

Launch of Launde Minster Community

30th April 2023

Acts 1:1-11

As many of you will know, I enjoy travelling. Having been born in another part of the world and having spent part of my childhood in what was effectively a guest house where people came to stay as they travelled in and out of the country, I've always had an interest in different cultures, different languages and everything else that goes with visiting a new country.

And today, we're reflecting on what it means to enter a new country. We may not have travelled physically – no long waits in airports and no long queues at passport checks. But psychologically, emotionally, and spiritually, we are crossing a border and entering a new land.

So firstly let me pause to say thank you to a few people who have enabled this journey to happen – in a sense this all started with Alison Booker, who as Area Dean began some thinking around the how the churches of Launde Deanery could work more closely together. I'm grateful to her, and I know she is continuing her good work in Peterborough Diocese. But the work was taken up by others, Madeleine Wang as Deanery Lay Chair, and many other lay people – too numerous to mention them all – but all of whom gave freely of their time, energy and wisdom. And then Jonathan Dowman and Alan Humphries as Co-Area Deans. I'm particularly grateful to Alan and his wife Lesley who are soon to move on from Launde Abbey, into a 'proper' retirement – though I can't imagine they will ever stop completely. But they've been so gracious in their service of Launde Abbey, Launde Deanery and before that the Community of the Tree of Life and Leicester Forest East. Thank you for all you have given. And I'm also grateful to Jonathan who, later in this service, will be commissioned as Oversight Minister for this Minster Community, alongside his

Growing Faith role working to link schools, households and churches. Thank you for your flexibility in taking on such varied roles. Then there's the facilitation team: Stuart Burns, Shayne Ardron, together with Archdeacon Richard, Claire Bampton and others working in the background. Thank you for holding the space to allow the conversations to happen and relationships to grow. I'm deeply grateful. And there are many more that I could mention – forgive me if I've not named you – but so many people have been involved.

So this gives some sense of the journey that we've been on, ever since Diocesan Synod formally decided on the creation of Minster Communities in 2021. You are the first – the pioneers – many more will follow by the grace of God. But let's take in a bit more of the landscape and culture of this new land.

So at the risk of telling a story which some of you will have had heard from me many times – I'd like to retell a story of something which occurred shortly after my wife and I arrived in the country of Guinea, West Africa where we were to work with the local church.

Not long after we arrived, while still settling into our new home in a small, rural village, I remember being interrupted during a language lesson. As I looked out the window, I saw two men walking towards the house, with a pole slung between their shoulders and hanging from the pole was an enormous wild boar. In the time it took me to get to my front door, a large crowd had gathered on my veranda (children were pouring out from the neighbouring school – they knew this was going to be entertaining) and they watched as the hunters dumped the beast unceremoniously on my veranda floor. Before I could do or say anything, the school Principal (ever the entrepreneur) sidled up to me and whispered (in French), "you must buy it – we'll take it to the market and sell it – we'll make a packet!" And so he started negotiating a price with the hunters and, still rather bemused by the whole affair, I found myself

handing over the cash and the animal was then transferred to the boot of my car. And so it was, that I found myself an hour later sat in the local market, with the school Principal on one side of me and local butcher on the other, swotting away the flies, trying to sell wild boar meat to passers-by. It was then that I asked myself the question, is this why I came to Africa?

The answer, it seemed to me was self-evident. The Church of England spent a lot of money putting me through theological college, training me to preach, lead church services and proclaim the gospel - nowhere on the curriculum was there anything to do with being a market trader. But even as these thoughts went through my mind, so I realised how wrong I was. In reality, this was exactly why I came to Africa – because as I sat swotting away the flies, so I chatted with curious passers-by, and so I shared the everyday life of the people God had called me to serve. This was all part of learning to serve people, sharing the Good News of Jesus Christ in action and in word, and in the process, going deeper in my own discipleship.

My friends, when people ask me why we are creating Minster Communities, I can't help but go back to this story and talk about the time it takes to adjust to a new world and explore what it means to be church in this new culture. Let's be under no illusion, our society in Great Britain has changed beyond all recognition from when most of us grew up. Even in 2001, 71% of the population said they were Christian. In 2011 the percentage was 59%. In 2021, it had fallen to 46% - that's less than half the people in this country now say they are Christian, and the numbers attending church, including for weddings, funerals and christening has dropped in a similar way. This is a very different landscape and culture. My children speak a language that I don't understand – they are “digital natives”, in other words computers have always been part of their lives, in a way that isn't true for me and my generation.

And as my recent Lent Pilgrimage revealed, most of our churches now have no children who attend on a regular basis. And the repeated refrain in my conversations was, we don't know how to get children to come. The answer, as I repeated on each occasion on my pilgrimage is that, rather than expecting the children to come to us, we need to go to them. We have 23,000 children in our church schools – and many local authority schools are very open to working with their local church as well. The opportunities are huge, the possibilities unending, if we are prepared to be humble and learn what it means to be church in the 21st Century.

So this lies at the heart of what we're trying to do. A little like me sitting in the African market swotting away the flies – being with people in their everyday life, learning from them about how the Christian faith might be made real or be incarnated for them in this new world. This is far from easy – I'm not trying to pretend it's simple – but it is possible when we, like the first disciples are filled with God's Holy Spirit.

I leave you then with four simple principles, for navigating a new culture - all drawn from our reading in Acts 1.

Firstly, letting go. Acts 1 is the account of Jesus leaving his disciples, ascending to heaven, but telling them that the Holy Spirit would come to them. So they had to let go of one way of being with Jesus and embrace a new way. They didn't know much of what this new way was going to look like, but they had the words of Jesus to guide them and the rest they learnt as they went along. Letting go of our own culture, our own way of doing things, is often the hardest part of the journey but without it we can't understand and embrace a new way of doing things.

Secondly, being sent. Jesus says, "You will be my witnesses in Jerusalem, and in all Judea, and Samaria and to the end of the earth" And so the story of Acts is the story of the ever-expanding witness of those first disciples. Like a stone thrown in a pond,

the ripples spread outwards. And so I believe in our own day and age – as fewer and fewer people own the name Christian, so we are called to look outwards to be his witnesses in our homes, our communities, our workplaces, our schools. We are sent out to a new country, a new land, a new culture.

Thirdly, living with uncertainty. The disciples ask, “is this the hour when you will restore the kingdom to Israel?” They wanted certainty, they wanted to know the time, the place and the exact way that Jesus would work. And his reply was simply, “it is not for you to understand the times or opportunities which the Father has set.” In other words, you must live with these questions and with the uncertainty they bring. There is no precise road map for the future, just as there is no precise description of a new culture. We pick it up as we go along, as we are curious and don’t mind making mistakes. And we trust in God to lead us.

Fourthly, and finally, and most importantly, receiving God’s Holy Spirit. Jesus says, “But you will receive power when the Holy Spirit comes upon you.” What is impossible for us, on our own, becomes possible when we are filled with God’s Holy Spirit – the Comforter, the Advocate, the One who reads our sighs and our deepest desires, the One who gives us a foretaste of all that is to come and is the guarantee of that future.

My friends, I want to offer my heartfelt thanks for your willingness to embark on this journey to a new country. I know there are still many questions, and I know that you have already had to let go of much that is dear. But I pray you will now look forward with hope as you receive the Holy Spirit and witness to the Risen Lord Jesus Christ in your communities and workplaces. And one day, we will look back and see how far we have come and how much we have learnt – and future generations will thank us for being bold enough to journey to an unknown land.

+ Martyn Leicester

