Enthronement Sermon: St Woolos Cathedral

1st February 2020 – St Brigid’s Day

Ephesians 3:14-end, John 21:4-19

This lovely story at the end of John’s gospel gives us an important glimpse into those early days just after the resurrection. According to John, Jesus had already appeared to Mary Magdalene in the garden on that first Easter morning and had appeared twice to the disciples in the upper room; first when they’d gathered behind locked doors for fear of what the Jewish leaders would do to them, and second, a week later, when Thomas who’d first doubted the resurrection was able to declare, ‘My Lord and my God’.

And yet it seems that the disciples struggled to know what to do this ‘good news’ that Jesus was alive again. Far from going around the towns and villages of Judea proclaiming his resurrection, Thomas, Nathanial, James, John and Peter go back to what they were familiar with – fishing. And when Jesus appears on the beach, although they know it’s him, none of them dare say anything. There’s a reticence, perhaps even an uncertainty as to know how to respond, what to say, what to do with this extra-ordinary fact that Jesus, once dead and buried, was now sitting with them having breakfast.

Then there’s Peter, who’d been so adamant that even if he had to die with Jesus, he would not deny him, now being gently confronted with the question, ‘Do you love me?’ Do you really love me?

So, an all too human crew that Jesus had called to be his closest disciples, as all the gospels record: weak and cowardly, fragile and vulnerable, getting things wrong and being so slow to understand…and yet - and yet, invited nevertheless to follow Jesus. And when they got things wrong, as Peter did spectacularly (and more than once), Jesus continued to love them, to forgive them, strengthen them, and to reiterate the call, ‘Follow me’.

That should give us enormous hope and encouragement! For we too may feel weak and ineffective sometimes as individuals. We may, as a church, feel fragile and vulnerable. We may struggle with doubts, fears, guilt or anxiety about the past or about the future. But Jesus continues to love us, in and through it all. He’s forever reaching out to us with forgiveness and strength for all that we need. And his call to each and every one of us to follow him never wavers; whoever we are, whatever our lives are like.

There’s massive potential in this diocese; in our churches and parishes, in our schools and ministry areas. Why? Because they’re made up of people; people created by God and made in his image – you and I – and because (as we heard in our first reading), through his power at work within us, he is able to accomplish abundantly far more than all we can ask or imagine. God can and does use each one of us to work out his loving purposes; transforming our doubts and fears and mistakes, sometimes in spite of us.

And God works in and through us, not just as individuals, but often most powerfully in communities, churches, schools and families. You may remember my well-known predecessor Rowan Williams describing mission and the task of the church as ‘discerning where God is at work and joining in.’ We’re called to work with God, who is already at work in the world, and to allow him to work in and through us, both as individuals and with others in our communities.

In his first letter to the early church in Corinth, St Paul gives us that wonderfully striking image of the body. He invites us to think of ourselves as members of a body; each of us having an important and unique part to play. And, as we all know only too well from our own experience, the body works at its best when all the parts, all the members work in harmony with each other. When one part of the body is damaged or gets sick or is prevented from doing its job, the whole body suffers or is weakened. So it is with churches and other communities. All the members have a part to play, a job to do. And to be most effective and healthy, all parts have to work together in harmony.

It’s a beautiful image and one we aspire to in our churches – to be the body of Christ. The challenge, of course, is to live it out. Paul goes on to remind the congregation in Corinth that the body does not consist of one member, but of many. One part cannot say to another, I have no need of you. The body is not a body if it’s all an eye or an ear or a foot. Whatever we might think of other parts and however much we like to think that we are the more important part, we all need one another. In God’s grace, our churches are the richer, the healthier and the more effective if all parts work together.

And it is the case that we can often learn most and be the more enriched by those who are different to us, those who challenge us, even those we don’t much like.

Many of you will know that I spent six years working as Chaplain to the Deaf Community in Manchester. It was the most significant and transformative period of my 30 years’ ministry to date. I went in full of good ideas, wanting to bring the love of God to a marginalized and isolated community, only to discover that God was already there and I had as much if not more to learn from them as they had from me. They opened my eyes to other ways of praying and worshipping, of understanding God and the scriptures, and of what the good news can mean to people who have been taught that they are disabled, less than, and to be felt sorry for. I learnt the importance of listening and of meeting people where they are, not where I thought them to be. I was changed and humbled by their acceptance of me; a chaplain, yes, but someone who struggled (certainly in the first years) to communicate with them in their own language (BSL). I was saddened and ashamed to learn how they had been treated at school and in the community, told they were stupid because they couldn’t hear or speak, patronized and made to feel difficult because they struggled to understand and fit in to the hearing world.

They taught me so much and together we learnt something of what it means to work with difference across barriers, and how openness, love and the courage to be honest and vulnerable with one another can bind and strengthen relationships. I’m not saying it was easy. Very often in the early years I felt lonely, inadequate and would be close to tears as I struggled with a call to a ministry that I felt so ill-equipped to fulfil. But that was an integral part of the learnin;, about God’s call, God’s grace and God’s love.

God has given us a world teeming with difference and diversity. Even just within the human family, the diversity is mind-boggling. Millions upon millions of people down the centuries and each person that has ever lived is different; unique in their particularity.

Sadly, because we’re human, difference can so easily lead to division, mistrust and barriers being put up, as we look to protect ourselves and our interests and to diminish those we don’t like or despise in an attempt to control and dominate.

One obvious example of this in the Anglican Church is the divisions that have arisen over the ordination of women as priests and bishops. I vividly remember a three day Manchester clergy conference in the mid-90’s, just after the first women had been ordained to the priesthood in 1994. The custom was to dress down on these occasions, but those who were opposed to the ordination of women came attired in their black clerical shirts. We unkindly referred to them as the black brigade. They sat separately at meal times and held their own services. The atmosphere was tense and there was a lot of anger on both sides.

Recognising that this was not a Christian way to go on, a few us began to meet: four clergy who were opposed to the ordination of women and four newly ordained women priests. Our early meetings, as you might imagine, were profoundly uncomfortable, tense and difficult. But we committed to meeting three or four times a year to share lunch, to pray together and to discuss. Our purpose was not to try and change one another’s minds, but to learn what it means to be brothers and sisters in Christ, despite our profoundly held differences. The group went through significant ups and downs as the debates on the ordination of women as bishops continued and there were a couple of times when the tensions, frustrations and disappointments of either side nearly resulted in the group breaking up. But in all that and, I believe, because of all that, we grew together in love and fellowship, in mutual respect and trust. And, perhaps most importantly, we were able, by God’s grace, to model something profoundly important to the diocese and wider church. That is, fundamentally we’re held together in God’s love, which is stronger than any of our differences and divisions.

Paul’s prayer in the first reading we heard, is that we may be rooted and grounded in the love of Christ; that we may have the power to comprehend what is the breadth and length and height and depth – and know the love of Christ which surpasses knowledge – and so be filled with all the fulness of God.

That’s what we’re called to live out. Jesus’s call and invitation is to love one another as he loves us; to love even our enemies and those who hate us, because love changes and transforms us. That’s precisely why it’s so hard and challenging. Because all too often we don’t want to be changed and transformed. It’s too difficult. It means seeing ourselves as God sees us and loving ourselves as God loves us – however we’re tempted to think or feel about ourselves. It means letting go of dearly held beliefs, tribal loyalties and the security of the familiar. It means drawing close to those we don’t like and those who don’t like us. And it means reaching out with the love of God to those whom the world (that is us) prefers to ignore: the outcast and marginalized, the despised and the rejected, criminals, betrayers, abusers of power.

Jesus’s harshest words, we might recall, were said to those who thought they’d got it right, those who felt themselves superior and those who considered they had nothing to learn from those who in their eyes were ‘sinners’.

Today marks a new start, both for me and for the Diocese of Monmouth. God is calling us to an exciting journey of discovery as we work together, grow and learn together and as we allow him to change us more and more into the likeness of Christ. My hope and prayer is that together, with the gifts and potential with which he has blessed us, we will serve the people and the communities of this diocese with the love that God has given us and will continue to give us.

And so I invite you to join me, whether believer, agnostic or atheist, churchgoer or not, however you voted over Brexit and whatever your hopes or fears are for the future; join me in living out as best we can the love of God for one another and for his world and, in so doing, building a world where all can feel that they have a place, all can belong and all can flourish. Christians call that the Kingdom of God.

Now to him, who by the power at work within us, is able to accomplish abundantly far more than all we can ask or imagine, to him be glory in the church and in Christ Jesus to all generations, forever and ever. Amen.