

Diocesan Festival**20 June 2015*****Forward Together in Hope***

As someone once said: 'It is wonderful to be here... 'Just in case you can't remember, it is from the beginning of the 17th chapter of Matthew's Gospel – the story of the Transfiguration... I wonder if you've ever been somewhere – it may even be here at our Festival this weekend - when you've felt...'It is good to be here...' Whenever you feel in the future, 'It is good to be here' – when with family, friends, other parishioners, at Church, drinking coffee at Starbucks...whenever you feel 'It is good to be here' ...this is a Transfiguring moment. It is a moment when things come together. God brought together the great figures from the Old Testament – Moses and Elijah – the great Law Giver and the Great Prophet... and at this very special moment for Peter, James and John – he hinted that there was much more to come... To be honest, it took a long while for them to cotton on to what Jesus was about, it took the explosive event of Pentecost for them to really appreciate that they had to go way beyond themselves and take risks.

I love the way the Apostles found it really difficult to believe in Jesus...They spent – actually we don't really know how long they spent with him - we presume it was three years, but we don't really know. Come to think of it, we don't really know how long Jesus spent with John the Baptist down by the Jordan – it may have been a couple of years, it was probably longer than the five minutes depicted in the blockbuster serious 'Jesus of Nazareth' with Robert Powell wandering along with all sorts of outsiders...Roman Soldiers, sinners, sex workers, folk who would never be allowed in the Temple. Let's just think about Jesus and John the Baptist for a few moments. Jesus, a worker with his hands, a 'teknon' around the age of 30 left the very small little village of Nazareth with its 120 or so residents, many of them living in caves, and went down to the River Jordan in the south of the Country. The life span of people living in Palestine at that time was around 39-40. There would be men of the age of Jesus who were grandfathers...Imagine your grandfather, or you yourself if you are a grandfather, deciding you fancy a career change, and go off to become an airline pilot. Imagine what the rest of the family would say! That is what Jesus did, have a complete career change and begin to learn from this very strange man, John the Baptist in the desert.

It's also true that John the Baptist also had a career change. He should have been a priest in the Temple. That is how you became a priest in those days, you were a priest if your dad was one, if you belonged to the right tribe. Some people estimate that there were around 7,000 priests in Jerusalem in those days, none of this business of having fewer priests, or priests involved in more than one parish in those days! There were no such things as

parishes. The priests had to take it in turns to be High Priest, when they would sacrifice animals, pray and burn incense a very different kind of priesthood shared by all of us here today... The priests of the Temple were reasonably wealthy, were distinctively dressed, would have houses as near the breezes as possible to keep cool in the summer. The Jewish people would hold them in great esteem. They would be feted wherever they went.

John the Baptist turned his back on all of this. He renounced his inheritance and went into the desert, we went to live in the wilderness, and made holy the place of bewilderment. All those people excluded from the Temple came to see John in the desert. All of these people trusted John in the Wilderness, the place of bewilderment, people who most certainly wouldn't be welcome in the very religious and holy place ...the Temple. Jesus may well have learned from John something about welcome and hospitality, being trusted by people who weren't respectable. Isn't it fascinating that 'outsiders' trusted John – they came to him and confessed their sins, and we're not likely to confess our sins to someone we don't trust. The outsiders didn't bother with the 'proper' way of seeking forgiveness for their sins, via the Temple, offering sacrifice and the Priests, they came to John, confessed their sins and were forgiven.

John explored a new way of being in touch with people, particularly those way out on the margins, and Jesus followed him For all we know, Jesus may have been with John for a couple of years, learning about welcoming outsiders, like sinners and lepers, learning to engage with strangers and foreigners, as he was to in later life, with people like the Syro-Phoenician woman, the Samaritan women, the Roman Centurian and countless other marginalised people.

Straight after his Baptism, Jesus was driven by the devil (according to Mark) into the Desert himself. Where he remained, again, according to Mark, for 40 days and 40 nights. Jesus then went public. He begins to preach 'Repentance' and chooses his first four disciples. Imagine being with Jesus on that first day in Capernaum. They must have been horrified. Jesus immediately begins to flaunt the Jewish law and tradition. He enters the synagogue and cures a demoniac. He cures Simon's mother in law – and it is still the Sabbath. Once the Sabbath is over he cures the sick and possessed. He then goes 'elsewhere' and travels through Galilee so that he can preach there too.

The Disciples must have been amazed, shocked and a bit frightened. They've left their secure job – fishing – and find themselves with this itinerant healer and preacher who plays fast and loose with their tradition. At the end of the 1st chapter of Mark's Gospel, Jesus cannot enter into any town but had to stay outside where no body lived. Why? Because he was contaminated by all this touching of lepers and the sick and associating with undesirables and flaunting the tradition. The Disciples must have been stunned by it all.

And 'Discipleship' is at the very heart of Forward Together in Hope. We use the word to describe the way we respond to the unimaginable and total love of God for each one of us. It is how we learn to follow Jesus, how we change to become more like him. It is not an easy word to define.

In 1969, three years before I was ordained, I found myself living and working with homeless people in Liverpool. I was sent 'on Placement' by the then Pastoral Director at Ushaw, Fr Brian Green. I made two mistakes with Brian, the second one was to say I was a bit scared of working in Hospitals, so he sent me to Sedgefield to that amazing priest Fr Jack Caden, who looked after a very busy local general hospital and a huge psychiatric hospital. I learned a great deal from Fr Jack. The first was to say that 'd never met a homeless person in my life. I come from Amble...a great place to be brought up in the 1950s, near the coast and the hills, near Alnmouth and the Cheviots and Rothbury. All of a sudden, I found myself in a hostel in Shaw Street in Liverpool with homeless people...it was a huge shock to the system. Fox Street and Shaw Street – home to the Simon Community – a Charity founded by Anton Wallich Clifford for the homeless – named after Simon of Cyrene - who got close to Jesus and helped him carry his cross. Anton had explored a calling to priesthood but was called up to join the RAF during the war, and on return from his time away found the Seminary just too repressive and became a Probation Officer. He was attached to Bow Street Magistrates Court and became very disillusioned with the care of homeless people that he set up the Simon Community movement to serve them.

For the month I was there every Monday morning I'd take a van into the huge open air market on the outskirts of the city and beg for food. I'd come back with potatoes, cabbages, carrots and onions – whatever people would give us... I am no cook – as all of my friends and parishioners in any parish I've been in, know. But I do have a clear memory of making breakfast in Fox Street one morning at 6.30 am and putting carrots in porridge – because that is all we had...and no one complained.

One of the people I met on this placement was a man called Grattan Puxon...He was the Leader of the Gypsy Council in the North West. We got on well, a shared interest in playing the guitar and folk music. I learned a lot from him. He asked me to join him one day 'to have a meeting about homeless people..' What he actually meant was...to stand in front of Local Authority bulldozers to discourage them from demolishing houses where homeless people found shelter....

This long introduction is to say that this experience helped me to understand something about Discipleship...!

I've no idea if Grattan Puxon was a Christian or not. But at the impressionable age of 20, I was immensely impressed by him. He was a champion for the Travellers in the North West,

someone who fully appreciated that Travellers have a very different culture and tradition and way of life from people who live in houses.

He literally put his body on the line for what he believed in. And I was standing next to him wondering what on earth I was doing there...I remember thinking – ‘What will my mam make of this if it’s on the national news tonight...’?

What I learned from Gratton Puxon is that ‘Discipleship’ is putting your body on the line for what you believe in.

Let me explain... Johnny Wilkinson put his body on the line for it...a brilliant Rugby Player...Blessed Oscar Romero put his body on the line for it...Alan Shearer did it for England, Owen Morgan is doing his best for English 50 over international.... Faith isn’t just about Religion...it is about how we make sense of who we are in relation to where we are, to what is going on around us.

All of us here this afternoon have a faith which is influenced by our relationship with Jesus Christ, by our this is our religion. Our Religion, Catholic Christianity, is the way we choose to shape our faith in Jesus, our way of celebrating, thinking, acting and deciding. Our faith is profoundly influenced by this particular tradition and way of life. Most of us do have some notion about Jesus – but do we actually put our body on the line for him?

Can I just pause for a moment and say that ‘Faith’ is not necessarily a ‘religious’ term. Faith is the word we use to describe the way we make sense of who we are in relation to everything around us, other people, our culture the pressures on us and so on. I guess that the faith of all of us here is affected by our belief in Jesus Christ and our belonging to the community we call the Catholic or Christian Community. All of us here this afternoon have a faith which is influenced by our relationship with Jesus Christ, this is our Religion.

Our Religion, Catholic Christianity, is the way we choose to shape our faith in Jesus, our way of celebrating, thinking, acting and deciding. Our faith is profoundly influenced by this particular tradition and way of life. Our faith is fundamentally a relationship – a relationship with Jesus. It isn’t knowledge or activity, it is a relationship. Like all relationships, it influences the way we live and move and decide and have our being. The question now is: but do we actually put our body on the line for him?

So Faith and Religion are not coterminous, the words don’t mean exactly the same thing. This is a really important distinction, because when I hear parents and grandparents say: ‘Our Jenny, Jack or Jeremiah don’t go to mass any more – they’ve lost the faith’...I’m inclined to say that’s not quite it. They haven’t ‘lost the faith’ they’re living their faith in a different way, at the moment it doesn’t include worship – but it might in the future’. Even if it

doesn't they haven't 'lost the faith', so long as they are making sense of themselves and their world, they are living their faith, and it must be influenced by their previous more 'active' involvement in the Catholic community.

So, I'm not just talking about Rugby or Football or standing in front of bulldozers...I'm wondering if we allow Jesus to influence our language, conversation, choices, friendships and the way we see and talk about things...do we put our whole selves, body and soul, on the line in the name of Jesus...

Not long after the call of Matthew in Matthew's Gospel, straight after he had been eating with sinners, curing the woman with the haemorrhage, raising Jairus' daughter to life, curing two blind men and a demoniac, Jesus made a tour through all the towns and villages, teaching in their synagogues, proclaiming the Good News of the Kingdom and curing all kinds of diseases and sickness. Matthew tells us: **And when he saw the crowds he felt sorry for them because they were harassed and dejected, like sheep without a shepherd. Then he said to his disciples: 'The harvest is rich but the labourers are few, so ask the Lord of the harvest to send labourers to his harvest'. (9:37)**

Jesus was deeply concerned about the world he lived in. All of those people whom he'd touched, -quite literally touched – the sinners, the dead child, the woman with the haemorrhage, the blind and the possessed, all of these people were excluded from the Temple. Indeed the very fact that Jesus had touched them, or in the case of the woman, had been touched by her, meant that he too was excluded from the Temple. He was unclean. Jesus would have to go through the whole complicated ritual washing process before he could set foot inside the Temple. Jesus regarded this separation of unclean from clean as profoundly wrong. It did not illustrate what his Kingdom would be like. His Kingdom would be more like the Mustard seed we heard about last Sunday, the very small and insignificant seed which when it grew up offered hospitality and shade to absolutely everything that flew about - not just pigeons, or robins, but the whole Ark full of birds of the air. Though I did see a cartoon recently where Noah and his wife were standing on the Ark as it sank, and his wife said to Noah: 'I did wonder about bringing those woodpeckers...'

I think my favourite excluded person in the whole of the Gospel is the gentleman at the beginning of the 5th chapter of Mark's Gospel. Remember the one: he was possessed, lived among tombs so in a grave yard, he was secured by chains which he snapped – so his body would be all cut and bruised. He howled and gashed himself with stones and he was around pigs. Being around pigs was the very least of his problems. If you want to make yourself totally unpopular, utterly derided and rejected, then follow the example of this man – he ticks a fair number of the boxes.

Jesus cures him. The villagers were afraid and they implore Jesus to leave. We simply cannot have someone like this in our community totally disrupting the normal way of doing things. We cannot possibly be expected to stand next to this raving creature now dressed in his best suit and praying in the Temple. We cannot possibly cope with this equality, this change, this way of life. It has never happened before – so please leave.

The possessed man begged Jesus to let him follow him. Jesus told him to go home to his own people and tell them what the Lord in his mercy has done for him. Jesus makes him a disciple – a follower who is to witness to him in what must have been very difficult circumstances.

Jesus was totally immersed in the world of his time, urging people through his words and actions to make sure that 'Relationships were right' – that there were no people whose dignity was not respected. This was the calling of the possessed man.

Jesus urges the disciples to pray that the Lord of the Harvest would send more people into the world to make sure that the diseased and sick were touched and respected, that the fullness of life was available to children, that the blind would be able to play their full part in the world, that those who were possessed were free of their severe limitation and become free. This is what Jesus wanted: he wanted more people to do that.

So, I imagine the Disciples did pray that the Lord of the Harvest would send labourers into the harvest.

And what happened?

What did the Lord of the Harvest do?

We read about it 5 verses later: He **sent them** into the world...with these instructions: **'Do not turn your steps into pagan territory, do not enter any Samaritan town: go rather to the lost sheep of the house of Israel. And as you go, proclaim that the kingdom of heaven is close at hand..'** (10:5)

The lost sheep of the House of Israel weren't so much lapsed Catholics, Catholics on sabbatical from worship – they were their sisters and brothers, cousins and aunts, the whole nation...because the nation had got it wrong. This is not a criticism of Judaism, not is it a way of saying that Christianity has 'taken over' from Judaism. It most certainly has not. Jesus seems to have seen himself as someone inviting his Jewish sisters and brothers to change, become people of Shalom – a people within whom relationships are right. Relationships aren't right when people are excluded. Actually, relationships aren't right when rivers are polluted, rain forests destroyed, and the poor are left to die while we invest 2% of our national income on the arms race...but perhaps that is another story.

Jesus sent the disciples, his close apprentices, those travelling with him, into the world to change it. We are called to become Christians in the world for the world's sake. We are the Body of Christ in our world today. Yesterday many young people in St Bede's parish in Denton Burn celebrated their First Holy Communion. This is happening all over the Diocese at this time of the year. I hope that in years to come they grow into an understanding that we don't simply 'receive the Body of Christ' when we come together to celebrate Mass, we actually ***become*** the Body of Christ.

Grattan Puxon was totally immersed in the lives of those he cared about. Jesus invites his followers to become totally immersed in the lives of people now. The former Anglican Bishop of Durham, David Jenkins, had a phrase. We have to become fully immersed in the world, in the ungodly, in order to discover how to be godly about it. The Holy Spirit is lurking there, in every relationship, every meeting, every gathering, every single person: we are to become engaged with all of this to find ways to celebrate the goodness of God within it.

Jesus is the Body Language of God. Jesus makes God flesh. We are to become the Body Language of Jesus. Becoming a disciple isn't so much about deciding how to behave, it is more becoming the kind of person who responds instinctively in the way Jesus would have done. Becoming a disciple embraces our whole lives – our personal habits, public commitments, our work lives and our home lives, our thoughts and our actions. There is nothing that we do, and no part of who we are that is beyond the call of Jesus. As Archbishop Desmond Tutu used to say: **There is nowhere in the world where the writ of God does not run...**

The disciples of Jesus learned about what Jesus wanted by being with him. They didn't really get it when he was walking with them. Right in the middle of the Last Supper there was a row about which of them was the greatest. Jesus has to put them right, it isn't about power and position it is about service. At the very last moment before the Ascension, 'some of them hesitated'. The stories about Jesus meeting with the Disciples after the Resurrection are about him moving in alongside them being touched by them (Thomas), walking with them (Emmaus) feeding them (John), - giving them all another chance to realise who he is and what he is truly about. Becoming a disciple is a life-long business, there are no short cuts.

Becoming a Disciple is a calling to see things differently. Listening to David Well's voice this morning over that brilliant visual cartoon of the life of Jesus, I was reminded of a story he told many years ago. As a young lad he was interested in Geography and every weekend he and his dad would walk among the hills in Derbyshire. Every time he went out he kept an eye open for two 50 foot high steel tubes joined by a 50 metre long steel tube. He never found it. He expected to see it, because every time he looked in an Atlas, the British Isles was always in the middle of the map of the world. And just about where he lived in Derbyshire,

there was a staple, keeping the Atlas together. He wanted to see the staple in real life... As he got older, he wondered if Japanese children went out at weekends looking for a 50 metre long staple embedded in the island of Honchu, because presumably Japan was in the middle of Japanese atlases.

The danger, he suggests, is that we never allow our vision of things, our understanding of things be challenged. The way we see it is the way it is. After all, we've always done it this way.

Peter and James and John and Mary Magdalene and Martha and Mary and the rest gradually became disciples by being with and spending time with Jesus – this is what Jim Clarke has been telling us, discovering how get to know Jesus, let Jesus get to know us and take us over a little more. We learn through our relationships, sometimes dramatically as with Grattan Puxon over a couple of days, usually more slowly over years within the network of relationships we have. When talking about ***Forward Together in Hope*** I often using the African proverb: 'It takes a whole village to bring up one child' – the different gifts of a wide range of people help children to grow into broad minded, imaginative adults. Our faith is nurtured by the communities experience, family, work, play, and worship. A phrase I use a lot is: 'It takes a flourishing community to nurture Discipleship'.

Our Church is not just an old institution with rituals, but a communion of real people with many gifts. We all belong to the one body of Christ. We are the Body of Christ. Together we are to become a sign of God's loving presence in the world we share. We are to be a sign of peace in a struggling world (did I hear on Thursday that there are 60 million refugees in our world today as a result of wars being fought among us?- what a huge scandal and form of blasphemy). We are to be a sign of passionate purpose in a very imbalanced world.

Discipleship isn't for superheroes or for wimps. Disciples don't go to Church, they are Church. They are robust in their commitment to making relationships right, making sure the poor and disadvantaged suffer less. They aren't obsessed with their own status and possessions and power and influence, - they live simply and respectfully, have a sense of awe about things, delight in beauty and want to love people. For disciples of Jesus, God is found not just in the Church but in the kitchen, not just in silence but in conversation, not just in serious consideration about things but in a good laugh. Maybe we need to let go of the idea that the Mass is the consecration of bread and wine surrounded by readings and hymns, let go of the idea that the Eucharist is a sacred object and enter into Eucharist as a communion with everyone in our world and the God who calls us.

We are different people, we have different gifts. Becoming a disciple need not be too scary a business. We can start small, we can start with little individual actions and choices:

There was once a child walking along a shoreline and came across a whole shoal of jelly fish stranded on the sand. The child began to walk along and throw the jelly fish one by one back into the sea. An adult standing close by said to the child: 'What's the point of doing that, there's millions of them, why bother, it doesn't matter.' 'It matters to that one, and it matters to that one and it matters to that one...' said the child.

I am convinced that if we work through our Forward Together in Hope programme together, prayerfully, honestly, openly and carefully, we have the chance to discover what really matters to us as followers of Jesus, and discover ways of supporting one another in witnessing to Jesus in a world crying out for love and forgiveness, for compassion and fun. It will mean taking responsibility for the gifts that we have been given and bringing them to life. It will mean becoming Christian in the world for the sake of the world. It will mean learning new things and meeting new people. It will mean discovering a bit of silence in our lives now and again and laughing with people we may have never met.

Jesus lived distinctively as he went into homes, market places, festivals, weddings and places of worship. He saw things differently; he saw the real potential in people, there wasn't a prejudiced gene in his body. He spoke about marriage and divorce, taxes and wealth, work and disease, fishermen and shepherds, the birds of the air and the lilies in the fields. He didn't use holy language, he spoke about everyday things in a holy, respectful, imaginative way.

Jesus provoked people: 'Love your enemies, do good to those who hate you...' and at the very moment of his death, his mind set excluded no one. At the point when Jesus absorbed the violence and savagery of those who wanted to destroy him, when he was abandoned by almost every one of his disciples, when he was almost screaming with terror in the Garden – he excluded no one. We were taught that our sins put him there. That is not true. His love puts us here – and calls us to go out and follow him.

Can we recall the final scene of the Crucifixion in John's Gospel. Jesus on the cross, and at the foot of the cross is the un-named 'Disciple Jesus loved'. The Beloved Disciple is never named in the Gospels, we have no idea who it is. He is anonymous – it could be any one of us. His mother, again not named anywhere in John's Gospel, is there too. Jesus declares that the Disciple, the follower of Jesus, and his mother, the family of Jesus are now one and the same. There is to be no division between family and follower. I wonder if one of the genius moments of the author of the Fourth Gospel is here. Perhaps there were tensions between family and followers, if so, there were to be no longer. If that sounds strange, just look at the tension (to say the least) between Shia and Sunni in the Islamist tradition: tension between family and follower...

So, Discipleship isn't for superheroes – but it is for people like us.

In ***Forward Together in Hope***, we have this marvellous opportunity to learn more about our communities and explore how to ensure our communities flourish in the future. Can I suggest that you take this message into your own worshipping communities and get your fellow worshippers fired up about being a friend of Jesus and about befriending the people in your neighbourhood – then we can truly say we are working together for the Kingdom of God.

Thank you

Perhaps now, in little groups around your table, or whatever...you might want to wonder about 2 things:

- 1 Who in your life has inspired you – who has shown you what it means to be a disciple
- 2 What story or phrase or verse in the Scriptures comes to mind as you remember and talk about this person?

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