and again was the humanity of Jesus in whom we see God fully. "Behold the man"

Today on Maundy Thursday we remember on the night *he was betrayed*, Jesus had supper with his disciples and taking bread *gave thanks*. With him was one who would betray him, and Luke also says was a dispute among the disciples about which of them was the greatest. They were not a great advert for intentional evangelism but we know about the humanity of the moment as well as it being God's moment.

Last Thursday at the end of a 2 day retreat for the political leadership of the South Sudan hosted in the Vatican by Pope Francis with our Archbishop Justin, the Pope addressed President Salva Kiir and Vice President Riek Macchar.

"I ask you as a brother, stay in peace.

I am asking you with my heart, in front of the people hold hands united."

To the astonishment of the politicians, the 82 year old Pope knelt and kissed their feet. The Archbishop of Canterbury commented, "This is a man who knows the importance of symbol and the power of weakness."

The Pope gave these Christian political leaders a Bible with an inscription which said:

"Seek that which unites.

Overcome that which divides."

In this diocese we know and love the South Sudan and we know how much they give us in commitment, faith and evangelism. The last five years have seen terrible violence. Nearly 400,000 people have been killed; 2 million have been displaced internally; and over 2 million have fled. This in a country of something like 11 million people.

The Pope did not blame or judge them. He showed them Christ-like service and challenged them. His generous loving humility caught the imagination. It just might stop spiralling violence and unlock a peace process that was stuck.

We come this Mandy Thursday as baptised disciples of Jesus, lay ministers and bishops, priests and deacons to renew our commitment to follow in the way of Jesus, and for those of us ordained to renew our ordination vows. We have come to bless the oil used through the year in ministry and mission – for the sick and dying, for baptism and for healing.

Like the first disciples, we are a mixed bag – some of us tired, some of failures, most of us knowing we're not really good enough, wondering why others seem so much better than ourselves. It's human, it's real. We're not perfect.

But this is where and how God meets us in Jesus.

Tonight many of us will wash feet or have our feet washed, learning again the importance of symbol and the power of weakness in service of others. It is a high calling. But it's hard to feel on top of it.

Of course we know we do not do it in our power alone.

In this service God meets us, calls us, renews us.

If we are serious about engaging with God, as with wrestling Jacob in that foundational story of Israel, the encounter will leave us both wounded and blessed. That is the holy ground on which the gate of heaven is opened.

In one of the cathedral's Lent conversations – modelling how to speak with one another about things that divide us - I was asked whether society is broken? It is, like us, but I don't much like it as a description of who and how we are. It puts the emphasis in the wrong place. Yes we are muddled, fallible, sinful people but we are also made in God's image, with a glorious capacity to love and serve joyfully and in baptism to become God's people called out of darkness into his marvellous light. Our sin is not the dominant story, God's love is.

Through acceptance of our limited humanity, through loving service of one another, as a Church we proclaim in the way of Jesus Christ the Kingdom of God is very near.

Why has the fire at Notre Dame had so much impact, not just on a largely secular and anti-clerical France but on the whole of Western Europe and the wider world? It was so much more than a great visitor attraction or an iconic building in the middle of one of the world's great cities. There is something about great religious buildings representing our beliefs and values to us. We have to be careful because it is easy to become idolatrous about great buildings. But at its best Notre Dame, this cathedral, any church, is a place where we find ourselves in relation to God and one another and all creation. Here God is among us.

To see such an important symbol burn shakes us at a time of *les gilets jaunes*, or anxiety about Brexit and the political processes falling apart, or the climate emergency in which we are not sure whether we have so mucked things up that our selfishness and greed has already damaged the earth for our children's children. A burning Notre Dame suggests it's all going up in smoke.

Actually, most people know that the Church holds something important for the world in these difficult times. That's why the fabric needs repairing quickly. The building is about our beliefs and values based on our relationships with God and one another.

The sorts of things that matter in these difficult times that are ours in Christ are worth setting out both for our own sakes and for the sake of the world God loves so much that he sent his Son Jesus Christ among us. I have had a few goes at doing this recently. Here's a start of the sort of things you might want to develop and make your own.

Love God and love your neighbour as yourself. I am not the centre of my own story. Don't forget that everyone is our neighbour. Churches are among the very few places in our community that exist not for themselves but for others. So people can gather across all sorts of divisions. Our purpose is worship and loving service so that God's kingdom of justice, peace and love is seen to be very near.

Love begins at home but it does not stop at home. What we learn in our family, community, country, teaches us to love more generally. The world does not divide between people who live somewhere and those who could live anywhere. Love everywhere has to begin somewhere.

That's why patriotism matters. Love of country teaches us love of world. Charity begins at home but does not stop at home. And so on.

As church we are global. Every church is the world's local church. If we choose to, we have the capacity to live as people who know what is happening in our world and not be overwhelmed by it but by the grace of God respond creatively to it.

Be reverent with creation. Use it well. Give thanks for everything. This is a fragile earth, love the gift God has given us and take good care of it both for itself alone and for the sake of others, including those who come after us.

Be kind to and about one another and recognise the importance of forgiveness in your own and other people's lives. Be generous because God has been generous to you.

In this world of alternative facts it is difficult to know the truth but be a people who are about the truth and are willing to be accountable to it because we know the truth will set us free.

What strikes me every time I say the Eucharistic prayer, is how the actions of breaking bread and drinking wine, carry us in every circumstance, wounded and blessed, broken and thankful. The healing is in God's presence. The miracle is in being renewed, and in being able to give thanks for everything.

As we begin the great three days together we give thanks for the Church throughout the Diocese and throughout the world, for the way of the cross that brings us to God now, as we are, on the journey with the joyful hope of Easter.