

Farewell Service

Bishop Peter Forster, July 2019

Thank you all for coming here this morning – from across the Diocese, my more immediate colleagues, staff at Bishop’s House, and friends and former colleagues from far flung places, as well as our four children and their families. Thank you all for your support over the years of my episcopate.

A word of thanks to everyone at the Cathedral who has helped to make the arrangements for the service. Jeremy, the Precentor, has borne the brunt of this, but I would also like to make special mention of Philip, the Director of Music. It’s the time of year when the Director of Music thinks he can relax a bit: the choirs are on holiday, and he and his family can go on holiday too.

The Bishop’s retirement, and his Farewell Service, have interfered with all this. I am most grateful to Philip for scouring the highways and byways, and assembling today’s Choir and musicians – rather in the spirit of the parable of the labourers in the vineyard, indeed.

But let me start with our first reading, from the end of the Book of Job. Most people have heard something about the story of Job, the righteous man who is sorely, and by his human judgement, unfairly tested by God. The

expression 'the patience of Job' entered the English language, although his was a reluctant and enforced patience. In himself, Job impatiently, and somewhat angrily, protests against his lot.

Job is bemused by the cards that life has dealt him, and his understandable failure to see the hand of God in them.

The dialogue in the book is with three so-called friends, who try to analyse and rationalize what has happened to Job. One way or another, they suggest, his misfortune must have been his own fault. God is the just Judge of all the earth, and Job will have deserved what had come his way.

Job shares the conviction that God is in charge of all that happens, and is a God of justice and love – but he is puzzled, and mystified, by his actual experience of life. Job lived a righteous life before his misfortune came upon him, and he maintains his innocence, and the injustice of his suffering.

Job is brought to a very low ebb, and at one point even curses the day he was born.

But – and this is the crucial point – he refuses to curse God. He can't understand God's ways, but he knows that if God is God, then, one way or another, he has to be trusted, no matter how puzzled and sorely tested Job feels.

At the end of the Book of Job there is a wonderful poetic vision of the majesty and mystery of God, followed by God recognizing Job's basic righteousness, and his underlying faith and trust. His good fortune is restored, twice over. The arguments of his Friends are revealed as all-too-human, and are condemned, but, partly through Job's intercession, they are forgiven.

The Book of Job reminds me of an old story, of an Uncle visiting his young nieces and nephews, and asking what they wanted to do when they were adults.

One said that she would like to be a doctor, and another wanted to be an engineer. Then the Uncle came to the youngest, aged 3 or 4, who thought carefully, and replied: 'I would like to be God, but it's too late to change now'.

The perennial human temptation, from the Garden of Eden onwards, has been to try to be as God. Only God is God, as Job steadfastly acknowledged. The human task is to concentrate on being human. That is enough, and will last a life-time, for all of us.

The modern world contains many invitations, and temptations, to think we're more in control of our world and our lives than is really the case. Modern politics, with all its hopes, disappointments, and frustrations, illustrates all this, of course, and we are living through a particularly acute phase today.

The myth of control can take root in the Church too, of course, with the belief that, if only we can find the right levers to pull, the recent decline will be reversed. Well, we do need to plan, and direct our resources as best we can, but without, I hope, falling into the all-too-human trap of thinking that we can control events.

When, as Prime Minister, Harold Macmillan was asked by a journalist what might blow his government off course, he famously replied: 'Events, dear boy, events.' There's also the boxing champion, Mike Tyson, who said that his fights always went according to plan, until he got punched in the mouth.

Well, Job got well and truly punched in the mouth – but so do we all, to one degree or another. So does the Church, and not least today. That's life. It's how we respond that counts.

The parable of the labourers in the vineyard makes the same point, but from the perspective of the generosity of God.

It's actually a very realistic parable, in that in ancient Israel once the weather was right to harvest grapes it was often a race against time to get the harvest in and, if workers could be found during the day, they would be hired on the spot. And at the end of the day, the owner of the vineyard chose to reward everyone with the same amount, the normal daily wage. All are treated the same.

That's a challenge, and a warning, to those who think they are ahead of the queue, or more important than others. If there was a particular application 2000 years ago to a sense of Jewish superiority in Jesus' hearers, it has applied ever since in the life of the Church.

But there's also a comfort: it's never too late for anyone to join the other labourers in the vineyard.

The comfort derives from the generosity of God. As the owner of the vineyard was free to reward everyone equally, so God will reward whatever we can give, and whenever we can give it. What matters is our own spirit of generosity and love.

The only motive for true Christian service must be the joy of serving God and his world. Understandably, perhaps, in the world of work the question of one's salary or wages can loom quite large, but before God it has to be different. A Christian who asks in relation to their involvement in the Church: 'what will I get out of it?' is in a cul-de-sac.

The generosity of God cannot be the object of our envy, but only of our gratitude.

So the last will be first, and the first will be last – because only God can truly be God.

Towards the beginning of my time as Bishop, I was invited to the European headquarters of MBNA, an excellent American financial services company, which is based in Chester, in the business park near the southern by-pass. The firm has made a substantial contribution to employment and community life in Chester. The imposing HQ has quite an American feel, and inside, above every doorway was the company motto: 'think of yourself as a customer'. The reception was held in the VIP suite at the back of the building, overlooking the state-of-the-art sports facilities for the employees.

I remarked to a senior executive that, while the company obviously provided brilliant facilities and care for its employees, they did seem to lack a company graveyard. I added that I was sure that I could provide professional advice as necessary. He took me seriously until I enquired whether they would want the company motto above the graveyard: 'think of yourself as a customer'.

Later, I found myself asking what biblical verse I might put above all the doors in Bishop's House. An obvious candidate was Jesus' concluding comment on the parable of the labourers in the vineyard: 'the last will be first, and the first will be last'.

I was also drawn to Jesus' remark to the disciples when they were squabbling about who should have pride of place among them. That is the way of the world, Jesus said, but:

'It shall not be so among you'.

Well, I never got around to putting any verse above my doorways. It's not quite my style.

In their different ways, both the Book of Job, and the parable of the Labourers in the Vineyard, have Jesus Christ himself as their theme.

Job should be seen as an Old Testament prophecy of Jesus: the righteous man tempted by Satan, and who suffered patiently, and faithfully, and unjustly, until he was vindicated by God.

And who is the original figure who, although 'first' became 'last'? The one who out of his richness, humbled himself, and took the form of a servant.

Jesus invites us to journey with Job when times seem tough, and also to accept the invitation to labour in his vineyard, and be rewarded just like everyone else, however and whenever that invitation from Jesus comes to us. He is the vine; we are the branches. Jesus invites us to recognize that our lives are lived with him in God. That we only live because Christ lives in us.

I hope that I have been able at least to attempt to conduct my ministry as Bishop in these terms – but, with the young girl answering her Uncle’s question, I recognize that it’s too late to change now.