

Blackburn Cathedral 14th February 2015

Music & More

Online Supplement 2015 No. 4

Bishop of Burnley's Sermon

delivered in Blackburn Cathedral on the Feast Day of St Valentine and Saints Cyril and Methodius (Missionaries) 2015.



Bishop Philip takes his Oath of Allegiance at his installation service

wants to listen.

Today, to guide us, we have two things. First Jesus' teaching, because the Gospel that we have just listened to is in fact a parable of how we share the Good News.



The packed congregation listens to Bishop Philip's sermon

But second this morning, we have two extraordinary lives to illustrate what Jesus is telling us.

Cyril and Methodius were born in Greece in the ninth century,



and whilst we in the UK may not know all that much about them, they will be honoured with great devotion in Ukraine and much of Eastern Europe because it was through their courage that the Gospel was carried to those lands.

These two were extraordinarily effective and fearless messengers of love to a culture even more hostile and difficult than our own.

USE WORDS

And **the first thing** we learn is this. Use words. In his teaching Jesus spoke the Gospel using language and images that people could understand.

And that is something that Cyril and Methodius also did with remarkable imagination. When they went to Ukraine, Slav was a verbal language with no written form. That meant it was incredibly hard to learn and impossible to translate the Bible or books of liturgy. So Cyril and Methodius created a language. They invented written Slavonic, the forebear of modern Russian, simply in order to tell people about Jesus. In so doing they point out to us that **the primary purpose of language is to speak the message of God's love.**

All the other uses to which we put language are secondary. God gave us the gift of language in order that we can be messengers of love.

So we need to use words, because that is what words are for. What good would a Valentine's Day card be if it contained no message? There must be a moment when we express in words the hope that is within us. We Anglicans are brilliant at being kind to people, fantastic at service, peerless at compliantly taking our place within the social order.

We're wonderful at pastoral care and at gentle, uncontroversial ministry. But if there is to be a Church in 50 years' time, we need to learn to use words to invite, to proclaim, to challenge.

And the best words are the most natural. Not erudite theological exposition but words that express simple trust in Jesus, first hand stories of lives he has changed in a language that people can understand.

~~VALENTINE'S DAY~~



You see in front of you a broken and disappointed man. Yes, it's happened again. Every Valentine's day, when the post arrives, I scamper downstairs full of hope and eager expectancy. And what do I find? An empty doormat. Maybe a pizza advert or a utilities bill, but not what I was longing for. No Valentine's card.

To be fair, when I was a teenager there was one year when I received 40, but they all turned out to be from my sisters who did it purely to mock me.

Again when I was a student I got one that read, 'You're like a broken staircase. You make me go head over heels'. My heart was racing, who could have sent me such a romantic message? It turned out to be from one of my housemates. And that's it. The last 24 years have brought nothing but annual disappointment.

I wonder how many people feel genuinely sad that no card arrives for them on February 14th. But of course there is no need for self-pity or disappointment. Because we're Christians.

We don't need to be sent a Valentine's Day card because we are a Valentine's Day card. Listen to Isaiah. *'How beautiful on the mountains are the feet of the messenger who brings good news, who announces salvation.'*

THE MESSAGE OF LOVE

Our purpose is to be bearers of a message of love; that life-transforming, sacrificial love revealed to us through the cross of our Saviour Jesus Christ. That's what we're for. We are the Valentine, we are the messengers of love.



Well that sounds great. It's the sort of thing preachers say all too easily isn't it – be messengers of love. But how do we do it? Where do we start? We all know the challenges.

A secular culture of greed and acquisition that has all but forgotten its need for God. An institutional church seemingly in retreat. A political context in which the Church often finds it hard to be heard and understood. We may think we have a beautiful, life-changing message of love to convey. The trouble is, it seems that nobody much

wants to listen.

And **the second thing** we learn is, go to the dangerous places. In the passage of Luke we heard this morning, the moment he has called the disciples Jesus takes them out into the deeper water, away from the safety of the shore to the place where there are storms and unknown dangers.



Bishop Philip stands with Archbishop Sentanu and Bishop Libby after his Consecration in York Minster on February 2, 2015

Likewise Cyril and Methodius abandoned the safety of Byzantine Greece and went to the most dangerous parts of the world, to the wild places, in order to proclaim. So for us, as messengers of love, we need to locate ourselves in those places where life is hardest and where ministry is most dangerous. All the most significant renewal movements in the history of the Church have started with the poor. Francis went to the lepers. Vincent de Paul went to the prisoners and to the galley slaves. Wesley went to the inner urban and remote rural areas that the respectable church had forgotten.

A complacent, solvent, middle class church that pays no more than lip-service to the poor is not a church at all. The books may balance but God has been forgotten.

FEED THE HUNGRY

To have a future we must be utterly committed to ministry where it's toughest and in those places where it will never, ever make economic sense. We need to be with those who are left behind by economic structures which enable the rich to prosper whilst the poor flounder.



FEED THE HUNGRY

the lonely and the young. We need to give voice to the anxious and the victimised and the abused.

We live in a nation crippled by growing injustice. Last week I was at a Youth Centre in West Burnley where the volunteers were telling me about the sheer desperation of people forced to choose between fuel or food.

They told me about children who will eat everything they are offered, whole loaves of bread, so desperate are they to fill their stomachs. What kind of national sin is this, that the fifth largest economy in the world is incapable of feeding its own children?

This is where we must be as Christians. We need to serve the hungry and the debt-laden and the lonely and the young. We need to give voice to the anxious and the victimised and the abused.

PARTNERSHIP

We need to work in joyful partnership with people of other faiths who also long for the flourishing of human life. We must go where it is dangerous and stay there. Because unless we do that our words are empty and our message of love is shown to be a sham.

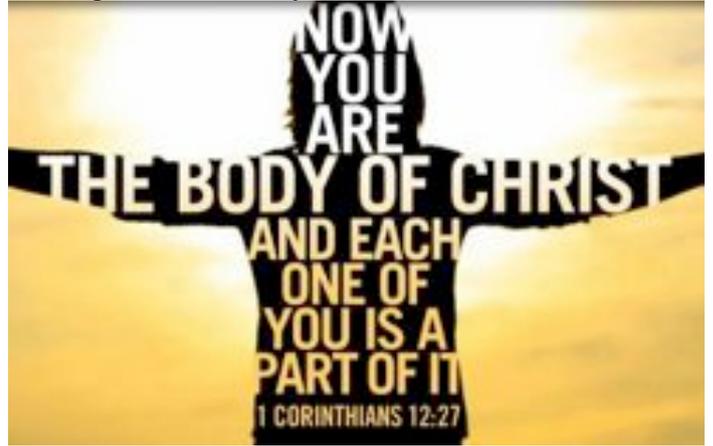
And **the third thing** we learn is this. Don't go alone. Once the disciples had dared to obey the Lord and gone out to the deep water, they caught a huge catch of fish, a symbol of the Church that was to come.

And what did they do as their nets burst? They sent out for help. They looked to their partners in the other boats because they were not to minister alone. Cyril and Methodius likewise worked in partnership with each other and did not minister alone, for that would have been too much to bear.

Loneliness is the greatest enemy of effective ministry, and when I talk about loneliness, I don't just mean clergy and lay-leaders who are working without support, but Parishes who end up existing in isolation as if the wider church weren't there for them.

WORKING TOGETHER

This is not how the Lord calls us to work, for we are one family under Christ. We are developing at the moment a bold and confident vision for the future of our Diocese. In many ways, even more important than the concrete steps to which that vision commits us is that we agree to walk it together. It is a shared and common purpose that will show how we are bound together as a one family under Christ.



And of course working together means being partners alongside people with whom you may not agree, people of different traditions and theologies, and we must see that as a strength.

The battle for the Christian soul of this nation is almost lost. We must stand as one family now as we work together on the task that matters most which is to be messengers of the love revealed to us in Jesus Christ. We need close and loving partnership in the Gospel.

THE LOCAL CHURCH



I was at a conference recently being addressed by the American church planter **Bill Hybels** and at one point he said, almost as an aside, you all know of course that the local church is the hope of the world.

We get so bogged down with common fund and insurance policies and gutters and arguments and rotas, that we all too easily forget the dignity of the task that the Lord has laid before us.

Your local church is the hope of the world. Without you, there is no one left to speak the message of love. You are the hope of the world. So this year, make up for my years of disappointment. I want you to be my Valentine.



I want to invite every single person here to be a Valentine, to be a messenger of love. Use words to speak love. Go where it's tough to make love real. Work together as partners in love.



So through our lives and our words, all the world may break into singing, all peoples may know the Lord's salvation, all nations may delight in the peace and the joy that comes from him who alone is the source of life and love.

To him be the glory now and for all eternity. **AMEN.**