

Archbishop Stephen gave the sermon during a service of Evensong at Chelmsford Cathedral today. A portrait of the Archbishop was also unveiled during the service - this was commissioned to mark his time as Bishop of Chelmsford.

The sermon follows in full:

“Shew me thy ways, O Lord; and teach me thy paths.” (Psalm 25. 4)

W H Auden famously said, that by the time you are forty, you have the face you deserve!

In your youth you may have had what the world currently deems beautiful, but with the passing of the years no amount of Botox, liposuction, no face lift or hair transplant, can prevent the inner person poking through.

Consequently, having your portrait painted is a somewhat unnerving experience. Especially if you're over forty! A great honour, but also a trial. You are brought face-to-face, quite literally, with yourself. For even if we don't go down the plastic surgery route, most of us, most of the time, like to present a version of ourselves, one that we hope might be attractive, employable, worthy, even admirable.

But we also reckon that sometimes what must be kept hidden is the true self.

Moreover, we live in an age where we are constantly being bombarded with images and messages about how we should look. Perhaps the portrait painter might help us out. For posterity, you understand. But as I discovered, woe betide the person sitting for their portrait, who asks the artist to give them a little less weight or a little more hair. These decisions are out of your hands. The artist will look. And the artist will paint what he sees.

When I sat down with John Wonnacott for my portrait to be painted, the only decision I was allowed was what I would be wearing and where it should be set.

I wanted to be outside. But since it was January, the compromise was inside with, as you shall see when the portrait is presented after the service, the backdrop of Chalkwell beaches. In fact, the very beach where I played as a child.

And, unlike most of my predecessors, I chose not to be portrayed as an Episcopal ship in full sale, with convocation robes or cope mitre, but with my rucksack on my back, and my staff in my hand, since if there is to be some permanent reminder of my time as Bishop of this great Diocese, then even though I know that none of us get to write our own obituary – rightly so! – I wanted to be remembered as a pilgrim and as an evangelist.

And I have so many happy memories of my time here, but some of the loveliest are of the days I spent walking around the diocese, praying that in that day, God would somehow, somewhere, with someone open a door of opportunity for the gospel to be shared; and in so doing to encourage a church that would be on the move, treading lightly on the Earth, and with a message of hope and the gospel of peace on its lips. That we might even be the presence of Jesus in the communities we serve.

And every life and every ministry is a journey. We received the baton from others (there had been 46 years of 'Johns' before me) and we pass the baton on. And what a joy to see how Bishop Guli has established herself as the 11th Bishop of Chelmsford. I cheer her on and cheer you on from York. And hold you and her in my prayers each day.

And a very particular thing about having your portrait painted is that you have to sit still for a long time. Which isn't a bad thing to do.

And then you let someone look at you intensely and intently.

As I have reflected on this experience, it seems to me that this is a deeply spiritual thing, for isn't this what God does? And isn't this what judgement is? To be looked at. To be seen.

In that astonishing encounter on another beach on another day, when for each of his three denials, Peter is asked by Jesus, whether he loves him, the conversation concludes with Peter saying, 'Lord you know everything, you know that I love you.' (John 21. 17) And now I wonder whether we might better understand this as, 'Lord you see everything. You see me as I really am. You see my flaws and failings. You see my hopes and fears. You see my need and my desire.'

And isn't this the best news of the gospel? That God sees us completely, and knows us even better than we know ourselves, and still loves us.

We always think there has to be some negotiation. We either know each other, or we love each other. But not both. And if we did know each other completely, then we would not love each other. And therefore if I was known truly known, then I too wouldn't be loved. In which case, I had better keep some things hidden.

Even from God.

But God does see. And God goes on loving.

I am reminded of the story of the rich young man who comes to Jesus, and isn't able to do what Jesus asks of him, and turns, disconsolate, away. And then, in one of the most beautiful verses in the whole of scripture it says, 'Jesus looked steadily at him and he loved him.' (Mark 10. 21) That is he looks steadily at him and he loves him as he is walking away. As he fails.

Sisters and brothers, this is how God looks at us.

This is how God looks at the lovely Diocese of Chelmsford.

God looks steadily at us and he loves us. He has a purpose for our lives, and God will always be adjusting his plan to our shortcomings. But God never gives in.

God believes in us. God carries on looking and searching.

That is why, as we heard in a second reading, when he comes to Jerusalem and sees it, he weeps. He weeps because he loves it so much and knows it so well. But it has turned it back on God.

One of the other great joys of this diocese are its international links with Sweden, Trinidad and Tobago and Kenya. Some years ago I was on retreat with the five Kenyan bishops, and somehow the subject of tears came up. One of the bishops said that Kenyan men don't cry. I responded by saying that it was similar in England, where we still prized a stiff upper lip. But I went on, doesn't the gospel liberate us from this. After all, Jesus cried.

The bishop in question looked at me rather quizzically. 'Did he?' he responded.

Well, Kenyan Christians know their bibles very well, but as I was just about to discover again, we all read the scriptures through the lens of our own cultural experiences, and sometimes, therefore, draw different, equally, legitimate conclusions, and sometimes find that there are some things we just don't see.

So I said to him, Yes. He wept at the grave of his friend Lazarus. He wept in Gethsemane as he pleaded with God that there might be another way. And he wept when he came to Jerusalem, for they couldn't see the things that made for peace.

My prayer for our Church of England is that we might be given the vision to see things clearly.

And that we may let God see us and know us, heal us, forgive us and love us.

And also, that we might receive the gift of tears. Yes, of course, the tears for those we love, and I can't stand here today without particularly remembering some of the people with whom I served who have departed this life. Bishop John Waine, the 7th Bishop of Chelmsford who died only a year or so ago; my dear colleague, John Wraw who died six years ago.

But also tears, as we seek to discover our vocation, and the part, each one of us can play, in God's work of mission and ministry in the world.

And tears flowing for the pain and confusion of the world, and the many ways in which we fail to see the world as it should be, and for the world's many horrors and injustices; that the Church may rise up and rise up again to be a sign of God's peace and God's justice, a transforming presence in the world. 'Oh, how blessed are those who mourn' - those who lament - says Jesus. 'They shall be comforted.' (Matthew 5. 4)

And on the first morning of the first Easter day, Jesus rises from the dead, and his first words to Mary Magdalene are words that reach out to the sorrow and longing in her heart. He sees her clearly, even though her eyes are not yet opened to see him. And he says to her, 'Why are you weeping?' (John 20. 13)

Well, I want you to know that today I am weeping with joy and thanksgiving for the privilege and honour of serving you in this diocese, daily holding you before God.

I am also weeping for the injustices of our world, and praying that we might be a church that allows ourselves to be seen and known and loved. Because it is when Jesus speaks her name, that Mary is able to recognise Jesus, which I suppose must mean that we can only really know God when we know that God knows us.

Sisters and brothers, he looks steadily at us and he loves us. Looks steadily at the Chelmsford diocese and loves it. He is the great portrait painter, but unlike the portrait painters of the world doesn't just paint what he sees but through the Holy Spirit works to reveal the inner beauty within us which, it turns out, is the very image of Christ, changing us from glory to glory so that we with our unveiled faces (2 Cor. 3. 18), if we dare to look at him, are transformed into his likeness and made more lovely; which I'm afraid isn't more hair and less weight, but the true beauty and lasting joy of Christ.

For He is our peace (Ephesians 2. 14). And we are his handiwork (Ephesians 2. 10). And on the finished picture which is the beautiful person we are meant to be, like all great artists, he writes his name. His signature on our lives. Amen.

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