

Holy Week 2012, Coventry Cathedral

‘For with you is the fountain of life. In your light we see light.’ Psalm 36.9

Are you a bath person or a shower person? It’s a question Mary my wife thinks I shouldn’t ask! But let’s think about it. In a bath you lie down in lovely warm water, you soap the dirt off and then you lie in the dirty water. If you have a shower on the other hand, the water is flowing, always new always fresh. If we look at our Church life which does it more resemble, a bath or a shower? I heard God’s love described as *‘the Niagara of God’s love’*, so strong, so powerful and life-giving to the deserts in every human heart.

If we look at mission in the New Testament, it flows not from a sense of duty but rather from joy, from lives changed and set free, from lives that have tasted heaven. As Peter and John say *‘We cannot but speak of what we have seen and heard.’* (Acts 4.20) Changed lives change lives. In this sense mission is more about who we *are* than what we *do*. Mission is the overflow of God’s love which is always outward bound. It always has to be given away. Sadly in many quarters as a Church we are known or at least perceived more for what we are against than for our contagious Christ-like love that draws others whoever they may be to the Father’s heart of love. In the Acts of the Apostles, it is the presence and power of the Holy Spirit among the believers that attracts and draws others to this new life in Christ. The life-changing proclamations of the Gospel in Acts 2 are not foisted upon unbelievers as part of any planned ‘mission’, they are responses to questions asked by the unbelievers, questions provoked by the presence and power of the Holy Spirit at work among the believers. *‘What is going on?’* they ask. *‘What should we do?’* Their hunger for God, made in the image of God as they are, is provoked by their sense of the presence of God. And so it is today. It is the presence and power of Christ that attracts people to faith, not monologues, not moralism, not answering questions people are not asking, and not even saying ‘you come and join us’. If it is the life of Christ in us and among us that draws others to Him, what are we doing to guard and to grow His life in us and ours in Him? Jesus says *‘If the salt has lost its saltiness, how can it be made salty again?’* (Matt.5.13) What can we do to be salt and light, to guard and to kindle God’s life in us? In one sense of course we can do nothing at all, because it is all of God. But a yacht can never truly be a yacht unless it is put into the water to catch the wind. So what can we do to put ourselves in the place where the wind of the Spirit can fill our sails? Leaders in the early pre-Christendom Church described this place of renewal in God in various ways. Cyprian describes life in Christ, in the words of the Song of Solomon, as *‘a garden enclosed, a well of living water’*. Origen: *‘This is God’s country. This is paradise’*. Hippolytus: *‘This is the place where the Holy Spirit flourishes.’* *‘In you is the fountain of life’* writes the Psalmist. They are all describing in different ways the new life, the true life that can be found only in God. How can we stay in this fountain of life, in the streams of living water? Ignatius of Antioch wrote a number of letters to different Christian communities on his way to martyrdom in Rome in the early 2nd century. In the course of this journey he also met with Polycarp who kept his letters and was himself to be martyred soon afterwards, a martyrdom witnessed and vividly depicted that we can read today. Ignatius gives us some signposts in our quest.

First, in his letter to the church in Tralles (between Ephesus and Laodicea) he writes: *‘Close your ears, then, if anyone preaches to you without speaking of Jesus Christ.’* Some people, I think many people actually, still see the Church and the Christian faith as being primarily about morals or observing a moral code. Others see the faith as being primarily about a set of beliefs or propositions. Others see the faith as primarily about ‘going to Church’ and then of

course so many say ‘you don’t have to go to church to be a Christian’. If clergy got a pound every time they had heard that they would be rich. We don’t *go* to Church, we *are* the Church and what we are about is not a moral code or a set of beliefs but a Person and a relationship and that Person is Jesus Christ, and Him crucified. Like the Greeks coming to Philip, the world longs to see Jesus - not the Church. The Church exists to make Jesus known. We have only one message and that is Jesus. The Church exists by the power of the Holy Spirit to make Christ present and to reveal Him. We do this not just by words or deeds -and sometimes not even in our words and deeds as we confess when we meet to worship. We do this above all through who we *are*. It is our ‘in Christness’ that above all reveals Christ. But sometimes perhaps the darkness of our minds, the blindness of our sight and the hardness of our hearts conceal Him from others. To paraphrase St Paul, though we may talk the Christian talk, though we may preach wonderful scintillating sermons, though we are on every possible church committee, though we do great works of charity and service in the community but have not love, Christ’s self-giving love, it profits us and others nothing. Jesus said and Jesus says ‘*Abide in me, apart from me, you can do nothing.*’

Second, and following on from this, in his letter to the Christians in Ephesus, Ignatius writes ‘*It is better to be quiet and to be than to make fluent professions and not to be.*’ I heard recently the Church England described as like a swimming pool where most of the noise happens at the shallow end! If we are serious about listening to God, we need to make space for silence in His presence. I believe this is actually important in public worship too. Listening to God in silence, in stillness, is important both when we meet together and when we are alone with God. It is encouraging that more and more clergy chapters are meeting to pray and in silence to listen together to God and this is happening more in Deanery and parish meetings across the Diocese. There is a monastic dimension to every Christian life, namely praying alone ‘*monos*’. Jesus’ foundational preaching on prayer is to ‘*go to your room, close the door and pray to your Father in secret.*’ This is the desert place, desert/*eremos* from which we get hermit, the one who prays alone. Jesus gets up early to go to a solitary place/*eremos* to pray. Basil Hume wrote ‘*We will never be at peace in the market place until we are at home in the desert*’. Quiet time alone in God’s presence - in ‘*the desert place*’ - deepens our roots in him and alerts us to the promptings of the Spirit in the busy market place of our daily lives. ‘*Be still and know that I am God.*’ Ps.46.10

Third, Ignatius on the way to his own martyrdom encourages the Ephesians to ‘*do your best to meet more often to give thanks and glory to God.*’ Praise changes things. Praise changes the atmosphere inside the ones praising and the atmosphere around the ones praising. Why? Because God inhabits the praises of his people. (Ps.22.3) We come close to God, we enter his courts with praise. (Ps.95.2) Praise empowers us in the Spirit. I think of Jacob Kwashi then Dean of Kaduna Cathedral in Nigeria who visited us recently and was telling us about a Church burnt down deliberately by so-called Muslims and the following morning amidst the smouldering remains a huge crowd of Christians gathered around the ruins not to lament but to praise God. This apparently confounded the perpetrators who could not believe such a reaction to their malicious action. If we only praise God when we feel like it or when we come to Church, we miss out on so much that God has for us. ‘*Seven whole days, not one in seven, I will praise thee*’ writes George Herbert. We are to rejoice in the Lord always. As a Eucharistic people we are called at all times and in all places to give God thanks and praise. ‘*Give thanks*’ writes Paul ‘*in all circumstances for this is God’s will for you in Christ Jesus.*’ (1 Thess.5.16) We are all, I suspect, on the nursery slopes in this. I most certainly am but yet I do believe that as we do gradually build more thanks and praise into the warp and woof of our daily lives the more we will see that we have to give God thanks and praise for. Thanking

God for what he gives us is good but there is more than this. Bernard of Clairvaux describes three stages in the Christian journey: first, *'love of self for self's sake'*, the pre-Christian stage; second, *'love of God for self's sake'*, loving God that is for all that he gives us, and finally and most important of all *'loving God for God's sake'* irrespective of the circumstances, however dire, in which we find ourselves. Loving God for who He is. It is into this intimacy with God that the Spirit invites us.

Fourth, if we are to be light and life in God's world we need to be fed by the Word of Life. Jesus says *'the Words I have spoken to you are Spirit and life.'* (John 6.63) Peter says to Jesus *'To whom (else) can we go? You have the words of eternal life'* (John 6.68). Paul writes *'Let the Word of Christ dwell in you richly.'* (Col.3.16) What is your relationship with the Word of God? Is it more like a rule book or a love letter? And when you read or hear the word of God, is it simply out of interest or duty or habit or is it from a real desire and hunger for God's life? After all, our experience of God is in large measure determined by our desire for God. *'These things are written'*, St John tells us *'that you may believe and believing have life in His name.'* (John 20.31) The 4th century church historian, Eusebius, tells us that in the early church it was not only the apostles and evangelists but very many lay disciples of that age *'whose hearts had been ravished by the divine Word.'* 'Ravished' by God's word, what an image! This is not the language of religious 'churchianity' but of passionate, vibrant life in Christ. The gospel spreads and the kingdom grows by Word and Spirit. When Luke charts the extraordinary growth of the Church in Acts, he could not be clearer about the means. It is by the preaching and receiving of the Word. 'Preaching' and or 'receiving' God's Word are mentioned 32 times. The apostles determine their priority as ones sent by Jesus *'We will give ourselves continually to prayer and to the ministry of the Word.'* (Acts 6.4) As part of the one, holy catholic and apostolic church, we too all of us, lay and ordained, share in that apostolate today. It is the Word of God in the power of the Spirit that brings life and light and healing, that brings salvation.

So what is the nature of your – of my – relationship with the Word of God? Assuming that we do read the scriptures daily as it is our daily bread, how do we approach the reading? C.S. Lewis, in one of his last writings *'An Experiment in Criticism'*, distinguishes between two ways of reading. The first he calls 'using', the second he calls 'receiving'. 'Using' is a kind of consumer approach to the Scriptures which is when we use the text simply to reinforce what we already believe, going back again and again to our favourite passages and pet themes and seeking to confirm for ourselves our own inevitably partial interpretation. It is, albeit subtly, a 'me' centred approach. It is closed to challenge, rebuke and even surprise and delight. There is always more to plumb from all of the Scriptures than we have yet understood. 'Receiving' is approaching the Scriptures as gift, knowing there is always something to receive, something new, something life-giving. It is approaching the scriptures prayerfully, humbly, hungrily, expectantly, actually wanting to be transformed by the renewal of our minds.

Just reading, however, is not enough. When Mary heard the words of the angel she *'pondered these things in her heart'*. Some of us need to read less and ponder more. We need to let the word of God down from our heads as something to think about into our hearts so that they become part of us. You will know the story, alleged to be true by a Bishop in the Oxford Diocese, of the curate visiting an elderly lady and there were some peanuts next to him in the chair he sat in which he helped himself to throughout the meeting. When he got up to leave he apologised profusely at having eaten them all to which she responded 'Oh don't worry about that, once I'd sucked the chocolate off, I didn't want them anymore.' There is always more new life, fresh life and a Word of God for today to be drawn from the Scriptures. Reading, marking, learning and inwardly digesting the Scriptures is *'letting the*

Word of Christ dwell in us richly (Col.3.16), letting them feed us from deep within. To communicate the Gospel, we need to be gossiped.

Our life is in Him and His Word of life.

I'll close with words from Hebrews 12, set for today, Wednesday in Holy Week, drawing us back to the One alone in whom we find new life, true life, eternal life. *'Since we are surrounded by so great a cloud of witnesses, let us also lay aside every weight and the sin that clings so closely and let us run with perseverance the race that is set before us, looking to Jesus the author and perfecter of our faith, who for the sake of the joy that was set before him endured the cross, disregarding its shame and has taken his seat at the right hand of the throne of God. Consider him who endured such hostility against himself from sinners so that you may not grow weary or lose heart.'*

+John Stroyan