

Celebration of Readers' Ministry and Re-licensing

For we preach not ourselves but Jesus Christ as Lord.

Ignatius of Antioch, on his way to being martyred in Rome at the end of the first century, wrote seven epistles. In his letter to the Trallian church – between Laodicea and Ephesus, he wrote: 'Close your ears then if anyone preaches to you without speaking of Jesus Christ.'

For we preach not ourselves but Jesus Christ as Lord.

Tonight and tomorrow we celebrate St Wulfstan, Bishop of Worcester whose millennium we celebrated five years ago. He came from Long Itchington, a 'local boy made good' we might say! William of Malmesbury wrote of him: 'He loved his preaching. He always spoke about Christ, resolutely setting Christ before his hearers that even the most reluctant might hear his name.'

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Or do we?

Bishop Christopher and I have done a little bit of preaching in German recently. In Germany I hasten to add! Afterwards he texted me in German and I tried to respond Danke Schon but my mobile turned what I wanted to say and thought I was saying into something else. The text Bishop Christopher actually received from me read: Dangle achondroplasia! As preachers of the Word of God are we communicating what we like to think we are? Are we communicating the Lordship of Jesus Christ? Or actually something else? And how do we set about answering such questions?

Are you being stretched as Readers? Are we, you and I, as ministers of the Word being stretched? Are you, as I will be asking you shortly, continually deepening your knowledge of the Christian faith and growing in your discipleship of Christ? Are you, are we continually stirring up the gift of the Spirit in us to make Christ known to all? Or have we grown too comfortable, too settled, too safe? Why do I ask? Because God's call in our lives is always into more. Just as it was for Abraham and Moses, just as it was for the Apostles and Ignatius and Wulfstan, God's call is always into more than we can do but never to more than He can do through us. When God lives in us, our hearts are enlarged, our minds enlightened, we are growing, growing in the knowledge of God, growing up into Him, letting ourselves continually be transformed by the renewal of our minds. This is the work of God in us. Abraham Lincoln said 'My concern is not whether God is on our side, my greatest concern is to be on God's side.' We cannot escape the otherness of God. Martin Luther put it more starkly: 'If God's Word is to transform us, it must always be our adversary.' There is an inevitable 'over againstness' of God's word. It is always in one way or another disturbing and challenging the culture around us and the culture within us.

Last week there were two wonderful programmes on BBC 1 and BBC2 at the same time. One explored life under the oceans. Oceanographers believe there are still thousands of undiscovered species in the depths of the oceans. They recognise that there is so much more to discover. The other programme with Brian Cox and about four other Professors in astronomy or astrophysics or quantum theory were looking upwards and one thing they knew above all else was how much they do not know. They agreed that it was only 5% of the universe about which they had any kind of knowledge – and this before we get to the hypothesis of universes or the multiverse. Whether of faith or not, they were in awe of the Creation itself, so much of it 'beyond our ken'. But we, who

acknowledge and worship a Creator beyond the creation, can say with the Psalmist ‘When I look at your heavens, the work of your fingers, the moon and the stars you have established; what are human beings that you are mindful of them, mortals that you care for them.’ Ps.8.3-4. Here there is both humility before the awesome greatness of God and joy in knowing our unique preciousness to Him. Like the human figure in the tapestry, ‘clasped’, as Archbishop Rowan put it, between the feet of Jesus, so small, yet so precious to God. I was amused to hear in that programme that the greatest meteorite shower in a decade is due to happen on 24th May, the anniversary of one whose heart was strangely warmed who experienced the reality of God’s forgiveness, who wrote ‘that my sins, even mine had been forgiven.’ The God of the universe, who is wholly other, utterly transcendent is the God who longs to make his home in us and for us to know our sins forgiven and to share in His very life. This is beyond any kind of ‘Wow’ factor.

So how can we preach not ourselves but Jesus Christ as Lord? William of Malmsbury wrote of Wulfstan, ‘He never neglected his interior life.’ In true prayer and contemplation, like those astrophysicists, we begin to know how much we don’t yet know. When we do go deeper in prayer, when we begin to glimpse and face our own vanities, when we go through the desert places and discover our utter poverty without him, then in the recognition of our need and in the reaching out, we begin to apprehend ‘How blessed are those who know their need of God’. When we neglect the interior life, the inner journey, the daily dying to self and surrender to Christ, we will not know both our own utter dependence and his utter dependability, we will not preach Christ Jesus as Lord. The Japanese theologian, Kosuke Koyama wrote ‘Biblical truth is not an intact truth but a suffered truth.’ The power of Paul’s preaching was not the human power of a smooth and accomplished orator, it was God’s power at work in one who was weak, who was afflicted, who was persecuted but one who in his self- surrender to Christ crucified and risen knew both his utter dependence and at the same time trusted God’s absolute dependability.

And then what?

If we look at the stars at night to see how small we are in relation to the cosmos, if we make time for prayer and not just the prayer of words but of being with God and see how much more there is to discover of God above us and God within us, then there is just one more thing. In the phrase of many teenagers to their parents a few years ago, ‘we need to get out more.’ See more films, there are some extraordinarily good films about. Go and spend time with people who have no contact at all with the Church, those who are angry with the Church and sense judgement, not the unconditional love of God from Christians. We need to cross boundaries for the Gospel’s sake. We need to be in situations, like lambs among wolves, where we know we cannot trust in our own human strength but only in God. Why? Because ‘we have this treasure in clay jars, so that it may be made clear that this extraordinary power belongs to God and does not come from us.’

The one who has called us is faithful and will do it.

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