

## Sermon preached by Bishop John at Chrism Eucharist 2023 Coventry Cathedral

'The Church of England, as it now stands, no human power can save.'

Not my words, though I would affirm them, but those of the Head Master of Rugby School, Thomas Arnold, in 1832. That was how it seemed to him, looked at through human eyes. He was both right and wrong. He was actually right, no *human* power can ever save the Church, however much we might try - and we *do* try and we exhaust ourselves trying. The Church is God's. And so are we.

Paul reminds us 'We are no longer our own but God's. We belong to Christ and Christ to God.' And as Gregory Palamas puts it simply, 'It is better to belong to God than to ourselves.' Why? Because that's where true life is, in God, in Christ, eternal life, life in all its fullness. Things go wrong when we elevate 'my way' above 'God's way', my will above God's will. Don't identify yourself with your will' writes Diadochus of Photike (5<sup>th</sup> cent. Bishop) writing on *The Contemplative Life*, 'true freedom comes only when we submit our wills to the will of God'.

But Arnold was wrong, at least in the sense in which he meant it, in his gloomy prognosis of the demise of the Church. It was the same prognosis that likely would have been made of the prospects of David against Goliath or Gideon against the Midianites, viewed through human eyes only. The 19<sup>th</sup> century was to see extraordinary renewal in the life of the Church, in Evangelical revivals, in the Oxford Movement and in all that flowed from that meeting in Aldersgate Street, when the heart of John Wesley was strangely warmed. These movements of God, in their different ways, led not only to a renewal of worship, but to the making of new disciples and the transformation of communities. The anointing of God, as Isaiah's prophecy, fulfilled in Jesus, issues in good news for the poor, healing of the broken-hearted and release for the captives. Wesley too had reached rock bottom, before God did extraordinary things through him. He wrote in his journal 'I went to America to convert the Indians, but who will convert me? I have a fair summer religion but let death look me in the face and I am afraid.' Out of the ashes something new was born. God specializes in dust and ashes and ruins. Let's remember where we are right now! And let's remember the move of the Holy Spirit in this Diocese when clergy at a chapter meeting in Monks Kirby let go of a subtly competitive spirit and recognized together in humility their need of God. And that is why the sacrifice of God is a broken spirit. This is where God comes to meet us. We cannot do what we are called to do in our own strength. 'Not by strength not by power but by my Spirit' says the Lord. The treasures of the kingdom are entrusted to frail earthen vessels, like the first disciples and like each one of us.

So, what about us today, in the light of Peter's invitation, to 'come to him a living stone and like living stones let yourselves be built into a spiritual house.'? Written to isolated and persecuted Christian communities who knew their need of God. He does not say build yourselves a house, but *let yourselves* be built. It is God's work, not ours, through lives made available to Him. Are we actually willing to trust our lives fully to God, not God

on our terms but us on God's terms? Just as the oil of healing will be brought from the ruins, a place of brokenness, to be offered to God, to be consecrated for healing, can we offer our lives and our life together as a Diocese, with all their bits of brokenness back to God for healing and reconciliation so that he can use us as instruments of healing and ambassadors of reconciliation?

And yet we do cling on to our own agenda, our own version of God, that which is inevitably less than God - which whoever we are or no matter how saintly - falls far short of the living God. Bonhoeffer in his *Life Together*, insisted that we have to be disillusioned with our own ideas about building God's Kingdom before we are ready to hand over and let ourselves be built by God into a spiritual house. As Augustine put it 'God longs to give us the gift of his very self, but so often our hands are too full to receive him.' Which brings us to the Gospel. The Priest and the Levite allow their religious protocols about ritual impurity to excuse them from God's underlying command to 'love your neighbour as yourself'. They allow religion to trump compassion. They deny and obscure God's love in the name of religion. It is the Samaritan, who incidentally was also bound by religious strictures regarding ritual impurity, who demonstrates what love of neighbour really means and is commended by Jesus for doing just this. He has compassion, he has pity, Luke tells us, on him. The English translation hardly does justice to the Greek word Luke uses, '*esplangthisne*'. It is the same word used of the Father's compassion when he sees his Prodigal son returning, the same word used of Jesus when he sees the crowds harassed and helpless like sheep without a shepherd. It expresses something deep, actually in the guts not in the head or even the heart. It is about a deep human solidarity that transcends all tribal divisions, of faith, culture or anything else. A human solidarity that matters more than the ways we differentiate ourselves from others. A solidarity which I have found sometimes in a hospice, where as human beings we face together our own mortality, sometimes in a prison where we face our own need of forgiveness and of God's help, sometimes among brothers and sisters in Christ when together we recognize both our need of God and our longing for God. This is where and when we are most receptive not only to the grace and mercy of God but to the renewing and empowering of God. God in Christ comes not to make us religious but more fully human, alive in his life.

Each one of us, and that includes our enemies, is one for whom Christ died and as John of the Cross writes 'In the evening of our lives, we will be judged on our love.' Without love, we are nothing.

So, there is an important question for each of us with faith, wherever we may see ourselves in the spectrum of theological perspectives, whether conservative or liberal or anything else. Do we allow our beliefs about God, our interpretations of God, to 'other' others who are not of our tribe? Do we allow our adherence to Paul, Apollos or Cephas or contemporary equivalents, to obscure our deeper and truer belonging to Christ?

Why do I ask? Because there is so much more to be revealed to each of us, wherever we may be on our journey. I think of Aquinas, regarded by many as the greatest theologian, with his prolific volumes of the *Summa Theologica* who, on the feast of St Nicholas in 1272, had an extraordinary encounter with God while presiding at the Mass. This experience of the glory of God reduced him to silence, writing to Br Reginald 'all I have

written now appears to me as so much straw after those things that have been revealed to me.' He abandoned his theological enterprise, it couldn't come close to what he had experienced. Now we see, as through a glass, darkly, then we shall see face to face.

Finally, each one of us here, whatever our chronology, whatever our status in the church or in the world - and such things matter little to God - is a *child* of God. When the disciples ask Jesus 'who is the greatest in the kingdom of heaven?' he calls a child to him and says 'unless you change and become like children, you will never enter the kingdom of heaven.' We have beacons of this kingdom in our church schools. There is a wonderful video with children and young people from our schools answering the question 'Where do you feel close to God?' What a blessing and tonic it is! A question for all of us and one which might bring life to PCCs, to Bishop's Council and to synods which can so easily fall prey to earnestness, defensiveness, position taking and sometimes sheer boredom.

So, now, let us come to him as his children and let ourselves be transformed by the renewal of our hearts and minds and so become agents of his transforming love.

Amen.

+John Stroyan