17 February 2019: Choral Eucharist
The Third Sunday before Lent
The Revd Canon Grant Bayliss, Diocesan Canon Precentor

‘Disturb us, Lord’

“Disturb us, Lord, when we are too well pleased with ourselves; when our dreams have come true, because we have dreamed too little; when we arrived safely, because we sailed too close to the shore. Disturb us, Lord, when with the abundance of things we possess, we have lost our thirst for the waters of life; having fallen in love with life, we have ceased to dream of eternity; and in our efforts to build a new earth, we have allowed our vision of the new heaven to dim. Disturb us, Lord, to dare more boldly, to venture on wider seas where storms will show your mastery; where losing sight of land, we shall find the stars. We ask you to push back the horizons of our hopes; and to push us into the future in strength, courage, hope, and love. This we ask in the name of our Captain, who is Jesus Christ.”

So runs a famous prayer, attributed almost-certainly-falsely to Francis Drake. It may not have much to do with Elizabethan sea-faring but it has a lot to do with our readings and the heart of the Gospel, especially for those of us who like “the most excellent Theophilus” (the presumably wealthy patron to whom Luke addressed his Gospel) are attracted to Christ but live relatively comfortable lives.

We may not think of ourselves as rich but as social scientists have repeatedly demonstrated perceptions of wealth are relative, rather than absolute, terms. No matter how much we actually have, what most people measure is how rich or poor we feel compared to those around us and with whom we spend our time.

We need disturbing to see the bigger picture, to find the new perspective, to sail towards the further horizon. And that’s precisely what the Jesus of our Gospel tries to do – announcing, “Woe to you who are rich… woe to you who are full… woe to you who are laughing… woe to you when all speak well of you”. Words not of curse or condemnation but of lament. Words that come not from a cruel or vindictive heart but a compassionate
one, saddened by so many people’s inability to see themselves and their lives for what they are. Words designed to disturb complacency.

It’s an all-too-familiar Gospel theme – Jesus turns the world on its head. And if we are to follow him, we must be ready for our life to be disturbed, challenged and changed. To have all our expectations of success, honour and wealth turned on their head. Transmuted from earth to heaven. God lifts up the lowly and sends the rich empty away.

But that familiarity is part of the problem. Whereas Theophilus and Luke’s first readers may have been truly shocked to hear Christ wailing woe for them, the rich and comfortable; for most of us, the words are not new. They risk drifting in one ear and out the other without bringing about any real change of heart or life, as we insulate ourselves with excuses – we are not that rich, not that full, not that respectable; there is always someone richer.

What can break through? What can disturb our daily patterns?

A few months ago I was in Manchester, walking amidst the shops with the throngs of people and the siren calls of cash registers, when I saw a figure lying curiously unmoving on a bench outside St Ann’s church. The light caught the figure in unusual way and I was about to say hello when I drew nearer and saw that it was in fact a bronze cast. A man wrapped in a blanket his hands and face covered. But, protruding from the hem of the cloth, feet unmistakeably marked with the nails of the Cross.

It was in fact a sculpture by the Canadian artist, Timothy Schmalz. A piece called the ‘Homeless Jesus’, first installed outside the University of Toronto but which can now be found in 100 locations around the world, ready to be encountered by unwitting passers-by like myself and potentially challenging them in their complacency.

It stopped me in my tracks, re-opened my eyes. Not because its message was novel – the link to Matthew 25 and Jesus’ famous parable, teaching that whatever we do for the least of our brothers and sisters we do for him is a two-thousand-year-old connection well-
explored by poets and artists. But something about the unexpectedness of this sculpture, its physical, tangible presence broke through the careful accumulation of habits and busyness that cocoon my life. It gave a new urgency to my meetings with people here on the streets of Oxford, a renewed openness to our rough sleepers which had been dulled by daily passing by. As this Thursday the city remembered those who died on the streets and in shelters or temporary accommodation, it turned my prayers from Valentine’s day romance to a deeper sort of love.

I felt it too in a different sort of disturbance on Friday, as hundreds of school-children took to the streets of Oxford and other cities around the country to call for real response to climate change. My eldest daughter, Beth, and her sixth-form friends were there amidst the protesters, waving placards and chanting rhymes to try to disturb an indigence she cannot yet understand; why those of us who are older seem so complacent, why so many governments accept the scientific data but are unwilling to change, unwilling to discomfort our present to protect the future. It may not have made much difference to Theresa May or national policy but seeing those faces, hearing their passion took me for a moment out of my sense of powerlessness and brought me back to ask what changes can I make, what can I do to value the creation that I bless God for and receive as a gift.

“Disturb us, Lord…” It is a tough prayer to pray but one we need to have never far from our lips. And the more comfortable we feel or the busier we are, the more we need to pray it. To ask that God will choose the right route through our defences to open us up and change us.

Whether we are disturbed by Jesus’ words, or by works of art, or by community rallies, may something disturb us today. May the hardnesses of our hearts and lives be melted and softened by the message of the Gospel, wherever it finds its way in.

“Disturb us, Lord to dare more boldly, to venture on wider seas where storms will show your mastery; where losing sight of land, we shall find the stars. For the sake of our Captain Jesus Christ. Amen.”