

Address for Archdeacon Paul Wright's Leaving Service

1980. The year Paul was ordained deacon in the Church of England. Some of you may not have been alive then. For those that were, here's a snapshot of the remarkable longevity of Paul's service. In 1980, Jimmy Carter was US President; the Iranian Embassy siege was ended in dramatic fashion by the SAS; punk rock was beginning its downward curve; John Lennon was shot dead in New York; the Rubik's Cube was invented; as were post-it notes. The Moscow Olympics were boycotted by the US because of the Soviet Union's invasion of Afghanistan - nicely bookended at Paul's retirement by the US diplomatic boycott of the Beijing Winter Olympics and a threatened new invasion by imperial Russia. Oh, and the comedy *Yes Minister* was first broadcast.

Yes Minister. A show where civil servants went on at great contorted length to explain why policies couldn't be implemented. Why government ministers must accept the status quo and the complacent rule of tenured bureaucrats. It should have been called *No Minister*, but in a way, that was the joke. The civil service simply meant the opposite of what it actually said.

There are few things more dispiriting than being continually met with a *can't do* attitude. In all the time I have known Paul, he has shown a restless, energetic *can do* attitude that has inspired trust and confidence in those around him. What is more striking is that Paul has ministered throughout a hard period for the Church of England, for reasons that don't need to be spelled out to people who have lived through them. When a team is struggling, the bad impact on the performance of key individual people is often bigger than their good effect on the team's performance. But not always: I bring Joe Root in as evidence here (knowing this cricketing reference has already lost Paul).

I think Paul has been in the same category. There are many examples I could pick on, but one stands for many others: while continuing as Archdeacon, he was made Priest in Charge of a struggling church in Erith deanery and in collaboration with others and with the grace of God, was able to turn it round to be the growing, outward facing church it is today.

In the reading from Matthew 6 we hear these three words from Jesus: 'Do not worry'. They are so easily said that they could feel trite coming from someone else. They are words used as a way of drawing an unwanted pastoral conversation to an end: 'don't worry' (for which read: *I really need to move on now, thank you very much*). But it is impossible to draw the same conclusion coming from Jesus.

Social analysts suggested we were living in the age of anxiety longer before coronavirus. Few eras have seen as much change as ours and yet the sense of impermanence only grows: relationships do not last; jobs are short-term; mobility increases. In this kind of ferment, it is not surprising that people are anxious. Tech developments are heralded breathlessly, but also mean that no-one can quite get away from it all anymore. The pace of life has palpably

increased. Before the First World War, the average person slept for nine hours a night. Hardly anyone gets this now. We are becoming like mice on a treadmill.

In helping the people to cope with their daily worries, Jesus encouraged them to look at the relationship God has with the natural world. If the needs of plants, birds and animals are catered for, why do they not get that he has rather more than a passing interest in their welfare as humans?

There is, however, a danger of us taking hold of Jesus' words about the flowers and the lilies and turning them into a story where shopping malls, office blocks and motorways are believed to draw us away from God while orchards, forests and rivers bring us back to him. In Deuteronomy 28:3, God says that his people will be blessed in the city as well as in the country. He is drawn by his heart of love to the grittier needs of this world, which means Jesus walks with us on the needle-strewn stairwell and the wind-blown estate as surely as he blesses us through Alpine mountains and glacial lakes. That's a message with traction for those who minister in the suburbs of south east London.

What Jesus calls us to is a radical re-casting of personal perspective. In countering human worry, he warns us against becoming gripped by the thing we are anxious about. The more we dissect this under the microscope, the larger the object of our fear appears. We worry because we have swapped priorities. We like to read and lay hold of the call not to worry but easily miss that in making it, Jesus was leading up to a specific point:

Strive first for the kingdom of God and his righteousness, he says, and all these things will be given to you as well.

There is an ingrained human tendency to forget the goal in front of us and to lose our way. I suspect this risk has rarely been greater than it is now. We simply have too much information to process and new digital systems that are designed to distract us from what we are doing. To give you a feel for this: we now generate the same amount of information every two hours as humans generated from the dawn of civilisation until 2003. Of all the challenges this represents, keeping the kingdom of God in focus is the most important.

I have always been grateful for the directness Paul brings to issues, wanting to ask the question 'why' to ensure teams don't drift from their goals. Keeping a vision of how the kingdom of God is drawing near and helping people to see it in their own lives and in the surrounding community is the core task we are set. We do not strive for the kingdom of God because we want all the other things to be given us as well, like a child trying to flatter a parent into bringing the cookie jar down from a high shelf. We seek it because it is the whole point of our lives.

And when we get that point, a light goes on that puts a different complexion on the concerns that snap at our heels. When our priorities are aligned with those of God's, our desires, our wishes begin to take a new shape too. We often get that kind of clarity round a bereavement, where we find a new perspective and see things more clearly in the light of eternity. The goal is to bring this properly into our daily experience. To do that, we have to ask not only 'why' we are doing something, but 'what' our target is too. And to go on asking that

question. It's what Paul has done. And it's a gift he passes on that we should never squander.

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