

Clergy Conference 2018

Wellbeing launch

The theme of this conference is Living Waters, welcoming dry and dusty travellers to drink of the waters of eternal life. It is the hope of all who have been involved in organising these days that those of us in ministry will return to our part of the garden feeling, indeed, refreshed and reinvigorated.

Good.

But how do we sustain that feeling of wellbeing? How can we view this time away not just as an oasis of interesting and fun and creative stuff in the midst of the hard realities of ministry, but as an invitation and a jumping off point for looking again at ourselves as we seek to be contemplative, compassionate and courageous? How do we flourish in ministry?

The Church is in the business of salvation. And we are in the business of praying for the communities of Christians which have been given into our care, and inspiring, enabling, informing and guiding them to think about salvation and what it means in their lives.

The word salvation, as I'm sure you know, comes from the Greek verb *sozo*, which means save, rescue, protect and also to make whole, heal. Wholeness and salvation are two ways of expressing the same reality of grace. Jesus sent his disciples to preach the gospel and heal the sick, and this twofold mandate reflects the truly embodied nature of human wholeness. The gospel brings the healing of human identity in its totality – body, mind and spirit.

That's the business we're in. Luke has Jesus quote a popular proverb of his time, *Physician, heal yourself*. The sense is that physicians, busy working on the health of others, are not able or willing to pay attention to their own health. It is akin to the medieval English expression that the cobbler always wears the worst shoes.

Does that resonate for us, who are in the business of bringing the message of salvation, the good news, to others? What does it mean in our lives to be healed, whole, flourishing, saved.

All of us are in need of Christ's healing touch. Our need is as great as any to whom we minister, and unless we recognise our own need of God-given wholeness, we are in the wrong role.

And that is why it is vital work for us, with God's help, to pay attention to our own wholeness. It's not an optional extra for if we happen to have the time, and nothing else to do on a Friday afternoon. It is central to our calling.

For some time now, the Senior Staff have been discussing this, and challenging ourselves to model wholesome and healthy patterns of life and ministry – setting a good example, if you like. We are doing this because we realise that unless we inhabit our belief in God's provision of salvation and wholeness, no words or encouragement to others in ministry will have any weight.

There is no doubt that the culture needs to be changed. Frenetic overworking, busyness, anxiety is all around us. But we are called to something different. The message of salvation is counter-cultural. The world has already been saved, and it's not our responsibility. To believe otherwise is functional atheism: we can too easily slip into believing that if anything decent is going to happen around here, we are the ones who must make it happen. But ours is not the only act in town, there

are others, and some are even better than ours! When we share the load, we liberate and empower others, and even, sometimes, feel able to trust others and lay it down altogether. Our responsibility is to grow in holiness and to become more Christ-like as we grow the community of the disciples, notice what God is doing around us and join in, reach out to our hurting world in love.

Contemplative. Compassionate. Courageous. Starting with ourselves.

But not ending with ourselves. God calls us to discover ourselves most fully in relationship with others. We attain wholeness together *'so that the body of Christ may be built up until we all reach unity in the faith, and in the knowledge of the Son of God and become mature, attaining to the whole measure of the fullness of Christ'* (Eph.4.12f). Health and wellbeing are not just individual concerns; they are social and organisational. Our health, or ill-health affects the congregations we minister among – there is a systemic interrelationship between these things. And we do it for the sake of the world. God's purposes for the world require us to take care of ourselves and each other, so that we can all play our full part in the Missio Dei. We need to love ourselves well enough that we can give our lives away in worship and service without burning out.

It is a virtuous spiral. Healthy ministry will make us well enough to do what God asks of us without harming ourselves or others, and in the process, our wellbeing and that of others will increase. A spiral in which harm is minimized and blessing is increased.

In taking our wellbeing seriously, let's start by noting that there is no formulaic approach to this. We will all be familiar with the general expectation that we will take a day off each week, have a spiritual director, make an annual retreat, take our full holiday and so on. But each of us is a unique creation, loved by God, with wildly differing circumstances of personality, style, family and friends, domestic challenges, age and stage of any children or parents. And each of us has a unique responsibility to work out a healthy rhythm of work, rest and play for whatever stage we are at.