

Sermon preached at the Methodist Ordination Service at St Cuthbert's Chapel, Worksop,

Sunday 1 July 2018

It is so wonderful to be worshipping in this chapel dedicated to the great Celtic bishop, St Cuthbert. Like the prophet, Isaiah, his life was shaped by visions. When he was a young shepherd, for instance, he saw a vision angels in the night sky carrying St Aidan to heaven. Little did he know that he would eventually follow in Aidan's footsteps as Abbot and Bishop of Lindisfarne.

'In the year that King Uzziah died ...' Isaiah sees a great vision in the Temple in Jerusalem. He might have seen his P45 because his ministry had begun to flourish under this King and was now in jeopardy. It would be fair to say that the Middle East has been in turmoil for approximately 4000 years, and peace and stability has been the exception rather than the rule. After five decades of relatively peaceful rule by Uzziah, the prophet knows that there's trouble ahead! Uzziah's reign will become Biblical code for 'the good old days!'.

Like Isaiah, those of you being ordained today might be forgiven for thinking that your ministry is beginning just as the good old days have come to an end. To be fair, they probably ended for the Methodist Church a while ago, but there will no doubt be plenty of people in the congregations you serve who remember them very fondly indeed. Times when the pews were crammed with people of all ages - but especially children - and Church fêtes were never ruined by rain or cloud: those are the times that really stick in the memory.

Like Isaiah, we live in anxious times. Our politics have become increasingly shrill as our leaders struggle to offer answers in the midst of uncertainty. Anxiety often forces us to turn inward, as individuals, organisations, and societies, in a vain attempt to find a secure place from which to face the future. But it is a false security if it is based on supposed shared identity, or a common threat.

The Church is not immune from this. In the last decade, the Methodist Church, like all mainline denominations, has witnessed significant decline, and a growing sense that life is going on without us. The real fear that the Methodist Church in Britain might cease to exist within our lifetime is ever present if not always acknowledged. In an anxious and nervous world, it is hard to resist the zeitgeist; fear is contagious. ... In the year that King Uzziah died ...

1. In the year that King Uzziah died, Isaiah is swept up in a vision of God that fills the Temple and overwhelms his mind. Thrones and robes and earthquakes and weird angels calling to one another - but they are not important. They are the window dressing of this vision, which is about Isaiah lifting his eyes above the fear and anxiety. For prophets are not the manufacturers of visions, and if they try to do it by themselves, they fail those they serve. If we are to be ministers

in the Church of God, it is because we have been captivated by a vision of God's love and generosity that shakes us to our foundations.

In the Methodist tradition, we ask those whom we ordain to retell the story of their calling to this ministry again and again. (You must be sick of it by now!) I imagine none of the ordinands sitting here had a call like Isaiah's - let's be honest, it wouldn't take much of God's robe to fill our local Methodist Chapel, and even a slight tremor would reduce half of our building to rubble!

In asking you to tell us that story, it is like asking a couple to tell us when they fell in love. Tell us that moment when your heart skipped a beat and you knew. Tell us that moment when the inklings you had been toying with for a while suddenly sparked into life. Tell us when you were swept off your feet by the love of God.

Telling your story is not for our benefit, but for yours. As Probationers, you have already had a taste of what ministry can be like (though the first Church Council after ordination always seems to be worse than the ones you've chaired to date!) What will sustain you in ministry for the next ten, twenty, fifty years is not good ideas or nifty strategies, or even being reasonably competent. The late great Donald English once asked a group of preachers, including me: Do you still love God, or do you just work for him now? Know the answer to that question. 'Remember your call.'

2. St Cuthbert lived in the 7th century, about 1400 years after Isaiah. He spent most of his life in Northumbria and Cumbria. When he was a young monk, the story goes, one frosty December day, he was on his way to morning prayers when he noticed a young man huddled in the cloister. The stranger was poorly dressed and freezing to the touch. To put it in a modern context: he looked like he was dressed for a night out in Newcastle! It was obvious he hadn't eaten in days. Since Cuthbert was in charge of the kitchen, he offered him some food, but the stranger refused. Cuthbert insisted and ran off to the kitchen for some bread. When he got back, the stranger was gone, but there was no sign of any footprints in the snow. Perplexed, Cuthbert returned to the kitchen to find that the oven he had just emptied was full of bread. At that moment, he realised who the stranger had been.

While other monks had passed by, the important thing about St Cuthbert was that he noticed - being swept up in the vision of God gave him a clearer vision of life around him. He became famous for his ability to see things that others couldn't, and offer insight into people's lives. It wasn't magic powers - he was simply so aware of the world around him that he saw the connections that others missed.

In this service, you will be charged to:

'Serve the needy.
Minister to the sick.
Welcome the Stranger.
Seek the lost.'

You have been set aside in order to notice things that others are too busy to see, to notice people that systems have forgotten. For we live in an age where we see everything and notice nothing. We have become so distracted by ourselves! That cannot be so for you! You will promise to pray, to worship, to read and to study - for the rest of your life! Not to make you cleverer or superior to anyone else, but to give you the eyes to see what others do not see. Your task, as a presbyter, is to notice, and to help others see more clearly what is really going on.

3. In 1953, Ray Bradbury had a vision of the future. In *Fahrenheit 451*, he foresaw a time when houses would be fireproof ... and books would be hated. The job of the fire brigade would no longer be the fighting of fire, but the burning of books. Knowledge, in this dystopia, is the enemy of fun. But a fireman becomes disillusioned by it all. So he steals a book - the Bible as it happens - and seeks out an old academic called Faber to teach him about it. Faber tries to explain the importance of books:

'The magic is only in what books say, how they stitched the patches of the universe together into one garment for us.'

But to understand and use books well, Faber says you need three things:

'Number one ... quality of information. Number two: leisure to digest it. And number three: the right to carry out actions based on what we learn from the interaction of the first two.'

(Bradbury, 1953, p72f)

The task of the presbyter is to contemplate, and then to share the fruits of your contemplation. You are called to be a seamstress, to assist others to join their little patch of experience together with others and reveal a richer, larger, deeper picture of how life is.

But more than that - you are called, as ministers of the gospel, to hold the vision for others, a vision not just of how life really is, but of how it can be.

A vision built on hope and not mere optimism. The difference between hope and optimism is clear. Optimism is a feeling, a feeling that life *might* be better tomorrow. But a feeling that carries no more responsibility than waking up positive.

Hope knows that tomorrow can be better, that tomorrow can be better because of what I do today. Hope is the fruit of faithful living. Hope may become infected with the contagion of fear, but is not paralysed by it.

It was hope that sustained the women who fought for FIFTY years to achieve the vote in this country.

It was hope that enabled Nelson Mandela to survive 27 years in prison.

It was hope that gave Martin Luther King the courage to face beatings and hatred with non-violence.

It is hope that keeps parents across this nation going, determined to feed and clothe and love their children despite benefits sanctions.

It is hope that enables people across the world to rebuild after disasters and disease; to hold a vision of the future in the midst of the horrors of war.

But pilgrims need sustenance, for the road to the future is long. Do not be tempted offer them the soggy-bottomed quiche of cheap optimism. They need real nourishment - always offer them the banquet of Hope. Always celebrate the sacraments.

Conclusion

Who is worthy of this calling? It's 18 years since I sat where the ordinands are sitting - not quite the year that King Uzziah died - and I still don't feel anywhere near worthy. We stand before this vision, and we are all too aware of our frailties and failings. 'I am a person of unclean lips ...'

In a moment, we will, with great acclamation, declare you worthy of this. Not because we like you - though we probably do - or because you're special - through you probably are. It is because we recognise in each of you a willingness to hold for us the breath-taking vision of hope and love that God has offered you and all of us in Jesus Christ - to Declare the good news!

And so we thank you now, that when God asked 'Whom shall I send, and who will go for us?', you responded:

Here am I; send me.