

While We Were Yet Sinners

Installation of Canons

Wakefield Cathedral Lent IV

26 March 2006

There are some things we never forget because of their associations. So I shall never forget Dennis Potter's marvellous serialised television drama *Pennies from Heaven*. That's because not just once, but twice, my wife missed the final episode – and for dramatic reasons. Somehow each time the plot sent her into labour! I suppose I should therefore call our two sons – *pennies from heaven*! For they were the result of that labour. My great memory of the series was of Bob Hoskins and his girlfriend singing *Anything Goes* in a barn, and then *Painting the Clouds with Sunshine* in a classroom – and all in the Forest of Dean.

Now I begin there since that's just where one of our two new canons began his life. Tony Macpherson, despite his Celtic surname, is a Forest of Dean man. But then how about Martyn? What does Martyn spark in my mind? Well, apart from the hills around Golcar, perhaps even more remarkably Martyn reminds me of the Vendée, and the terrible bloodshed following the Revolution on the north western coastlands of France. For over the years Martyn and Gini have rooted their hearts in that marvellous part of France, albeit with its own tragic memories.

So each of our new canons brings to the college they've just joined fascinating backgrounds or hinterlands, and so what we might call 'lateral insights'. They bring other broad interests and insights too, alongside all the other canons, both ordained and lay members of the chapter. And that is part of the reason for the existence of the greater chapter. It offers to the cathedral, and to the diocese, a rich reservoir of expertise, interest and talent for the furthering of the Kingdom of God.

But let me stay with our two new canons for just a little longer. What is it that shapes the distinctive character of their ministries? Let me begin with Martyn this time. Martyn's well sustained work in Golcar is shaped, without doubt, by a pastoral heart rooted in a love of his Lord. As both parish priest and rural dean those are the vibes, so to speak, that communicate themselves most immediately.

There's no doubting too that Tony's heart is utterly pastoral, but Tony has a different style again. For Tony's ministry is shaped by a unique liturgical awareness. Indeed, it was my deanery visit to Horbury Junction that saw the chairs turned in choir-wise with the worship having a touch of the Orthodox tradition about it. Or there was the stunning eucharist in York Minster at the *Arise* gathering. Or there was his contribution to *Everyday God*. Like Martyn, Tony sees the Life of the Church as forming us in the image of Christ. That too is another aspect of the life of the college of canons – again both ordained and lay.

But, in the end, what are all these gifts and talents about? What is priesthood, the chapter or, indeed, the Church of God for? Today's two readings leave us in no doubt whatsoever. That brief extract from Exodus recounts a defining moment in Israel's exile in Egypt. More than almost any other race in history the Jewish people have been a people in exile. The pogroms of Russia, the blood libel witch-hunts of mediaeval England and finally the Holocaust, or Shoah, are but the latest atrocities in one nation's history. Exodus tells of an obdurate Pharaoh who will not let Israel go. Later the psalmist tells of another exile and persecution: 'By the waters of Babylon we sat down and wept and remembered Zion – how shall we sing the Lord's song in a strange land?'

In that outstanding piece from the letter to the Christians in Rome, Paul rehearses a similar theme about liberty and freedom, but this time it is framed in the context of hope: 'While we were yet sinners, Christ died for us', and more lyrically still: 'God's love has been poured into our hearts through the Holy Spirit which has been given to us!' This brief extract we heard is part of one of the most

inspiring, but also most complex pieces of theological argument in Christian history. But the message that issues from those amazing, complex first eight chapters of Romans is simple, and it is the foundation of our hope. In Christ we are made free – freed to live our lives in communion with God.

Now we have hit the very centre of the gospel. For, contrary to so many caricatures of the Church and Christian theology, the gospel is a gospel of freedom, not constraint - of grace, not of law. It is amazing how it has been corrupted. Corrupted to take Christians into bloody crusades. Corrupted by the media to produce a travesty of what God achieved in Jesus. Corrupted even within our own communion to exclude those with whom we disagree.

But in Christ all have been made free, male and female, Jew and Greek, gay and straight, black and white, Arab and Israeli. Today then, first and foremost, we celebrate communion, the college Tony and Martyn have joined is a microcosm, a tiny example of what we are all called to be. Anglicanism used to be synonymous with communion. Let no corruption or hardness of heart, no modern Pharaoh, drive this out. Let our celebration this evening be the pushing back of any talk of building frontiers of communion. For communion is Christ's, and Christ is God.

Amen.

Readings:

Exodus 6. 2-13

Romans 5. 1-11