

Twenty Sixth Sunday of the Year 2021

On the Occasion of Fr Hugh Wybrew's Diamond Anniversary

The Rt Revd Lord Williams of Oystermouth

In the name of the Father, and of the Son, and of the Holy Spirit. Amen.

Jesus, it seems, doesn't lose any sleep about being consistent. He's not composing a thesis or an essay, where the arguments have to join up. His entire life, his identity, is what he says, and what he teaches, and it's not a system, but a presence, a challenge, and an invitation. So if we are slightly puzzled, as we well might be, by the shift of tone in this morning's gospel, we shouldn't be that surprised.

On the one hand, the world is actually not quite as bad as you might have expected. Those who are not against us are for us. There are, surprisingly, people out there who are on our side, though they don't look like it. Be very careful about saying no to them, assuming they don't matter, or that they're not there. Don't, like the enthusiastic Joshua in the Old Testament reading, simply say, "This has got to stop." Be grateful for the cups of water, literal and metaphorical, offered to you in your discipleship, by those who don't actually seem to share it.

On the other hand, if your eye offends you, pluck it out. This is not quite the cozy inclusive version of the gospel we might have thought, for a moment. It's still about cost, about risks of total loss and pain. How on earth do you balance this out?

The simple answer, of course, is, well, not in theory, and certainly not in sermons. Let's pause for a moment on both sides of that extraordinary set of paradoxes.

On the one hand, we are made in God's image, as today's Collect forcefully reminded us, echoing St Augustine, "our hearts are made for God". There is a magnetism about our divine source which causes our inmost spirit to quiver towards that magnetic pole that is God. There is something in us making for truth, making for life, making for

Christ, whether we like it or not - deeply buried, inarticulate, sometimes misdirected; yet real, and in its way, strong.

There are unlikely people who will recognize the integrity of Christian life; who will give those metaphorical cups of water to the disciples, saying, aloud or in their hearts, "I don't know how you do it, and I don't think I could do it, but I'm glad it's being done, because it should be."

And I suspect that it's people like that who are "the little ones who believe in me", about whom Jesus speaks. I don't think he's actually talking about children here. I think he's talking about those whose faith is small but real; whose needles are quivering northwards; who are able to recognize something of the kingdom when it is there, and at work. Woe to you, says the Lord, if you despise or shut out those little ones, those whose miniscule faith and struggling love nonetheless moves them inch by inch towards the truth that you seek. And, incidentally, if, en route, you realise just how miniscule your own faith and love are, all the better.

So, around us, there is that deep, implicit movement towards God that is simply the reality set at the heart of human life, and at the very heart of creation. And yet here is the other side of the paradox coming up.

Understanding that, responding to that, requires us to let go of so much. It is so wonderful to think that *we* are the inheritors of the kingdom; so wonderful to think that we can take all other claimants to law over this inheritance and prove them wrong. To let go of that can be -- is -- profoundly painful, a wrench, an amputation. It can feel like the loss of something crucial to ourselves, our bodies, our souls, our hearts.

And yet, only in the recognition and the embrace of what God has already given in the world, in our neighbour, in our unbelieving, indifferent neighbour -- only in the recognition of that are we going to come fully alive in our being in Christ. Because to be in Christ is to be in the limitless hospitality of God, to be the welcome that God always eternally is.

To be in the kingdom is to be in that state of hospitality -costly hospitality, because at level after level of our own being, the temptation becomes stronger and stronger to shut the door on at least something, and at least someone, to give up on our hope and our prayer, and to say, well, those (like Eldad and Medad in the camp) who failed to set their alarm clocks for the great prophetic moment, are actually the people we can safely look down on. What a relief.

So the paradox is one of those paradoxes that can only be resolved in the complex and demanding and joyful living of hospitality. And this is where the ordained ministry in the church ought to come in, as a sacramental sign to the whole body of Christ that living in Christ is living in welcome. We cannot receive the life that God gives unless we live in that state of hospitality, because the life of God is welcome, and the life of Christ is welcome: deeply, costly welcome, at every moment.

Today we're giving thanks for one particular ordained minister in the body of Christ; and I suspect that everyone in this congregation will know at once what I mean when I say that this has been, above all, supremely a ministry of hospitality - a ministry in which those who have come to Fr Hugh for counsel, support, and wisdom have unfailingly been received, with that characteristic quizzical, unserious, focused attention -- a difficult mixture to attain and sustain; an attention which has somehow opened up our own perspectives to something of our absurdity, as well as something of our preciousness. That, I would suggest, is one of the great gifts that pastoral ministry can give: awaking us to a sense of our absurdity as well as our preciousness. But that's another sermon or two.

But whether in Bucharest, Jerusalem, Dulwich, Pinner, even Oxford, the life of the hospitable Christ has been lived out, and spoken out, by this profoundly welcoming priest, whose ministry we have welcomed so joyfully, and whose ministry has, as ministry should, generated more and more ministry around the Church of God.

Those of us here this morning who share that ordained ministry will know just how much Hugh has contributed to the integrity and the strength, such as it is, of whatever ministry we've been granted to exercise. We will know that we have been

held to account in the most welcoming and hospitable way possible; held to account for our own willingness to welcome, our own willingness to practise that unserious, serious, loving attentiveness which has so characterised this ministry.

And so we are recalled to the very nature of Christ's body as a hospitable place. We're not simply talking about church communities that tick all the boxes on diversity and inclusion. We're talking about something rather more fundamental: about living as a community where diverse humanity is rooted, nourished, and transfigured. And for it to be rooted, nourished, and transfigured, it first has to be received. All those who bring their diverse levels of faith, love, and hope to the community -- those who don't know very much about it at all; those who don't know what they're asking; those who don't know what it might be to belong and don't very much want to know -- all of them are to be received, because those who are not against us are for us. Around us in the world, did we but know it, there is an urgent longing for the good news of God, which we ignore at our peril and our loss, so tempting is it to suppose that the kingdom is our possession.

And so we come, this morning, to celebrate a welcome -- a welcome given us by a priest we love, and then, at a still deeper level, a welcome given before the foundation of the world, by the Lord who has called us into his body. We come to renew our own freedom and joy in welcoming, in hospitality, and our own sense of our absurd temptations to close that down, to make the kingdom simply our own back garden.

We come in joy and in thanks; in repentance; and in glad acknowledgement that we have been called by name, and seated in the feast of the kingdom; and, in that welcome, been given the courage, the overflowing hope, that allows us to turn to the world, knowing that around us, there are more than we ever suspected; that, as Elisha says to his young assistant in the second book of Kings, 'those who are with us are more than those who are against us'. Because the shape, and logic, and strength of the entire universe is the wisdom of God, pressing towards its purposes, in ceaseless generosity, in fathomless glory, for which, to God, Father, Son, and Holy Spirit, be thanks now and forever. Amen.