



THE ARCHBISHOP
OF YORK

The Archbishop delivered the sermon at his Enthronement as 98th Archbishop of York in York Minster, 18 October 2020. This follows in full.

Isaiah 61.4 – speaking about the world we will build when we discover God’s peaceful vision of justice -

“They shall build up the ancient ruins, they shall raise up former devastations, they shall repair ruined cities.”

Goodness me! The church of Jesus Christ! What a motley band of muddled humanity it is. All the wrong sort of people gathered together with their foibles and failings: the cracked vessels through which the light of God’s vision shines into the world.

We were introduced to some of the lesser known members of the cast in our second reading. It is one of the features of the New Testament, especially Paul’s letters, that names of individuals pop into the text with little introduction. The reason is simply this: those receiving the letter knew who these people were. It is one branch of the family writing to another. For me, it brings the New Testament to vivid life. If these manuscripts were a put up job written many years after the events they describe, why would these named, but unknown, individuals be included?

So who were Tychicus, Aristarchus, Onesimus and Demas?

Well, we’re not always entirely sure. We know that Tychicus accompanied Paul, and Epaphras was one of the people who planted the church in Colossae. Onesimus was an escaped slave (his name means ‘useful’, and was a common slaves’ name). Paul now refers to him as ‘one of us’. This is significant. Mark, the cousin of Barnabas, may well be the same Mark who writes the first gospel. Luke, the physician, is the writer of the third gospel and the Acts of the Apostles. It is his festival we remember today; Luke, was a doctor and a poet, a great storyteller whose gospel gives us the very best of Jesus’ stories, reminding me of R.S. Thomas’ great poem, *Praise*, where he says God is praised because God is “artist and scientist in one.” God is all encompassing.

To bring his storytelling to even more brilliant life, towards the end of the Acts of the Apostles, Luke even changes the tense of his writing: “they did this” suddenly becomes “we”, because Luke, the companion of Paul, now enters the story himself. What he writes is no longer based upon the memories of others; it is his own first-hand witness of those early days of the Christian church.

What an unexpected collection of people. And how quickly they changed and grew. What began as a small Jewish sect spread across the whole of the known world so that now Paul, a Jewish scholar who persecuted the Christian church and oversaw the death of its first martyr, and Luke, the doctor, and Onesimus the liberated slave, and Tychicus from Asia and Aristarchus from Greece are together modelling to an astonished world a

new way of human beings belonging together.

Because we are so familiar with this story, and because the ideas that this story produced have shaped the whole of European culture, we easily forget how shocking it was then for Jews and Gentiles to mix together; for slaves to be set free; and for the gods of Rome and the power of Rome to be invited to bend the knee to a God whose kingdom was not measured by wealth or power, not enforced by strict and suffocating codes of status and position, nor secured by might and the shedding of blood - except, that is, for the one shed blood of Jesus Christ on the cross who, it turns out to our surprise, *is* God come down to earth to share what it is to be human, and unite humanity with God. In this new humanity, the old distinctions just don't count anymore. God includes you in. That is the radical good news of the Christian faith. And very good news indeed if you are outcast or oppressed: liberty to captives, comfort for those who mourn, the very things Isaiah speaks of.

And in our own day there are still more barriers to be broken down, for as quickly as Christ sets us free from all the self-made constrictions of separation, the wilful pride of the rebel human heart builds them up again. This is why the Church of Jesus Christ must and does confront division and oppression today - we call it sin - those things which drive us from each other and drive us from God: homophobia, racism, modern day slavery, poverty, and the unchecked tyranny of unaccountable power wherever it is found, including the Church itself which we know is not immune from human failing.

This is our vocation. And it's my job as Bishop and Archbishop to serve and lead the church in the very particular challenges of our own day where our world cries out for ways of inhabiting life which draws us together rather than tear us apart and is able to confront with joyful confidence the horrors that surround us: not just this terrible Covid pandemic, but death itself, and the more dangerous scourges of racism which deny our common humanity; and the environmental challenge where we are at risk of separating ourselves from the planet itself, so obsessed have we become with the dangerous suppositions of our own importance and dominion.

Since I moved to Bishopthorpe about a month ago, I have been having conversations with my new staff team. I've asked each of them the same questions. One of them is this: what would you do if you were the Archbishop of York?

Their answers have been fascinating and I want to finish by quoting Bernard, who works two days a week in the gardens at Bishopthorpe. He told me about a young woman he knows who goes to church in York, but doesn't really believe in God. She *wants* to believe, and she's certainly not an atheist. But like so many people in England today, she just hasn't got there yet.

"So why do you come to church, then?", he asked her. She replied, "Because I feel safe here; I feel loved; I feel accepted."

I found the story profoundly moving. Don't get me wrong, I do indeed long for people to see that Jesus Christ shows us what humanity is supposed to look like, and knowing him and following him brings liberation, joy and purpose to life. But, as I said, she's not there yet. That's not

what she believes. But she's still travelling with the church.

Why?

Because she feels safe.

I don't know what horrors she's experienced in her life, and what other places there may have been where this safety wasn't there, but I rejoice that she found church a safe place. And I say this to you very mindful of the recently published *Inquiry into Child Sexual Abuse in the Anglican church*. Because the Church of England has not always been the safe place it should have been. We need to change, and that change needs to be much more than mere words. I am determined to be someone who will lead on this change and I hold before me the words of this unknown young woman who came to the church with her fears and horrors and found a place of safety. I want that to be true for every church.

Then she said she was loved. This is such a simple thing to say, but it's also profoundly beautiful.

On the night before he died, Jesus said to his friends that this is how people would know they were his followers; by the way they loved each other. And Jesus' most famous teaching is about loving yourself, loving your neighbour and loving God. And because I am a simple soul, I am not embarrassed to say to you that this would be the greatest revolution in the English church. Letting go of so much of our pomposity, privilege, position and power we became a simpler, humbler church; but also bolder in saying that our job is to love one another, and to show the world what loving one another looks like.

That was the amazing thing those first Christians showed the world: the people who were supposed to be apart, were together. They loved one another. Enemies had become friends. This love and this service conquered the world in a way that armies never can. It built a kingdom that can last for ever because it's not measured by space and time, has no capital and no borders, but is simply the consequence of love: for when we love each other we become more the people that we are meant to be, and form a unity that cannot be broken, not even by death. We know this because whether we are believers or not, those we love who have died, those who are not with us here today, are still as loved as they ever were. As Julian of Norwich declared of the whole gospel of Jesus Christ: "Love was his meaning."

And finally, she said she was accepted. Again, I do not know what rejections and rebuttals she had experienced, nor why others would have been quick to exclude her (though this is something we human beings are very good at) but I do know that in the Church of Jesus Christ, even though she didn't believe yet, she found a home: a group of people who drew their circle wider and counted her in.

This is what the gospel is always seeking to do. It is always seeking to expand the boundaries of the Kingdom of love by including people. Then, in the school of love which is the Church of Jesus Christ, we learn how to live as God intends, and schooled by scripture and tradition we find

ourselves and we find a way for life. Then the world itself is changed.

That's what Luke and Tychicus found all those centuries ago. That's what Bernard and this young woman found in a church in York. That's what I have found on the journey of my life.

It is this vision of a new humanity and the church as a school of love and a servant to the nation that I declare today.

This is a time of huge challenge, uncertainty and fearfulness in our world. I am conscious that I'm standing in the shoes of some very great forebears, not least a man like William Temple who during the darkest hours of the Second World War with others dreamed of what the peace may look like and how literally devastated cities would be re-built, but also a moral vision for the rebuilding of a nation. He was one of the architects of that post-war consensus that gave birth to a welfare state and to that NHS that we stood out on the streets and clapped every Thursday Evening during the hardest days of lockdown.

What were we clapping? Well, yes, all those who worked in our health service, but also all the others whose labour kept us going: those who stack supermarket shelves; volunteer in foodbanks; drive delivery vans, or collect prescriptions. But I also think we were clapping a set of ideas that are very dear to us: a belief about our common humanity which says that we belong to each other and have a responsibility to each other and that we are at our very best when we build communities of love which look out for and cherish each other, so that there is healthcare for everyone, not just for those who can pay.

It is easy to take these ideas for granted. But they have an origin. They don't come from our observation of nature nor from the customs and cultures of most human communities. They flow directly from the revelation of God in Jesus Christ who by his sharing in our life and through his death and resurrection has formed us into a new humanity, and brought us into a community of giving and receiving love.

Therefore, as a nation, and especially here in Yorkshire and across the north, we need to let this vision and these beautiful ideas, rekindle hope, build community, challenge the narrow and divisive versions of the world which only divide us from each other and, as we see to our terrible detriment, the planet itself. As a church we need to let this vision enable us to embrace difference, disagree well, and turn ourselves inside out in service, prophetic witness and joyful proclamation of the gospel to the world.

I pledge to give myself to this happy task. It is good news for the world and may indeed be the only hope for the world at this awful moment in our history. This is how we will build up the ancient ruins in our own day.

The problems of the world, be it racism, poverty or environmental catastrophe begin in the human heart which so easily turns in on itself – what we call sin - pulling up the drawbridge on the rest of humanity. It is fuelled by the unjust and oppressive structures of self-serving systems. But it

can be changed. And this change comes when we behold the beauty and peace of Jesus Christ and are drawn into this strange, motley, and yes muddled, but determined to love each other and love the world, Church of Jesus Christ.

Let's put this sign up outside our churches. Let's wear it on our sleeves and declare it to the world: Everyone is welcome. Here is a place and here is a people where you will be safe, where you will be loved, where you will be accepted. This is where you will find hope for the world and a new vision for a new humanity. Enter here and be changed. Not into somebody else, but into the beautiful person you are meant to be. Then join with us in changing the world.

The Order of Service is available below

Documents

- [Enthronement Order of Service 18 October 2020](#) (232.23 KB)

Source URL: <https://www.archbishopofyork.org/sermon-service-evensong-and-enthronement-98th-archbishop-york>