

Just over 38 years ago I was ordained in Bradford Cathedral: an enthusiastic, young – and young-faced – curate. In those early years, more than once, when people came to the door looking for me, they asked 'Is your dad in?'

I'm afraid that no-one asks that any more. But one thing which I do have in common with that young curate is that I still find myself as excited as ever by the Christian Gospel and by Christian ministry.

And so I should, of course! Because the Gospel is exciting: a transformative message of a God who invites us to enter into the fullness of His life. And ministry is exciting, too: the opportunity to be fellow-workers with God, bringing that life-changing message to people in every kind of situation and circumstance. As Paul wrote in our second reading, 'since through God's mercy we have this ministry, we do not lose heart'.¹

But we have all known people who *have* 'lost heart'. Even if they started with a strong and enthusiastic faith, over the years they have struggled to keep it that way: I even know clergy friends, who, somewhere along the way, have lost faith altogether. The reasons why that sadly happens will be as varied as the people themselves. And, if *I'm* still going strong, well, it's no credit to me. But....I believe I know where the credit *does* lie. And the answer may surprise you: the credit lies with...The Church!

I say it may surprise you, because some people describe their experience of church as challenging, not strengthening, their Christian faith. And, yes, any of us who have been part of the church for any length of time are well aware of its failings. It's made up of human beings, after all, and we always make a mess of things! And yet, for all the difficult times along the way, it's in being part of the church – and I've been curate or vicar of ten, altogether – that we work out, act out, live out, together, what it means to be God's Kingdom People. Christian living and believing was never meant to be a solo activity, and being part of God's church, part of Christ's Body, faults and all, is an essential part of the Christian life.

Which brings me to St Christopher's, Pott Shrigley. If I end my stipendiary ministry encouraged, affirmed, strengthened and hopeful in my faith, then it is in no small part due to the wonderful generosity of God in letting me spend the last 5 of those 38 years here

¹ 2 Corinthians 4.1

with you, who have tolerated, accepted and made up for my weaknesses, whilst appreciating and encouraging my strengths; who have shared fully with me in that 'ministry which, by God's mercy, we have'.

I have walked up and down from here to the Vicarage, of course, countless times: and in my mind early on I dubbed it 'the walk of blessing': partly because it's a lovely route, past fields, trees, livestock, water, and it always refreshes my soul; but mainly because I'm always excited to be on my way to Pott Shrigley Church, and to the people I will meet with, work and worship with, when I get there. And because whilst on that walk I have thanked the Lord a hundred times for His blessing in bringing me and Kim here!

In our first reading (Psalm 133), a curious scene is described: copious quantities of oil poured out on the head of Aaron, and running down his hair, his beard and onto his garments. A striking and rather odd image: but in the Bible oil is a symbol of God's blessing; and our God is ridiculously, unstintingly generous; his blessings really do overflow.

But notice, specifically, *where* 'the Lord bestows his blessing, even life for evermore'². He bestows it where 'God's people [are] living together in unity'³. It was Jesus' earnest prayer to the Father that his people should be one. And it's not hard to see why unity is one of his key priorities: divided churches are weak churches. Sadly, some churches – some church people – are plagued with a readiness to fall out, to take offence, to divide into groups and factions. All very human, of course, but also incredibly painful, destructive, and a denial of the Kingdom life and ministry we are called to share together.

One of the greatest blessings you have here is that there is very little in the way of division and divisiveness. There is a spirit of Unity. Not uniformity, of course; we have a wide range of personalities, views, opinions, preferences. But time after time it has been my experience that people here work together, for a common cause, in a spirit of mutual love and positivity, where the default position is acceptance and friendship, not suspicion and antagonism.

Please never stop being that blessed, united church family: to quote St Paul, 'Make every effort to keep the unity of the Spirit through the bond of peace'⁴. The easiest way for the powers of darkness to weaken any church is to sow division: so, to quote Paul again, 'Don't give the devil a chance!'⁵

² Psalm 133.3 New International Version

³ Psalm 133.1 New International Version

⁴ Ephesians 4:3 New International Version

⁵ Ephesians 4:27 Good News Translation

In our reading from 2 Corinthians Paul writes, ‘what we preach is not ourselves, but Jesus Christ as Lord, and ourselves as your servants for Jesus’ sake’⁶. On an occasion such as this, it’s too easy to make the sermon all about me – or all about you. But none of this is ultimately about us – it’s about Him. And this church has always been at its best when it has remembered that.

Yes, our life as a church is made up of many elements. We have this wonderful building – picturesque inside and out – popular for weddings, lovingly and sacrificially cared for by our members. We have lots of activities and events in which we share together. We have essential business to attend to, challenges to meet, bills to pay, problems to solve. We have worship, outreach, pastoral care, and much more besides. But unfortunately it’s possible for a church to have all that, and yet to have a massive God-shaped hole at the centre: to be so busy, or perhaps to be so complacent, that there is no room – or little room – for God Himself. Channelling Martha, rather than Mary, such a church has little or no time for listening to the Lord, and to what *He* might be wanting to say; what activities, plans, worship and ministry might be *His* priorities. And it is a short step from that to becoming a church which is there just for its own sake, rather than to be a channel of the life-changing, life-saving Gospel of Jesus Christ, a message which God has entrusted to us, and which our world so sorely needs.

And, while I know that we so often fall so far short of what we might be in this regard, I have always found this to be a church which, at its heart, knows what really matters, and is ready to be reminded of it by an annoying vicar who constantly harps on about it.

Again, whatever lies ahead, please never lose that focus: this is God’s church, not yours: let Him be Lord of St Christopher’s, Pott Shrigley; and let the church always be shaped by His Gospel, and not by our own agenda – nor by the world around us and its latest fads and pre-occupations.

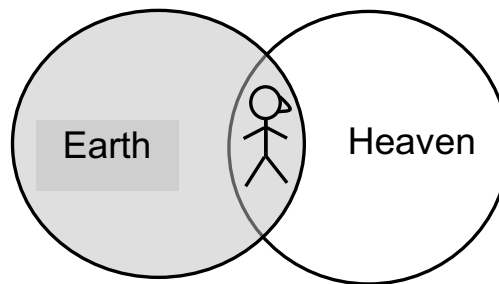
Indeed, this also comes loud and clear from today’s reading. As Paul rather sternly writes about the surrounding culture in his own day, ‘The god of this age has blinded the minds of unbelievers, so that they cannot see the light of the gospel that displays the glory of Christ, who is the image of God’⁷. Now, I’m not one of those Christians who think that the world is all evil, so we need to huddle together in the church like Noah in his ark, pull up the gangplank, and keep ourselves separate and pure. That’s not the Gospel: we are called to engage with the world in which we live and move, indeed, to bring the salt and light of

⁶ 2 Corinthians 4.5 New International Version

⁷ 2 Corinthians 4.18 New International Version

Christ into it, as He commanded; *but we are to stand firmly on the values of God's Kingdom, not the values of this world as we do so.*

Which brings me to this old chestnut:



Regular members may recall I first shared this picture in my early days here, and told the story of how a Christian speaker shared it, way back in my university days. It shows that as Christians we inhabit two kingdoms; this world's, and God's. That university speaker had a big nose, and he insisted that this stick figure should have one too – to show clearly that, although we are living in both worlds, we take our values from God's kingdom. As Paul writes in our reading, 'So we fix our eyes not on what is seen, but on what is unseen, since what is seen is temporary, but what is unseen is eternal.'⁸ I have found myself reaching for this picture a lot in these past 5 years: perhaps that's a reflection of how during that time our contemporary culture has drifted ever further from anything resembling a Christian worldview. This can be a painful and confusing space to occupy, and it is increasingly challenging to stand for and live by God's principles in this world. But that is what we are called to do: and, of course, it's another reason why we need one another, need the church, as together we try to be God's people in this world.

Paul ends this same passage with a reminder of our mortality. And that suddenly seems that bit more relevant to me as I enter retirement! – after years of moving from place to place, the next big move will be 'up there'!

'Therefore we do not lose heart. Though outwardly we are wasting away, yet inwardly we are being renewed day by day'⁹. Now, I'm not being morbid: it actually is healthy to be reminded every so often that all of us are only here for a season. In my last letter for our wonderful magazine, HotPott, I wrote about how, while we've been here, we couldn't imagine being anywhere else, or with anyone else; and yet today, suddenly, that comes to an end. In this life, nothing is permanent, except God's love, which is stronger even than that last move which we will all one day have to make...

⁸ Colossians 3.1-2 Good News Translation

⁹ 2 Corinthians 4.16 New International Version

Still, I hope that for us, and for all of you, that day is still far off. And in the meantime, we are still called to serve – in retirement as much as ever. I could not have had a better model of that than the folk in this church who are retired, but who use the freedom which that gives them to serve God so faithfully and effectively. I hope we can be even half as effective in the Lord's service as our retired folk here. But it has been a joy to be part of a church family where everyone plays a vital part: from the youngest to the oldest, from the busy parent managing family and work, to the older members who sometimes regret that 'they can't do what they used to', and yet bring so much with their love, their wisdom and their prayers. As Paul reminds us 'You are the Body of Christ, and *each one* is a part of it'¹⁰.

Because, of course, we're all called to follow Christ and to serve him – not just fresh faced young vicars – or ageing superannuated ones. And, as I myself have always found over all these years, he never calls us to do something which he won't also give us the strength and ability to do. As we'll sing in our final hymn.

Christ doth call

One and all:

*Ye who follow shall not fall*¹¹.

In fact, I can't do better than close with words we sang in our opening hymn: for this would be my prayer for all of us as we face the future united in our hope in Christ:

Lord, for ourselves; in living power remake us -

Self on the cross and Christ upon the throne,

Past put behind us, for the future take us:

*Lord of our lives, to live for Christ alone.*¹²

¹⁰ 1 Corinthians 12.27 New International Version

¹¹ From the hymn, 'All my hope on God is founded'.

¹² From the hymn, 'Lord, for the years'.

Appendix. First reading: Psalm 133

1 How good and pleasant it is
when God's people live together in unity!

2 It is like precious oil poured on the head,
running down on the beard,
running down on Aaron's beard,
down on the collar of his robe.

3 It is as if the dew of Hermon
were falling on Mount Zion.

For there the Lord bestows his blessing,
even life for evermore.

Second reading: 2 Corinthians Chapter 4

1 Therefore, since through God's mercy we have this ministry, we do not lose heart.

2 Rather, we have renounced secret and shameful ways; we do not use deception, nor do we distort the word of God. On the contrary, by setting forth the truth plainly we commend ourselves to everyone's conscience in the sight of God.

3 And even if our gospel is veiled, it is veiled to those who are perishing. 4 The god of this age has blinded the minds of unbelievers, so that they cannot see the light of the gospel that displays the glory of Christ, who is the image of God.

5 For what we preach is not ourselves, but Jesus Christ as Lord, and ourselves as your servants for Jesus' sake. 6 For God, who said, 'Let light shine out of darkness,' made his light shine in our hearts to give us the light of the knowledge of God's glory displayed in the face of Christ.

16 Therefore we do not lose heart. Though outwardly we are wasting away, yet inwardly we are being renewed day by day. 17 For our light and momentary troubles are achieving for us an eternal glory that far outweighs them all.

18 So we fix our eyes not on what is seen, but on what is unseen, since what is seen is temporary, but what is unseen is eternal.