

The Dream for the Church

St Martin in the Fields Lecture Series - 27 September 2021

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The Archbishop gave the opening lecture at St Martin in the Fields in the Autumn Lecture Series â We Have a Dream his speech follows in full...

The only really interesting thing about the Church is God, and God as God is revealed to us in the life, death and resurrection of Jesus Christ.Â

Jesus is for us the human face of God; God coming to us and speaking to us in the language of a human life; and at the same time revealing to us, not only God, but what our humanity can and should be.

If this was a sermon, I am a preacher after all, I would have a text. From 2 Corinthians 5.17: âIf anyone is in Christ, there is a new creation: everything old has passed away; see, everything has become new!â

That is the great hope of our life in Christ. A hope of transformation.

And what is the Church? Well here I am going to rather inelegantly paraphrase or misquote Rowan Williams where I once heard him say something like this, Â we are the ones who are being transformed by Christ in order to transform the world. We are this motley band of muddled humanity whose lives have been so impacted by what God has shown us and done for us in Jesus Christ that we have formed a community that is centred on Christ: and shaped by his teaching and his presence; and resourced and sustained by that continuing ever present presence that we called the Holy Spirit; and nourished each day by the iron rations of scripture and sacrament, which are in the end probably the only things about church life that really matter (and that shape everything else) we are trying, not just to follow Jesus, but recognise our responsibility to the world and share with the world and every person in it the things that we have seen and received from Jesus. Â One very long sentence!

So when I speak about the mission of the church (which on the whole I try not to) what Iâm really speaking about is the mission of God: Godâs great vision and desire to shape and transform the whole world around Christ; and what we call mission is our catching hold of Godâs vision and joining in as best we can. Therefore, my dream for the church is not really a dream at all. Rather, it is the hope that we can become the simpler, humbler, bolder church that the current vision statements of the Church of England encourage, reflecting the simplicity, humility and courage that we see in Christ.

A church absolutely centred on Christ will require a stripping back, a purging, of all those things that are not of Christ, for all the great spiritual writers say that the first step in the spiritual life is the unmasking of illusion.Â

I wonder whether this focus of the church being centred on Christ, I wonder if we could have had such a focus were it not for the last 18 months of Covid, where our lives have been so stripped back, where we have been denied all the familiarities and the comforts of worship and fellowship, where we have had a Eucharistic fast for months and months. I found myself saying during the second or third lockdown that Lent seems to have been very long this year. It has been going on for over 12 months. Â But with this stripping back we have found the presence of Christ in a new and beautiful way and it is from that from which we build.

Simplicity in this sense â the natural gift of the child, the supernatural gift of the saint â is the reflection of God. It was Ronald Knox who said that âThere is only one being who is absolutely simple; that is almighty God, who knows everything.â Â He went on: âTo be simple is to see things with the eyes of God, that is to see them as they are without trimmings.â This is what Jesus called purity of heart (see Matthew 5. 8). And it is the pure of heart who inherit the earth. This is the very big vision that flows from the deep well of our life in Christ.

I therefore dare to dream as we emerge from Covid that we might even be able to scrape the barnacles off the hull of the church and put out again into deep waters, recognising that our vocation, especially in the Church of England, is to be the church for everyone, or as one of my most famous predecessors famously put it: the one organisation which exists for the benefit of its non-members. Which is why the church that is centred on Jesus Christ will also be shaped by Jesus Christ, and I dream every church, be it Westminster abbey, St Martin in the Fields, the tiniest village church in the tiniest hamlets rural Herefordshire has to offer, or hard-pressed, under resourced inner-city urban churches serving a glorious diversity of people, or some swinging from the chandeliers new wine fandango of a resource church, or a small gathering of young people meeting each week with a pioneer minister for a cup of coffee and hardly yet a church at all, but a little band of people who want to know Jesus more and see how his life can shape their lives and the life of the world, will make discipleship, apostolic and missionary discipleship the centre of their lives. Because from this everything else will flow.Â

I dream of a church where almost the first words that Saint Benedict wrote when he produced his rule might become central to the life of every parish church, chaplaincy, fresh expression or church plant: âWe are going to establish a school for the service of the Lord.â How would it be if that was true for every Christian Community ?

And I too want to save the parish. But the best way to save the parish is to grow the Church. And the best way to grow the Church is to proclaim the gospel. And the best way to proclaim the gospel is to so live your life in Christ that the beauty and radiance that we see in Christ shines in our lives and makes a difference in the world; it is the pursuit of holiness and the transparent, transformative indwelling of Christ that will save the parish. Though we will need to ensure that the necessary resources and back office functions of the Church are also focused to serve that same single purpose of making Christ known through his Church, that is through us — that motley band of muddled humanity whose lives have been so impacted by what God has shown us and done for us in Jesus Christ that they have formed a community that is centred on Christ: and trying to make a difference in the world. All this is happening in the life of our church at the moment and the things that are happening in the national church and reviews into effectiveness and governance are seeking to support it.Â

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And I am dismayed (and the inheritor of a good many sleepless nights), aghast that somehow the things that I have been associated with which only want to support, uphold, build and sustain local church and parish church (and more of it) in all its manifold forms have somehow been interpreted as quite the opposite. And I reach out to those who have been troubled by some of the things they have heard centrally and say please let us join together as sisters and brothers in Christ for this single purpose of finding how we can best preserve, sustain and enable local church to flourish, and by local church I mean the parish church and priests and parishes and churchwardens overseeing a proliferation of other ministries and expressions of Christian community which will enable us to reach more people and shape the life of our nation and our world. That is my dream. And I am hugely encouraged by the many, many ways I see this lived out in the parishes I visit. I was in Bridlington recently and was completely blown away by the service they were offering to their very deprived seaside community. A whole motley band of muddled humanity, I won't repeat it but making a difference.

And if I could include a plea as well as a dream: wouldn't it be good if we stopped talking about ourselves so much. If we become a church that is shaped by the five marks of mission then we would be crying out against the injustices of the world, asking the government to put back that twenty quid that has been lost on Universal Credit; losing patience with the lack of movement towards a green economy and pointing out the madness of spending millions on bombs when people starve, and shaping a world where love of neighbour and the common good is the place where we start to dream. And plan. The commissions that the Archbishop of Canterbury has led on for housing, racial justice, family life Â and social care will contribute massively to this national debate. I am honoured to be part of it. Our nation doesn't want to simply go back to how things were. We want a vision of hope. Hope for everyone, particularly in some of the left behind and neglected communities of the north where I now serve. Churches here are in the frontline. Our parishes and chaplaincies are lifelines of hope. I dream of a church where the hope we have in Christ inspires our nation and our world.

In this past year, so many churches have experienced growth through two things: worship and service. It has been unexpected and counter intuitive. It wasn't led from the centre, though much is being done to align resources with this flourishing of ministry.Â

But there has been a huge development of online services of one sort or another. New congregations have been established. New people have been drawn into the life of the Church. At the same time, churches have been in the forefront of working with others to alleviate suffering, be it debt relief, food poverty, homelessness or just those acts of kindness such as collecting the prescription for an isolated person. This gives us confidence to dream and develop that narrative of hope where we invite people to live their lives in Christ through the worship and companionship of the church and demonstrate in our communities what that life in Christ looks like, measured by the number of feet we wash.Â

Therefore, although Iâ€™m hugely relieved to now be meeting again in person, I believe that one of the ways we will best shape the life of our nation and grow the church is through developing a presence in all the places where people actually live their lives â€” a worshipping presence and a serving presence â€” and this isnâ€™t just the home and the neighbourhood, but also in education, at work and leisure, and in peopleâ€™s online as well as their off-line lives.Â

The real meaning behind the phrase you may have heard in the Church of England at the moment mixed ecology church, is not abandoning or dismantling one way of being the church in order to develop another, but taking hold of the historic vocation of the Church of England to be the church for everyone everywhere, and pay greater attention to the different ways and the different places in which people actually live, then grow the church accordingly. It is about adapting to the challenge of changed circumstances, that is the best way for anything to grow. The history of Christian mission has been the history of such cultural adaptation. The gospel doesnâ€™t change. But the languages in which it is translated do. And the refining fire of the questions that different cultures pose reveal to us new depths and new truths within that gospel. Isnâ€™t this also the very moving and inspiring vision behind Heartedge, a movement for mission and renewal, which emerged from this church?

Let me quote Billy Connolly who once said there is no such thing as bad weather, only the wrong clothes. It is no good, the Church complaining about the weather, saying things are against us in our culture, rather we need to find the right clothes and the right ways of reaching and serving people in all the many places that they live their lives. All this will be led by bishops and priests who share a cure of souls, but will require a vision of ministry where, because of our baptism into Christ, ministry belongs to the whole people of God and where lay ministry flourishes under the oversight of the church. It is a generous catholic and apostolic vision, rooted in that inheritance of faith that we have received as the Church of England.Â

And I dream of a church that, like Peter just as he was about to receive a bit of an intellectual mauling by St Paul over the barrier breaking and epoch making changes that his mission to the Hellenistic world had brought to the Church (at last discovering the new humanity in Christ where class and sexuality and gender and race no longer counted in quite the same way), was able to say from his close company with Christ, and despite his own many failings, â€”do not forget the poor (see Galatians 2.10).â€”

I don't think there has ever been a moment of fundamental renewal in the life of the church without a bias to the poor. It will be the same for us today. After all what are we saving the parish for, if not the service of the world? But it won't just be parish. It will also be school and prison chaplains, and, I hope and pray, a renewal of the religious life. This is happening. I am hugely inspired by the young people I meet who are forming small Christian communities. I thank God for the more established communities such as the Society of St Francis (and others) who continue to work and serve in some of our poorest parishes. And isn't the real test of the government's levelling up agenda what it brings to the disconnected, the marginalised, those who lack opportunity, those who don't have access to the best of education, or often even a dentist.

And to do all this unity will be all important. A church of variety and diversity needs deep roots in its tradition, deep roots in Christ, Only then will it bear fruit. This is unity within the Church of England. But we must also strive for unity with all our sisters and brothers in Christ. I think we underestimate the damage our disunity does to our credibility and witness. If we are the one charge to preach a Gospel of reconciliation, how come we are so unreconciled ourselves? Preaching on the text from Haggai 1:1-8, "Rebuild my House", In 2015 Fr. Raniero Cantalamessa, preacher to the Papal Household, memorably observed that in those "parts of the world where Christians are killed and churches torched, it is not because they are Catholic or Anglican or Pentecostal, but because they are Christians." He went on: "In our persecutors eyes we are already one. Let us be one also in our own eyes and in the eyes of God."

Now that is a dream worth pursuing. However, I am less and less confident that theologians and church leaders will achieve this unity, though the vital work of ecumenical dialogue must continue and has born some fruit. Unity will be achieved because it is the prayer and the heart's desire of all of us. St John tells us that on the cross not one bone of Jesus' body was broken. Yet in his body the church, we've broken every one. And we don't seem to mind that much. And the echo chambers of social media only distort and amplify our suspicions of each other.

Again, I believe it is our faithfulness to Christ and our rootedness in prayer that will bring unity, for the closer we get to Christ the closer we get to each other. When I was Bishop of Chelmsford, one of the best things I did was pray each month with other church leaders across Essex and East London, I think did more for unity than any amount of other meetings. And it over flowed into acts of joint service and witness. I intend to do the same in Yorkshire .And I encourage you and plead with you and all the church to look for opportunities to pray together with other Christian denominations. This is how the world will come to believe.

Finally, I dream of a church that is younger and more diverse. The average age of people in our congregations is 61, that is twenty-one years older than the average age in the population. Many of our congregations don't look like the communities they serve. We need leadership in the church that is more diverse, inclusive and representative.

When I was a parish priest there were no children in church on the first Sunday morning. My wife was the youngest person in the congregation. I was the second youngest person. They were lovely people but they didn't really want a vicar, they wanted a hospice chaplain. The turning point for me and for them was recognising that things could change. But that change would only come about when that change came from all of us. And we started to become again a Church which looked outwards. I won't tell you the whole story of how those changes came about, that might be a subject for another lecture but on my final Sunday there were 30 or 40 children and a thriving youth group from which two members went on to be ordained. I will always remember this as being one of the most joyful parts of my ministry.

And when I was Bishop of Chelmsford as I looked round the table at my first staff meeting we were all white and nearly all male. And we together had to own the fact that this was holding back our mission, diminishing our leadership and not looking like the people we served. Change is possible.

But these kind of changes are not driven by race politics nor helped by culture wars, but, again, arise out of our life in Christ. In Christ there is a new humanity (see Galatians 3. 27-29). The church is his body. The elbow can't say to the arm I don't need you (see 1 Corinthians 12. 12-27). At Pentecost, the Holy Spirit blesses diversity. The whole world doesn't speak one language. That's what I would have done if I was in charge but the Holy Spirit does the opposite. The church speaks every language. And the great biblical vision with which scripture concludes is about every tribe and every tongue and every nation being gathered before God (see Revelation 7.9).

So yes, I do dream that we will put more energy and resources into working with children and young people and schools and families and that we will find resources to combat racism, support racial justice and enable the church on Earth to look more like the church in heaven and serve those diverse communities that make up the smorgasbord of British life today and led by the spirit clothe the unchanging gospel in the ever-changing cultures and languages with which we have been called to speak the gospel and share the story of Christ.

It is a dream that inspires and sustains me. It is what gets me up in the morning. Its un-fulfilment, and our my - stubborn resistance to the prophetic call of the Spirit of God, keeps me up at night.

Young men dream dreams, old men have visions, but much of the problem is that often middle-aged men are in charge.

So let's include the young around the table, and may those of us who are not young and not yet that old, be brought to that purity of heart and poverty of spirit whereby we too are children of God.

The final chapter of my recent book, Dear England which I started writing thinking it would be a response to a world emerging from Brexit but was actually written during the lockdowns of Covid, ends with a beautiful poem by the French Roman Catholic thinker and poet, Charles Peguy. It's called God's Dream. It feels like a good place to conclude this lecture: not my dream for the church, not yours, but God's. It also feeds into my other dream, so well expressed by Mark Oakley, that we have more poetry than prose: Poetry is the language of religious faith, and those of us in the Christian tradition need to reclaim this unapologetically at a time when shallow literalism is on the prowl.

I for one will be trying to woo people with the love song of the gospel. I'm not sure I actually know how to do much else.

Poetry is, supremely, the language of worship. It is therefore the language of heaven.

So, what is God's dream for God's church in God's world. This is what Peguy wrote

I myself will dream a dream within you -

Good dreams come from me, you know -

My dreams seem impossible,

not too practical,

not for the cautious man or woman -

a little risky sometimes,

a trifle brash perhaps -

Some of my friends prefer

to rest more comfortably,

in sound asleep,

with visionless eyes -

But, from those who share my dreams

I ask a little patience,

a little humour,

some small courage,

and listening heart -

I will do the rest -

Then they will risk

and wonder at their daring -

Run - and marvel at this speed -

Build and stand in awe at the beauty of their building -

You will meet me often as you work -

in your companions, who share the risk

in your friends, who believe in you enough

to lend their own dreams

their own hands

their own hearts

to your building -

In the people who will stand in your doorway,

stay awhile,

and walk away knowing that they, too, can find a dream.

There will be sun-filled days,

and sometimes it will rain -

a little variety -

both come from me.

So come now, be content

It is my dream you dream -

my house you build -

my caring you witness -

my love you share,

and this is the heart of the matter.

- 1The Rule of St Benedict
- 2Mark Oakley, *The Splash of Words; Believing in Poetry*, Canterbury Press, 2016, Pg. xxxiv

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