

He Came Where He Was

Installation of Michael Rawson as Canon Pastor and Sub Dean of Wakefield Cathedral.

Sunday July 15th 2007

‘But a Samaritan, as he journeyed, came where he was.’

Luke 10.33

Where, I wonder, if you live around here, when you have people coming to stay, do you take them out for a treat? Happily living in Wakefield you’re spoilt for choice. You can be in the Lake District, the North York Moors, Lincoln or North Wales for the inside of a day. Those of you who know me better might have included Loch Lomond, Brighton, or even Belgium on that list. But assuming it is to be a short trip, it could be the Sculpture Park, this cathedral or Nostell Priory.

One of our favourite trips is Saltaire and Salt’s Mill in Bradford. So, not long after we came to Yorkshire, we had a couple staying and we decided on Saltaire. At least we shan’t meet anyone there that we know, my wife reflected. As it happened, I think we met four different people we knew. I was buttonholed three times! The fourth person, however, did not buttonhole me; I stopped him. It was Michael Rawson – he was there for a day off. Our encounter was exemplary of Michael’s personality. He was immediately friendly, but in a gentle unpushy way. You felt valued, but not taken over. Michael always has a gentle respect for the other person. That indeed is part of what has made Michael’s ministry at Brighouse, at Gomersal – and more recently, across the Diocese, as Chaplain and Communications Officer – so valued.

Anyway, I shall always associate Michael with Saltaire. He’ll be glad to know that it’s not because he is a David Hockney look-alike – let alone like some of Hockney’s rather surrealist pictures which are displayed there. No it’s because of Michael’s valuing of others, and that, I think, takes us to the heart, of what we are about here this morning.

I began, rather unusually for me, with a text. Still more unusually I plucked it out of the Authorised Version. In that translation of the parable of the Good Samaritan, the entry of the hero of the tale is announced simply: ‘But a Samaritan, as he journeyed, came where he was.’ There is so much that can be said of this story, but often it is treated too shallowly. The Samaritan has become the epitome of the religious *do gooder*. Of course this in itself has led to so many worthwhile initiatives from Chad Varah’s *Samaritans* to every form of getting alongside those in need. But Luke implies still more than this.

So, taking things one-step deeper with this marvellous parable is a helpful key to one of the main themes of Luke’s gospel. More than any other of the evangelists, Luke emphasises the *generosity of God*. He does it, over and over again, through story. Perhaps the most moving example of all is the parable of the Prodigal Son, or it might better be titled the parable of the ever generous father. For despite everything the father still gives more. The parable of the Pharisee and the tax collector pictures a similar generosity. And it is in Luke, and Luke alone, that Jesus says, at his crucifixion, to the repentant one on the nearby cross: ‘Truly, I say to you, today you will be with me in paradise.’

But that short extract from our parable this morning, which was my text, takes us to the deepest level of all. It simply says: ‘The Samaritan came *where the wounded man was*.’ This takes us into the heart of God, whose ever-abounding generosity is poured out in the life and death of Jesus. In Jesus, *God comes where we are*. This takes us to the heart of the doctrine of the incarnation. In gentleness, and never with turbulent force, God comes where we are, in Jesus. Jesus never asserts himself, but is nevertheless here absolutely amongst us all.

This is part of what a cathedral is about, and the location of our own cathedral here makes the point unmissable. Cheek to cheek with Burgerland, BHS and Boots – and now going up market, even Costa Coffee, the cathedral is ‘where people are.’ Indeed I hope that eventually the cathedral’s parish will be deliberately small enough and contained to focus on the city centre, the civic quarter and the constantly changing community, which they represent. For that is where the cathedral’s people are in Wakefield.

The cathedral, then, is a living instance of the incarnation, of God coming where we are, in the heart of this developing city. Not only that, but Michael’s new ministry exemplifies this with more focus than perhaps any other role in a cathedral except for that of the Dean. Michael is the canon pastor, who, as he did on that afternoon in Saltaire, will always value the other but never in an oppressive manner. He will come where they are. Sometimes it will be the Goths or those in need wandering through this building; sometimes it will be the regular congregation – Sunday after Sunday, morning after weekday morning; sometimes it will be the city fathers – I’d better say mothers now too! But his pastoral care – and that of the cathedral reaches out also, of course, across the diocese and the region. That is what a cathedral is for!

Under the leadership of George, our retiring dean – no that doesn’t sound quite right for George - our dean who is about to retire. Under George, the cathedral has done just that. George has also courageously begun a giant programme of development. Michael, along with the rest of the clergy team, the chapter and the next dean will take this forward.

But at the heart of it all will be that incarnational foundation of the cathedral. Again, and again, and again, God comes where we are. And ultimately that can lead to a transfiguration of the community which is this cathedral and, moreover, of the wider community – the community which it is called to serve. In rich, metaphysical, theological terms Paul captured this in our first reading: ‘God has delivered us from the dominion of darkness and transferred us to the Kingdom of his beloved Son.’ In narrative terms, in Luke: ‘God comes where we are.’ This morning both Michael, and this great building, are potent sacramental reminders of this for us.

So, to Michael and Wakefield Cathedral, I say:
Godspeed and Amen

READINGS

Colossians 1: 1-14

Luke 10: 25-37