

SHARON'S INSTITUTION AS ARCHDEACON OF TONBRIDGE

Sharon has chosen two exceptional readings for our understanding of what the Gospel means. They can't be improved upon, but I kind of think my sermon can't end after two sentences, not matter how much your heart just leapt at the thought. I doubt I'm going to say anything to her now that she has not already thought or heard or tried to put into practice, but I'm going to say it all the same, because she is at a moment of transition. And it's in these moments when our natural vulnerability is most felt.

Most people I ask about imposter syndrome shyly admit to it even when they have been in role for years. This rises to almost everyone when a new job starts. Me? Really? When I became an archdeacon, the thing that astonished me most was the way some people immediately related to me as if I were a competent archdeacon one day into role when I felt like a parish priest plus one day. There may well be things that Sharon is about to learn about the arcane practices of the Church of England but I have no intention of talking about them here. There is something much more fundamental to address to help ground her.

The role of archdeacon is not the most natural ministerial evolution from the origin of the Great Commission, and at times can make you feel like an octopus or a kangaroo trying to figure out how they came into being. But it is deeply rooted in the ethos of the early Church in its commitment to service. And in the readings she chose.

Here are three things Sharon has heard before and which I have no embarrassment in repeating to her and to others listening today.

Do not be overcome with worry

Anyone who simply tells another person not to worry is about as grounded as an aeroplane at 40,000 feet. Despite what Jesus said about not worrying, I expect there isn't a single person here who isn't carrying something they are anxious about today. These worries assail us from when we boot up the computer in the morning to when we drive home at night. If we try to deflect them, they mug us at the 3am toilet visit. I am not suggesting we capitulate to worry, just that a bit more honesty with one another could be transformative.

It's worth noting that the pioneers of the early Church, Peter and Paul, called on the Jesus followers not to worry and to cast their burdens on him. But they also made a big play of what it felt like to carry the burdens of building the Church. We need a less black and white view of anxiety and peace. For human beings, they are rarely binary experiences. If we talked more openly about this, we might become less

anxious, because anxieties often need exposure to lose their secret power.

Ministry is God's work. He co-opts us into this, not vice versa, like so many of our prayers make it sound. No matter how much we worry, these anxieties never power the kingdom of God. Instead, the kingdom draws near to us while we're obsessing about other things.

At the end of each day, it's said one US President would stand outside the Oval Office to stare at the stars until he realised how small his life was. It's not a bad tactic. But it can be bettered. Just stare at the stars until you remember how loved you are by their maker.

Sharon, there is nothing you can add to the world to come by the power of your worrying.

Do not grow weary of figuring out the right thing to do

Anyone who says they never get weary in life is either lying or so annoying that a one way ticket to Antarctica should be sourced. Right now there is a lot of weariness, the baleful legacy of a generation's pandemic. Sharon has lived through this pandemic as a parish priest and that puts her in a good place to minister to colleagues who continue to do so.

It was Samuel Beckett in 'The Unnamable' who said: 'I can't go on I'll go on'. These words could come from the soul of many people. A point where we hit what marathon runners call 'the wall'. It is present in ministry, too. We say no and yet we carry on, because our calling from God compels us. You may be familiar with that feeling. It is a place of deep vulnerability, because as we carry on, we are most exposed to the corrosive effects of cynicism. It is here that the pastoral care of clergy and lay leaders in the Church becomes so fundamental to the role of an archdeacon.

One famous comedian said 80% of success in life is just turning up. When we are tired or confused or afraid, turning up can be the ministry itself, because we put ourselves in the position where God can use us. And it is liberating to know that how we feel inside often has no bearing on the impact we make on others. That's the nature of grace, the way of the Spirit, the weakness that presents as strength.

St Paul said: 'let us not grow weary in doing what is right'. There's a song by Peter Gabriel and Kate Bush that could have been written as a backing track to this scripture, ending with the whispered singing of the words 'don't give up' against a melodic bass rhythm. They are words from God to us. The thing is, in the work of God, you can be inching forwards and then from nowhere come the most astonishing gains.

Sharon, hanging in there is the purest form of incarnational theology.

Never lose sight of the goal above all goals

The economist John Kay wrote a book called *Obliquity* in which he suggests that those who take a route one approach to their goals are less likely to secure them than those who take a more indirect journey. He challenges the Founding Fathers' idea that the pursuit of happiness is a prize we can lay claim to just by choosing it. Instead, happiness is a by-product of pursuing other goals. Similarly, to become very rich is an object best secured by trying to be good at doing something else. And to make the best products is the surest way of making a profit than making profit your only goal.

It sounds sensible, but we should not read the words: '*seek first the kingdom of God and all these things will be given to you as well*' in the same way. We do not seek God in order to become rich – that's the prosperity heresy. We do not even seek God in order for there to be church growth. There can be no instrumentalism in our worship of God. The most important words in that saying of Jesus are not '*and all these things will be given to you as well*'. They are: '*seek first the kingdom of God*'.

We are endlessly distracted by information flows today. And we are overcome by instant communication in our work too. The more perfectionist, the more driven you are, the likelier it is you will so be consumed by the detail, that you forget God is holding you by the right hand. There is one goal in the life of faith, and that is to be drawn into the heart of God together. It is when we find our groundedness in God, that place of poise, that we are most influential in this world. You can see it and feel it in some people. And it is the place of greatest creativity and fruitfulness.

I do not wish to sound naïve when a lot of ministry feels like you are being spun round like a trainee astronaut at high speeds while being expected to minister perfect peace. But we should never lose sight of the goal above all goals, from which God does the thing he does best: turning our water into wine. And get this: on one hand, Jesus says, seek the kingdom of God. And on the other hand he says, the kingdom of God has drawn near. The goal is almost in our grasp when we simply turn to God.

Sharon, pursue this goal with single-mindedness, and when you are thrown off course, re-set the co-ordinates.

Because in doing so, you will be of the greatest service to those you have come to serve.

Bishop Simon January 16, 2022