

Salisbury 26 November, 2011

May I begin by saying what an immense pleasure and privilege it is to be with you at this awards and presentation ceremony. A day of celebration, thanksgiving, encouragement and commissioning!

God has called you to ministry in his church. The church has tested your call and is finding you worthy. Whether or not you find your calling burdensome at times, whether or not you feel ‘up to the job’, you have been called. Those whom God calls, he equips. Every day God equips. I still think Wesley got it right: ‘pray like it depends on God; work like it depends on you’. It will be hard work. But you are not asked to conduct your ministry in your own strength. The blessing of God is upon you and his Spirit dwells within you. His strength is yours for the asking.

It is to remind you of these truths that I offer you a small gift today. ... a reproduction of artist Brian Turner’s painting *Turning Water into Wine*. No, I’m not suggesting that you drink a lot of wine to get you through! Wine is a symbol of generosity and celebration. The image contains a message about God’s generosity – poured out on the cross, poured out daily *for* you, and poured out daily *through* you. My talk comprises a few reflections on this painting.

(This afternoon’s sessions will be an opportunity to work further with similar images.)

The painting is, of course, based on John 2:7-10.

Jesus said to the servants, “Fill the jars with water”. So they filled the jars to the top.

Then he said to them, “Now take some out and give it to the master of the feast”.

So they took the water to the master. When he tasted it, the water had become wine. He did not know where the wine came from, but the servants who had brought the water knew. The master of the wedding called the bridegroom and said to him, “People always serve the best wine first. Later, after the guests have been drinking awhile, they serve the cheaper wine. But you have saved the best wine till now”.

This is the first time that Jesus is portrayed in John's gospel performing a miracle. He too was facing new challenges, new public roles, new responsibilities with their various demands upon his character, family relations, and decision-making abilities.

Like many of you, he was fortunate to have family members present to share with him in the ministry – and, as we know from Jesus' conversation with his mother – it wasn't always easy for them!

The pouring out of wine foreshadows his death. The marriage feast foreshadows the great heavenly feast in celebration of his resurrection.

At first glance, this small image by a South West artist might seem an odd place from which to offer reflections on your ministry. To me, however, the image speaks of imperatives that will, I hope, shape your ministry. If you will forgive the rather corny use of an acronym, I want to make 5 points about:

- SUSPENDING normal modes of reasoning
- TESTING your ministry and the communities you will serve against the requirements of the gospel
- EXPECTING much from your congregations
- TESTIFYING always to him who saved you
- SERVING to the uttermost.

Suspend

Wine flowing from a kitchen tap requires a suspension of normal modes of reasoning. Wine from a kitchen sink has little utility. Neither does the eucharist. We do not celebrate the eucharist for its usefulness or social function modes of reasoning. A Christian understanding of life is not confined within humanly constructed norms that calculate benefit or perform against management strategies. Wine flowing from a kitchen tap, the freely-given eucharistic feast, means liberation from all that it utilitarian.

The usual world order is suspended. The new heavenly order which will come to replace already embraces all. Everyone is an equal participant and there is no clear dividing line between the eschatological and 'daily life'.

The eucharist knows no separation between ‘performers’ and ‘spectators’, clergy and laity. It is your privilege to prepare the Holy Table and echo Jesus’ invitation to eat and drink. Yet it is the church, not the priest, who conducts the liturgy.

But be careful.

Test

Paul emphasized the high demands of the eucharist when writing to the Corinthians.

‘I hear that there are divisions among you’, he wrote, ‘ For when the time comes to eat, each of you goes ahead with your own supper, and one goes hungry and another becomes drunk’ (1 Cor. 11:18, 21).

In the earliest days of the church, believers ate all things in common. Later, they feasted in common only when celebrating the Lord’s supper. In Corinth this custom was threatened by individualistic and divisive practices. The early church father John Chrysostom writes:

This custom was broken ... a custom most excellent and most useful; (for it was a foundation of love, and a comfort to poverty, and a corrective of riches, and an occasion of the highest philosophy, and an instruction of humility: since however he [Paul] saw so great advantages in a way being destroyed, he naturally addresses them with severity ...¹

The true ethos of the eucharist is all of the above! The true ethos of the eucharist is the basis upon which the church is built. The true ethos of the eucharist is the true character of our life together in all its aspects, whether as the church universal or the church in the smallest village of Steeplebumpstead. The true ethos of the eucharist is that which makes the practices of the church worthy of the name ‘Christian’.

As John Chrysostom was quick to point out, the eucharist teaches participants to ease the grief and trouble of poverty by sharing things in common, thereby giving strength and hope to those in need. The true ethos of the eucharist counteracts the temptations of riches by pointing out how poverty is a cause of harm, urging that a person’s liberality should increase and become manifold, in proportion to their ability to give.

¹ John Chrysostom, *Homilies on First Corinthians*, Homily XXVII on 1 Cor. XI. 17, *NPNF* First Series, Vol. XII, p.157.

The true ethos of the eucharist, nurtures wisdom and overcomes the arrogance and pride that Chrysostom links to failings in virtue and giving others cause to stumble in their path of faith (Matt. 18:7).

Expect

Expect a lot from your people. Set high expectations of your own and their ministries of prayer, witness and service.

Paul clearly expected an outflow of loving communion from the practice of eating the Lord's supper. He 'seared with a hot iron' the consciences of those who broke with the customary, communal practices of eating together in favour of feasting in private. *You are called to have similarly high expectations of your people.* Even someone dying can pray for another.

John Chrysostom again:

Do you see how they were disgracing themselves? For that which is the Lord's, they make a private matter ... How and in what manner? Because the Lord's Supper, *i.e.* the Master's, ought to be common. For the property of the master belongs not to this servant without belonging to that, but in common to all. So that by "the Lord's" Supper he expresses this, the "community" of the feast.²

Individualistic practices went hand-in-hand with factions in the church. The Lord's supper is not a private feast or individual indulgence.

Paul's strictness, and that of Chrysostom, was not intended to undermine the liberty of those in his charge, or to place any necessity or compulsion on the people.

The point is that the ethos of the Lord's Supper is that of a feast or banquet. What matters is simply being with other members of the church, being the church, setting aside daily affairs, and being part of the celebration. The quality of love for one another distinguishes its participants from those at any other feast.

And remember, significance of the eucharist extends also beyond the community of the church. In Jesus' parable of the wedding feast, the servant was told to go out into the streets and lanes of the town and bring in the poor, the crippled, the blind, and the lame (Lk 14:21b). All were invited; it was a banquet for the world. The banquet breaks out of private ways of life into social, civic modes of existence. Sociologists tell us that

² John Chrysostom, *Homilies on First Corinthians*, Homily XXVII on 1 Cor. XI. 17, commenting on verse 21, *NPNF* First Series, Vol. XII, p.159.

eating and feasting are the primary ways in which communities are bound together. The church too lives and invites others to share its life in Christ at a feast. Like a carnival, the ethos of the eucharist is inclusive and welcoming. There is food and drink available for all.

Testify

His mother said to the servants, “Do whatever he tells you to do.”

In that place there were six stone water jars that the Jews used in their washing ceremony. Each jar held about 100 litres.

Jesus said to the servants, “Fill the jars with water”. So they filled the jars to the top.

Then he said to them, “Now take some out and give it to the master of the feast”. So they took the water to the master.

Testify to our saviour even when you don't quite know what's going on and everything seems to be falling apart. Testify even though the truths to which we bear witness are incomprehensible..

The servants were asked to ‘believe against understanding’ --- to distinguish between ‘nonsense’ and the ‘incomprehensible’.

It is not ‘nonsense’ – not without sense - that Christ was raised from the dead (the sentence is grammatical and meaningful). The truth conveyed, however, is beyond earthly understanding. Finite human beings cannot comprehend infinity.

The servants could not comprehend what happened to the water.

How they must have laughed.

I hope that, when you first saw the image on the card, you smiled a little.

Smiles and laughter. In some ancient Christian traditions, laughter and excess mirth were censured because laughter was linked to luxury, laxness, dissolution and blasphemy – all of which ill-befit a Christian sorrowful for sin. John Chrysostom was one such voice. He said that he did not wish ‘to suppress all laughter’ but reminds his readers that Christ speaks much about mourning and blesses those who mourn.

In medieval Europe, however, carnivals took place just after Easter. After the dourness of Lent, Easter laughter (*risus paschalis*) was permitted. Amusing stories and laughter were permitted even in church.

Easter laughter was linked with German, especially Bavarian, preaching traditions in the fifteenth century, and was a way of embodying the triumph over death that Easter celebrates. Easter laughter was concurrent with the resumption of meat-eating, sexual intercourse, and general gaiety that pervaded the church after the days of Lenten sadness.

Prohibited later by Pope Clement X — for fear of ribaldry and abuse of the word of God — the tradition fell into disuse. Easter laughter (*risus paschalis*) was linked with developing ideas about the Christian as the fool of God and saintly folly in the name of the gospel.

Easter laughter reminded believers of the absurdity to human eyes of the self-humiliation, the *kenosis*, of God at the incarnation.

Laughter has therapeutic effect; laughter is the best medicine. (Which is perhaps fortunate because it's all that the NHS might soon be able to offer.)

Fools in the medieval church who gaffawed and shook with Easter Laughter imitated Christ's victory over the devil (Matt. 4:1-11).

Fools in the medieval church mocked the powers and privileges of this world, gaining their strength from prayer and fasting. Their seemingly odd behaviour was a prophetic witness to the difference between God's coming reign and the reality of our fallen condition.

'The wisdom of this world is foolishness with God' (1 Cor. 3:18-19). Become fools in Christ, writes Paul. so that you might become wise.

This injunction was interpreted by some to mean the foolishness of asceticism. Saint Isidora of Egypt is reputed to have fed herself with nothing but crumbs, to have covered her head with a rag and gone barefoot rather than wear cowl and sandals like other nuns. She was regarded by many as a mad woman. Serapion the Sydonite (+ 5th century) strove for the perfection of non-acquisitiveness by giving away everything he possessed, even his cloak.

The folly of asceticism makes little sense in our contemporary culture, and it is important to emphasize that this kind of folly is not about self-abasement for its own sake or seeking discomfort and suffering because they are good in themselves. Much

harm can be done through misinterpretations of such folly. Yet there is something about cutting connection with the destructive forces of greed and shunning the life of acquisitiveness that biblical teaching suggests is pleasing to God: 'It is no longer I who live, but Christ who lives in me' (Gal 2:20).

As ministers of the gospel you have the authority of the clown. Jesus was a king, mounted on a donkey.

His authority was in stark contrast with that of officialdom.

He, the fountain of living water, thirsted and asked for a drink.

He, the saviour of humanity, delivered Himself to the death of the cross.

The king of kings mounted on a donkey is the criterion for determining the quality or genuineness of all authority and leadership in the church.

Christ the king is the clown - mocked by the people, abused and beaten when the time of his reign is over ... 'But every blow dealt to the old helps the new to be born. Thrashings and mockings give way to life. Blood is turned into wine.

Serve

Serve to the uttermost. What would be more foolish than to die laughing? In the medieval traditions of Easter Laughter and carnival, characters frequently fell about with laughter and even died of laughter in their plays, laughter being one of the gay forms of death.

One author lists nine cases of death from joy, one of which was death from drowning in a barrel due to an excess of drinking; one is a man dying from joy when, after having seen three of his sons win the Olympic games, they place their victory wreathes on his head. In these stories, the image of death is devoid of all tragic or terrifying overtones. 'Death is the necessary link in a person's growth into the life to come, their renewal there. Death is the "other side" of birth; our side of birth.'

Not all funeral services that you will conduct will acknowledge that Easter laughter or death is 'birth-giving'. Not all will welcome in death the path to birth, new life, and Easter transformation. Not one, however, – no, not any – of the funeral service that you

will conduct will be outside Christ's once-for-all death and resurrection. Not one is devoid of the Easter laughter that you know and love.

STETS

Today, as we give thanks for your ministry and for that of STETS

- **SUSPEND** normal, earthly modes of reasoning that decry wine from a kitchen tap, or the truth of Christ crucified, as utterly ridiculous;
- **TEST** your own ministry and that of every community you serve against the demanding requirements of the gospel;
- **EXPECT** much from your congregations as you share in ministry with them;
- **TESTIFY** always — and especially when carefully-laid plans are overcome by events — to him who saved you;
- **SERVE** to the uttermost – even as death is all around.

The ministry to which you are called is one of feasting, celebration and laughter even at the point of death.

The ethos of the community into which you are ordained is one of abundant generosity – abundance beyond comprehension – and foolishness in the face of sin.

Through the incomprehensibility of the infinite God assuming finitude, all humanity is called to participate in the perfection of the divine life. I pray God's blessing on your ministry as, with all those placed in your charge, together, we drink the wine of heaven.