



Diocese of Bristol

Maundy Thursday reaffirmation of vows

Sermon from Bishop Viv

Some considerable years ago, when I was 22, I was sent by the Church Mission Society to teach in a school at an oil refinery and chemical and industrial works near the Ganges in Bihar North India. Imagine Avonmouth on speed. What saved the area was the unromantically named Refinery Township, with its rose gardens and, after the monsoon, lawns.

Our commissioning by CMS staff was framed within a reminder of God's covenant faithfulness and then the words, familiar to those of you with Methodist roots;

I am no longer my own but yours. Put me to what you will, rank me with whom you will; put me to doing, put me to suffering; let me be employed for you or laid aside for you, exalted for you or brought low for you; et me be full, let me be empty, let me have all things, let me have nothing; I freely and wholeheartedly yield all things to your pleasure and disposal.

And now glorious and blessed God,

Father Son and Holy Spirit, you and mine and I am yours.

So be it. And the covenant now made on earth let it be ratified in heaven.

I admit, I said those words in something of a romantic haze. Reality did soon dawn, particularly after one severe monsoon when I found myself teaching up to my ankles in muddy water and looked down to see little snakes around my toes. We caught some and sent them next door to the school's biologist who sent them back with a message 'they are very very dangerous'. We carried on teaching.

The reality of my commissioning hit home.

Today, when all humanity is reeling with impact of COVID -19 the reality of our baptismal and ordination vows hits home. I don't know what has hit you hardest.

For Bishops not being able to gather our clergy, to hear in person how you are responding to profound change, to be able to pray with you and assure you that God in Christ does go with you.

For priests, not being able to open the church, to preside at the Eucharist. Not being able to visit the sick, and perhaps above all not to be able to prepare the dying for their death, knowing that there are those who are dying alone.

For deacons not being able to be out in the community, reaching out to the lonely and the unloved, proclaiming in your actions the works of the Lord set out by Isaiah and echoed by Jesus.

For all of us, the question fundamental to our baptismal hope, where is Christ in Coronavirus?

How do we find hope when we cannot even tend the graves of the dead as we proclaim our resurrection faith this Easter? As the stressed-out Psalmist put it. *My tears have been my bread day and night, while all day long they say to me, 'Where is now your God?*

And yet in the midst of this lament, in all the deprivation and demand you have achieved so much and in so few days, posting resources for prayer through letter boxes, learning to stream services, developing your Facebook sites and setting up WhatsApp groups to encourage and inform. You have done this while learning how to home school, teaching your distant elders how to Skype and queuing patiently for bread flour, pasta and Paracetamol. You have been resourceful beyond my hopes you have given me new dreams for this diocese for the future and I am grateful beyond words.

During my MDR Zoom with Archbishop Justin last week (yes Bishops have MDRs too) we talked about the innovation so obvious in the church as its journeys through these hard times, and how we are to cherish that for the future. He reminded me, in a story perhaps particularly appropriate for this diocese, of Li Tim Oi, the first woman ordained priest in the Anglican Communion, ordained priest because there was no priest in wartime Macau. Li Tim Oi

crossed enemy lines for her ordination by Bishop Ronald Hall. By the time LI Tim Oi had reached home Bishop Hall had received the letter from Archbishop William Temple not to proceed. The point Justin was making was not, I think, that Archbishops get it wrong, but that crisis enables innovation, requires innovation. Of course those innovations need testing (and in Li Tim Oi's case that took 30 years and more), just as the tongues need interpreting, but we have seen in just a few days how our hide-bound risk averse church has discovered new freedom and I believe new possibility.

But there is perhaps more to be learnt from Li Tim Oi's story. There was to be more trouble ahead. The war did end, but in China war was followed by revolution. The Communist government in China closed all churches from 1958 to 1974, during which time Li was compelled to work on a farm and then in a factory and was re-educated. Easter communion became impossible, and eventually she found herself without a Bible, or even a calendar to know when it was Easter. She was comforted, she says, by the Psalms and gospel passages she knew by heart.

We know that probably much more will be called for from us individually and as a church in the coming days as the people we serve have to face up to illness and bereavement, the impact of isolation, particularly for those whose homes are not safe havens, and the now inevitable changes to employment, to businesses and the wider economy. We are in for a long haul. In Christ we are in for the long haul. These precious days of Holy Week, as we journey with Christ, will remind us of the foundation of our calling. This coming Easter, as we claim resurrection hope in these difficult days, will be an Easter which impresses itself on us. We will remember. We will look forward. We will trust that we will meet again. O put your trust in God, for we will yet give him thanks who is the help of our countenance and our God.

And there is a third part to Li Tim Oi's story. Eventually she was released from hard labour and was able to join her family. She didn't go back to Hong Kong or to Macau. She went to join her family in Canada. She needed a change, and a rest.

When I got back from North India, as I remember it, I went to bed for several weeks, emotionally, physically and spiritually overwhelmed by all that had happened, and all that combined with reverse culture shock.

You have all put so much into these demanding weeks. In the days after Easter please try, even, for the moment, in the confines of your home, to find a slower rhythm for your days, a

different shape to your life. Go easy on yourselves, and take the time you need. Take time for family and friends. Discover newness.

The Archdeacon of Bristol bravely set an example last weekend by going camping. I was somewhat anxious that the police might get involved, but Neil wasn't off to Wales. He camped in his back garden with Bill the dog in a very particular version of social distancing. Neil tells me his family thought it a great idea.

And when you do re-engage after a break, do keep in touch, with your parish networks, with clergy chapters, with your Area Deans, with your Archdeacons and with your Bishops. We care how you are, and we want to know how best to support you.

We are called together by Christ, inextricably connected, to serve this gloriously various and in these days profoundly vulnerable diocese of Bristol.

God in Christ has called us to a great endeavour and we believe and trust that all things will work for good for those who love God and are called according to his purpose.

For I am convinced that neither death nor life, nor angels nor rulers, nor things present nor things to come, nor powers, nor height, nor depth nor anything else in all creation will be able to separate us from the love of God in Christ Jesus our Lord.