

Chrism Eucharist - Lichfield Cathedral 2018

1 Samuel 16: 1-13a; 2 Corinthians 3:17- 4:12; Luke 22:24-30

This morning gives us time to reflect on our calling and ministry. Thirty one years ago, I was coming to the end of my 3 years' training at Trinity College, Bristol. One of about 40 leavers; some to be youth workers, childrens' workers, church lay workers, some back home overseas; others, like me, to be ordained deacon. All that theological study, preaching practice, parish placement experience and missionary zeal ready to be let loose on the world...

My first day as curate, I was sent up on the roof of St George's, Stockport with the youth group to shoot pigeons with air rifles. (Pigeon dung had been getting on church members cars and clogging up the church gutters and down spouts. It was a job for the new curate). My second day, I was asked to call bingo numbers for the Wives' Fellowship in the Parish Rooms.

How well college had prepared me for those missionary challenges...

I find today poignant, though, because a significant number who started formal ministry with me in 1987, withdrew from church leadership within 10 years.

Our bible passages this morning contain some essential truths that might help us to hold fast for the long haul as disciples of Jesus and ministers of the Gospel.

1. God chooses the unlikely

Our first reading tells of the prophet Samuel visiting the rural village of Bethlehem. God is sending him to anoint a new king over Israel. It's a huge event for Bethlehem – one causing fear and amazement in equal order. The scene reminds me of 'Lark Rise to Candleford' where the postman runs around each house and settlement with wide eyed bewilderment announcing that, 'the Bishop is coming!' – a rare, peculiar, and extraordinary happening.

The elders speculate: Why is the prophet visiting our village? What have we done wrong? Will he proclaim God's judgement against us? You can sense the relief when Samuel says: 'No, I come in peace. Together we will celebrate the Living God and you



will be my honoured guests'. Samuel finds the opportunity to meet privately with Jesse. His strapping sons are then paraded before him. Who will it be? We know the story well. It's **not** one of Jesse's seven, tall, handsome lads, who have come with their father to the feast. It's the young shepherd boy with a ruddy complexion who has to be fetched from the field. In Jewish minds and theology, 7 is the perfect number, so David is the imperfect 8th child. God chooses the runt of the litter to be anointed as king over his people.

God sees things differently. He judges the heart not the appearance. He chooses unlikely people to be bearers of his Gospel and stewards of his Grace. Many of us here today will have had the feeling at some stage- 'why me?!' I know you'll find this hard to believe but when my mother used to tell people that I was going to be ordained, they would say: 'Mark?! Don't you mean, Tom? (my elder brother) 'Surely, nice, good, sensible, Tom. He's going to be ordained. Not Mark!!' But, God doesn't work like that. Look around the Cathedral – yes, it's you and me! How crazy is that?

The Chrism Eucharist reminds us about God's Grace. It's about **God's** goodness, not ours. So thirst and hunger to know God, desire to understand his way and determination to walk his path are crucial. And we'd better not forget it. God chose David and anointed him with the Spirit. He gave him a job to do and the tools he needed. When Samuel anointed David's head with oil and offered his prayer of dedication, he was confirming God's choice. This morning, ordinary olive oil is set apart for God's purposes. God takes the ordinary things of this world – like olive oil – and makes them holy. Just so, he takes ordinary humans like you and me, and does extraordinary things through us.

2. However, good people do bad things

World-wide revelations in politics, showbiz, the world of sport and here in the Church shows just that: once adored stars have fallen; long revered leaders are shown to have had feet of clay and much worse.

Many of the problems come when we see ourselves as *inherently* extraordinary – thinking the extraordinary action is of our own making, our own doing and not by grace.

The anointing of David has a back story. It takes place while Saul is king of Israel. But Saul has gone off the rails. In the end, for Saul, it became more about *his* power and

position and less about God's. Someone, who began as an impressive character without equal, ends up literally destroying himself. Good people do bad things.

Of course, this was true of David, too. Apart from Jesus, no other character in the Bible occupies as much space as David. Ranked among the great leaders of world history- as a military commander and politician he has been placed alongside Alexander the Great, Julius Caesar and Napoleon. David is a successful king – a high achiever - and a shepherd king after God's heart; enthusiastic in his devotion and worship and demonstrating love and care for God's people.

Then when everything is going well, when he is at the top of his game, David fails morally and spiritually. He falls catastrophically. One sleepless night, strolling around the palace roof and spotting a beautiful woman taking a bath in her house, leads to David falling head over heels in lust with Bathsheba. He commits adultery and then, when the pregnancy begins to show, David plots and arranges the murder of her husband, Uriah. On one level, it looks like out-of-character behaviour; but if you investigate, you can trace David's downfall in his compromises, comfort and complacency. *Compromise*: He starts to let his moral standards slip by taking new wives and concubines; *Comfort*: he lets others lead the army in battle while he stays at home in ease and becomes spiritually lethargic - a man of passion and energy finds his passion and energy diverted in other directions! *Complacency*: he felt secure in Jerusalem; his enemies were subdued; life was good to him. Relax! He began to forget what had put him there and had started to think it was all about him.

Good people do bad things. Well, we may not do a Saul or a David. Maybe the disciples are more our style. The Gospel reading comes during the Last Supper scene. Luke writes: 'a dispute arose among them as to which one of them was to be regarded as the greatest'. I am thinking this dispute arose *before* Jesus washed their feet (If it was after, then they really were a hard-bitten, unperceptive bunch!). Perhaps the dispute arose around the question of who was going to take the role of the servant? Because, there isn't one in the Upper Room. Yes, the room had been prepared but there was no servant appointed to wash the feet of guests that had walked in open toed sandals through streets. Streets that also served as open sewers. Had they, therefore, all reclined to dinner with their filthy, smelly feet virtually in the lap of the person next to them? Imagine the whiff! Had they all eaten with smiles like grimaces, silently thinking darkly: 'Well, I may not be the best disciple – the 1st disciple – but I'm certainly not the 12th Man. I'm not picking up the bowl and the towel. Someone else can do it!?' We've all been in Chapter and church meetings like it and yes, it happens

at College of Bishops, too. 'Mine's bigger and better than yours' lies not far beneath the veneer of niceness.

Good people do bad things. We are not immune. We are flawed human beings. We are ordinary humans who God chooses to use for his extraordinary purposes. We have this treasure in clay jars and we'd better not forget it.

3. It's not about us

Church ministry, whether lay or ordained, exposes our weaknesses, character flaws and failings. It is all too easy to allow our focus to be wrongly fixed on ourselves – what we can and can't do.

But, as Paul says:

'We do not proclaim ourselves; we proclaim Jesus Christ as Lord and ourselves as your slaves for Jesus' sake.'

Paul is reminding those he writes to (and himself) of the treasure entrusted to us, the commission of everyone called to be stewards of the Gospel.

'Let light shine out of darkness': with echoes of Genesis, Paul points to the Creator God who has shone in our hearts to give the light of the knowledge of the glory of God in the face of Jesus Christ. Perhaps he is remembering himself 'being made new' when he was stopped in his tracks that day on the road to Damascus in a blinding light. It is no less than the power and authority of the Creator God working in and through those he calls.

'Yet, we have this treasure in clay jars so that it may be made clear that this extraordinary power belongs to God and does not come from us.'

On several occasions I have fallen flat on my face here in Shropshire but one particular event in Cheshire stands out -:

Story about failure and God's grace: Rob Woods

During a mission week in a village in South Cheshire – back in the 1990's, I organised a men's evening at a local pub. I arranged for the Manchester City Football Chaplain (The Man Utd Chaplain was not available) to come and speak; I printed 100 tickets and got them handed out through the men in the church; ordered a big supper for 70 and the Canon Missioner heard about it and came to see this special outreach. Only 8



people in total turned up: me, the Canon Missioner, 4 Churchwardens, a young farmer and the guest speaker. I was mortified and apologised profusely to the speaker who told me not to worry and went ahead with his talk. After the talk, those present ate as much of the food set for 70 as possible and had a drink at the bar. I drowned my sorrows and made my excuses to the Canon Missioner, went home and wrote the evening off as a failure! A complete waste of time and effort!

But two days later, I was made to see things differently. One of the very few people to attend was Rob, a young farmer who I'd invited along. That evening he had thought about what was said and it prompted him to join the Alpha course, come to church and become a follower of Jesus. Later in the year he was helping run the Church youth group and two years later was serving as church warden – the youngest in Chester Diocese at the time.

My failure to plan and promote the event properly was plain for all to see.

My hubris was clearly evident – being so pleased that the Canon Missioner was coming to see this wonderfully whizzy event. What a fool.

My stupidity was exposed. Fancy thinking that the Manchester City Chaplain would have the same pulling power as the Man Utd Chaplain in that part of Cheshire!

It was my mess, yet God worked through it, despite it. The Gospel was proclaimed, Rob's life was transformed and he had a huge impact on the community. The Kingdom grew because of that evening. God worked through and around my weakness and fallibility.

It's why Paul, with his thorn in the flesh can say: 'we are afflicted but not crushed; perplexed but not driven to despair; struck down but not destroyed.'

It's why Peter, despite his many failings, can get up... again and again and again.

They understood: it's not about them. To be in Christian leadership is to be in a spiritual battle. Twin dangers are particularly:

1. That of Saul, David and the disciples – to believe own press and start to think it's all about us and our gifts and abilities.
2. That of Paul and Peter- to be so knocked by disappointments, hurts and failures that we are tempted to give up and give in.

We have this treasure in clay jars... and we leak a lot. This morning is special but *daily* renewal and refreshment is vital. We are work in progress. On the road but not there



yet! If I'm not saying my prayers, not reading my bible, not regularly receiving the sacrament, not continuing to learn and grow from others then I'm in danger of going off the rails, of being a poor steward and of hindering the Gospel.

It's not about us. The good news is that this is God's Mission. He calls us into his service and fills us with his Spirit for the sake of the world.

He adores us, he believes in us, he forgives us.

And if we follow Christ in the footsteps of Chad *or* the footsteps of Petroc, as Mandy and I will be doing from August, God will be with us wherever we go.

**+Mark Shrewsbury
2018**

29th March