30 March 2018: Chrism Eucharist

Maundy Thursday


The Rt Revd Andrew Proud, Bishop of Reading

‘Peeling off the skin’

_Gentle me,_
_Holy one_
Into an unclinched moment,
_A deep breath,_
_A letting go_
Of heavy expectancies,
Of shrivelling anxieties,
Of dead certainties,
_That, softened by the silence,_
_Surrounded by the light,_
_And open to the mystery,_
_I may be found by wholeness,_
_Upheld by the unfathomable,_
_Entranced by the simple,_
_And filled with the joy_
_That is you._
_Amen._

More from Ted Loder later.

This opportunity
to lay aside our responsibilities
for a morning in holy week,
to remember our first love –
feels so precious.
And it seems almost more important - now, 
Living in volatile, uncertain, 
complex and ambiguous times as we do. 
And it has begun to feel to me, lately, that we, 
God’s Church - caught up in that 
are a bit like a traveller walking in a deep, dark wood.

And - afraid we might be on the wrong path - 
have started thinking to ourselves - 
if we only walk faster –
push ourselves a bit harder -
this may even turn out to be the right path 
home.

So, this morning is a gift, 
Space to think of ‘home’, 
to recalibrate ..... life, really!
And - to remember our first love –
why we offered ourselves for this life 
in the first place -
to BE - in relationship - with a loving God.

To have time for that.

And, ‘Nothing’ said Evagrius, 
‘is more essential to prayer than attentiveness’
In fact, ‘Unawareness is the root of all evil’ as another desert monk said.

I want to reflect with you on what we might want 
to pay attention to – and I am going to try to get 
at that through the very last lines of our gospel

Where Jesus says, 
*You are those who have been with me in my 
trials, And I confer on you, just as my Father has conferred on me, a kingdom,*
That is as mysterious as it is exciting. Because the kingdom He has been speaking of is both somewhere and everywhere; A subversive Kingdom That springs forth from the smallest, most unpromising beginnings; A peaceable kingdom, in which The ‘first shall be last and the last shall be first.’ In other words, a kingdom you and I are very unlikely to enter first, and certainly not ahead of the starving, the abused, and the unjustly imprisoned. And with that kingdom in mind, I want to suggest that our real work is not the jobs, the roles, or the ministries we’re licensed to — or the responsibilities we carry. It is not even the preaching, teaching, presiding, and leading we do – Our real work is more elusive than any of that. Our real work is to receive the extraordinary gift that the kingdom is — where our only responsibility is to seek it - and to share it - with the last and with the first.

So, what of our jobs? The ministries to which we are licensed? I wonder if we feel unhappy, from time to time because we look for more meaning in them than they can provide? The temptation for us - is to believe that somehow - we are ‘in control’ of sacred things.
But it is often in the chance conversation
after a big event, that truth dawns –
slipping in … end-first
rather than in - or through - our lovingly
constructed sermon or worship.
If Max Weber is right, then we expect more from
our work.
He said that what he called ‘worldly asceticism’
has shaped Protestant
views of work and vocation - and affected us all.
And so since the sixteenth century
We’ve performed our jobs in the world
with the same spiritual fervour only thought
possible for those who lived in the cloister.
Which means our culture celebrates the active
virtues to the point of insisting that our jobs
carry an almost holy relevance.
So I know this might sound sacrilegious -
but I am going to say it anyway -
that our jobs, our ministries are probably
secondary to our real work.
Our real work - which is to follow Jesus –
to grow in holiness,
to be shaped by Him –
and lead others to Him,
feeding - guiding - and loving them on the way –
and they us - actually -
until we are all more like Him –
and can remember whose we are –
inhabitants of the Kingdom He has
covenanted for us.
Which seems to be the meaning here.
I have Covenanted you a Kingdom.....
In scripture - we see - many times, 
how God communicates His glory –
through His covenant –
which is often described in terms of - clothing.

So, in Deuteronomy, as a shepherd, God wraps
the infant found in the vast desert waste [Deut
32:10]; and guards him as the apple of his eye.

As a king, in Isaiah 6, the skirts of God’s robes
fill the Temple [Isa 6:1];
And as a spouse, in Ezekiel 16 [v 8ff],
God spreads His mantle over His people and
clothes them –
not with the skins of animals,
but with fine linen and silk
as if He were making them priests [Exod 16:13]
Which is what eastern Christians believe we all
are.

Lay and ordained – they believe we are priests of
creation – made – simply - to stand before God
to voice the praises of all God’s creatures.

Jesus confers the kingdom on us – as the
kingdom was conferred upon Him.

He - who was stripped of His clothing
and dressed – in kingly robes
as a parody of worldly power –
becoming - just - ‘a’ man.

Until, as Easter dawned, God’s love -
His glory is revealed -
not with turban, ring or robe –
but as His whole being shines –
even through his clothing.
And yet – of course,
When they see Him,
Mary Magdalene,
and the travellers to Emmaus –
only see someone very ordinary
a gardener, and a fellow traveller.

I think there is something here for us –
licensed ministers of word and sacrament –
in this ‘fast’ and anxious Church we love –
and - even hate sometimes –
for how we might think of the ministries
we are called and licensed to.

And I think that might be as straightforward as
celebrating the grace of Baptism –
over the grace of orders.

I am beginning to feel that we need to recover
our confidence in Baptism -
those precious moments
when our identity is given –
as a gift - freely – as we are clothed with Christ.

Think how transformational it would be if we
lived out of that.
Because then,
When everything seems lost – we’d discover
again - that baptismal grace –
if we pay attention to it –
has the power to transform even the
deep darkness of the forest path –
into the way home.
To transform deadlock into breakthrough –
And to change hearts of stone -
into hearts of flesh –
so that - God’s Holy Spirit
can write on our hearts
the only demands God ever makes –
the demands of love.

Maybe our work is to learn –
through spiritual practices –
Yes! to learn that
we are deeply loved –
SO we can love?
And in that love, to find the courage
to tear away all the dead skin –
of the institution –
and even our roles sometimes –
to allow the life of Christ to
rise within us.

Our work is not to grasp at mystery,
and certainly not to try to confect it for others -
I think we discover it
through paying attention to the everyday,
To the prosaic –
that is how we find God’s glory -
Because that is how
Mary Magdalene and the travellers did.

We need days like today, in places set apart,
to shift from fast - to slow -
if we are to have any hope of gently
lifting up the edges of the ordinary –
to discover the glory underneath.
Until, little by little, over time,
We begin to see how the work shines through the
job, too.
Our jobs can become the way we do our best work
Here, at this desk, from this pulpit, and this altar, with these people, even in the drudging necessity of it all.
The kingdom and the mystery – the love – comes as by-product of all of this.
Through all the compulsions of our ‘fast’ and anxious Church, let Him reign – wild and awesome right at the heart of who we are and everything we do.
I am going to finish with some more Ted Loder, this from his book of prayers, Guerillas of Grace.

O God
Who out of nothing
Brought everything that is,
Out of who I am
Bring more of what I dream
But haven’t dared;
Direct my power and passion
To creating life
Where there is death,
To putting flesh of action
On bare-boned intentions,
To lighting fires
Against the midnight of indifference,
To throwing bridges of care
Across canyons of loneliness;
So I can look on creation
Together with you,
And, behold,
Call it very good;
Through Jesus Christ my Lord.
Amen.