

No-one Expects the Spanish Inquisition!

Collation of Peter Townley as Archdeacon of Pontefract

Wakefield Cathedral

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Often, if I am travelling to London, I seek solace by buying *Private Eye*. It rarely disappoints, and one of my favourite columns is *Dumb Britain*. It records catastrophically hopeless answers to quiz game questions. A couple of weeks ago there was a corker from BBC1's *In It To Win It*. The question was: 'Alderney and Sark – are they part of the Channel Islands?' The contestant struggled but not really very manfully.

So he replied: 'Ooh! Is that the *English* Channel? I don't know, *are* there islands in the English Channel? I've never heard of any. *France* – that's near the English Channel.'

I begin with such 'hard' questions since the role of the archdeacon is often seen very largely as that of an inquisitor, a sort of ecclesiastical Anne Robinson! It is easy to see why: the Archdeacon's Visitation, the Articles of Inquiry, checking the Terriers – it all sounds very frightening. And, after all, no-one expects the Spanish Inquisition! Yet, nevertheless, the Shorter Oxford English Dictionary describes the archdeacon as being appointed by the bishop with the power of spiritual *censure*.

Now remembering that Peter is being collated to this new office on Passion Sunday, it would be easy for him to imagine that he is being led by me 'like a lamb to the slaughter'. For is not the archdeacon, as the most advanced member of the church inspectorate, something like the leader of the equivalent of OFSTED, a sort of OFVIC? In some sense they are always going to be seen almost as the traffic wardens of the Church. Such a role has very little attraction to the archdeacon's customers and very little more for the archdeacon him- or herself.

If today, however, is a Sunday when we dwell on the passion of Jesus, our readings take us to a deeper and more subtle level than talk of inquisitors and inspectors. That reading from Lamentations is one of the most compassionate and inspired passages to be used regularly in Passiontide. Let me remind you of its powerful opening words:

'The steadfast love of the Lord never ceases, his mercies never come to an end; they are new every morning.'

This is one of those moments when the Old Testament heralds so resonantly the outpouring of grace which is such a consistent theme in the New Testament – both in St Paul and the Gospels. It is, of course, a verse which has inspired many hymns: 'Great is thy faithfulness, O God of my Father' is one obvious fruit, but so are John Keble's marvellous verses which begin 'New every morning is the love, our waking and uprising prove.'

The thrust of these lines from Lamentations is one of God's abiding but also constantly renewed love and compassion. It is a compassion, however, that is costly both to God and to those who would follow the Christian way. Compassion, of itself, requires a giving, a self-emptying, a vulnerability even.

The end of our Old Testament passage runs: 'For the Lord will not cast off for ever, but though he cause grief, he will have compassion.' The Gospel reading, of course, opens this up far more vividly still. Jesus, in a manner which he repeats three times in Matthew, Mark and Luke predicts his own fate:

‘... the Son of Man will be delivered to the chief priest and scribes ... to be mocked and scourged and crucified.’

It is not only Jesus, of course, who is caught up into this self-giving. The mother of the sons of Zebedee gets short shrift when she asks for places on the top table for James and John: ‘Are you able to drink the cup that I am to drink?’ What Jesus calls us to is a lifetime’s pattern of service and self-giving. But what might this have to do with an archdeacon, some might ask?

Perhaps the beginnings of an answer spring from our candidate this afternoon. Peter is, of course, a good Lancashire lad. Now we, living in Yorkshire, must not be too hard on him simply for wearing the red rose! But, more seriously, Peter has known what a lifetime of service entails. Ordination has taken him to some of the tougher parts of Manchester, then to Ashton-under-Lyne and to Stretford. It has taken him too to the busy civic parish of St Mary-le-Tower where he has exercised an outstanding ministry in that fairly robust East Anglian town of Ipswich.

Alongside this he has been a rural dean and has kept pace with the Church internationally through his links with Germany. He has even done a full sentence on General Synod. But at the root of this, and this I have heard so often in the past two months, at the very root of this, is the warmest of pastoral hearts. That is what takes us to the centre of an archdeacon’s ministry.

For an archdeacon is a chief deacon, and deacons are called to mirror the self-giving of Christ; they are messengers for the Gospel. So the archdeacon is that times one thousand. Being an archdeacon is no easy calling. It calls out of the person a really deep level of self-giving. The archdeacon really *is*, in that sense, the deacon *par excellence*. Of course, only in the Church of England could there be the irony that to be an archdeacon you must be a priest as well! But that does not override that essential rooted role of being a compassionate servant of Christ’s Gospel. He is there to encourage and support. Let me end with an example from my other favourite column in *Private Eye*.

This time it is *Colemanballs*, gaffs from commentators especially on sport. Steven Gerrard on BBC1 reflected profoundly a few weeks ago:

‘We’re a long way from being where we are!’

Well, doubtless he did not quite mean that, but it is clear what it does mean. Often within the Church we can feel that sense of falling short of our calling, and of being in need of God’s grace. Peter, as archdeacon of Pontefract will help us all, alongside Robert, as we follow Christ’s call to us. Ultimately that calling is seen most perfectly in the life of Jesus.

For all of us, then, our calling is one of Christ-like self-giving and of encouragement of others. Peter will model just that. He will be no shrinking violet and he will exhibit his own unique blend of openness and bonhomie, and in that he will encourage many.

Amen.

Readings:

Lamentations: 3.22-33

Matthew: 20.17-38