

In the name of the Father and of the Son and of the Holy Spirit.

I am a terrible pessimist. I can see a glass half empty when others see a glass half full. I say this because I've been reflecting on a fascinating lecture given at the start of this month, by the Bishop of London, Richard Chartres, on his near twenty years in the Diocesan hot seat. He detailed how the Diocese had been in slow decline since the 1970s: dwindling aging congregations, dwindling reserves, year on year deficits, accelerating cuts, governance filled with people who talked a good talk, but who did so in endless circles, did little and decided even less. A group think mindset of gloom and doom, where backbiting was rife; and rampant unaccountability. As Bishop Richard points out "Publically expressed and constructive criticism should always be welcome, but subversives, "weevils of the commonwealth", those who damage morale by cynicism and gossip have to be weeded out."

His lecture – its about an hours worth – don't worry I'm not going to read it all now – repays reading in full. It is a picture of how easy it is to slip into a protectionist mindset – man the ramparts, pull up the drawbridge, ossify and hope that eventually the wind will change for the better. As long as we just keep doing what we've always done, keep stripping back, surely all will be well, eventually? No.

Bishop Richard is clear, that there is though a real difference between faithfulness to the Tradition, and a creeping curse of traditionalism. He expresses it well in his own rhetorical way:

“Traditionalism is the obstinate adherence to the *mores* of the day before yesterday – the dead faith of living people. Tradition is the spirit-filled continuity of the Church's life, through which the truth is communicated from generation to generation in fresh ways in order to stay the same... living faith which we share with dead people. The hardest task is to persuade yesterday's *avant-garde* that they are today's busted flush.”

Throughout the years I have been ordained it is startling how often the latent enthusiasm, courage, generosity and faithfulness of many, can be strangled at birth by the living faithless dead. If I might even emulate a Chartres-ism, its easy to find as the parish priest gets in the bus drivers' seat, the back seat drivers obsessively yell out what to do – only to find that hours or decades later, the bus is still parked in the garage.

It's easy after all for us to talk. We can talk and talk and talk about what we'd like to do. We can talk *ad nauseum* about what will stop us doing what we want to do. We can be talked at, about how unless we do it 'this way' we won't be able to do what we want to do. But there must come a time to stop talking, start doing, and do it better and do it right. Actions do speak louder than words. You can keep some of the people happy some of the time; you can't keep all of the people happy all of the time and you should never attempt, as often we do to keep only the few happy, forever.

And that dear friends is where I think we are today: at a turning point, a pivotal moment in our life together, a changing of the guard, a call to action – or to use more theological language, a *kairos* moment – a point in God’s time in which we are called to seize some opportunities before us, to be a little fearless and to take some risks.

The Bishop of London’s talk, entitled “New Fire” has a brilliant of line: “The Christian community will continue to thrive as long as it is vision-led and not problem-led.” The Diocese of London is one of the few places which has seen growth, rather than decline in the last twenty years.

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St Wilfrid’s life wasn’t easy. He endured expulsion from his episcopal see, being dispossessed of his assets, a spell of being a political prisoner. Yet he is remembered for building churches and building communities of prayer and worship. That was his vision. He pursued it fearlessly. That’s the vision I want to set out now to help us map our way forward: fearless service, beauty in holiness: building the kingdom of God.

**FEARLESS** because its easy to be frightened – but God is on our side. Each of us is loved and has infinite worth. If a few galilean fishermen and an itinerant Rabbi can change the world – imagine what we can do if we really try. This must be a place we we freely offer the gifts we have, without sitting back and waiting to be asked.

**SERVICE**, because the Gospel and the lives of the saints call us to die to self. The example Jesus sets is not about being honoured or being members of a shiny badge club. It is about serving others, not ourselves. It is about washing the feet of those around us, without needing to be thanked – for our reward is in heaven.

**BEAUTY** because God’s creation is beautiful, despite our best attempts to neglect and disfigure it. What we offer should be attractive, calling others to share in the inheritance we have received as nothing more than what we are: transient stewards. It may captivate us, but it must not control us. Beauty calls us in, so that we may see through it to something deeper. And we must seek the beauty in others – not just impose on them our own *mores* and opinions which speak of us, not them.

**HOLINESS** because our worship and prayer should transform us – we are called to grow in faith. That is fundamentally a daily duty. We won’t transform anything unless we transform ourselves. We change because to live is to change, and if we don’t, we die.

**BUILDING THE KINGDOM OF GOD** because that's what we're all called to do. We are to participate in the mission of God, the *missio Dei*. And to be clear, that's about discerning God's agenda for us – not setting our agenda for God – nor our agendas for each other in this place. It is about working together – doing that which is entrusted to each of us – not working against each other and trying to do each others jobs (whilst all too often not doing our own).

There are two images that speak of this. Firstly, there is in one of the floor tiles in the main aisle a starfish – a symbol of Wilfrid our Patron. Its arms radiate out from the central body – just as we are called to radiate out into the world. Even if it loses an arm, it can grow another – nothing is indispensable – and sometimes to survive it will even lose an arm in order to better flourish. In tidal waterways, it can appear dead and dried out. Yet restore its environment – water it, and it springs back to life.

Our task is to radiate into the world – to take a risk – and yes, we might lose something now and again – or even need to make sacrifices – we may even die a little. But isn't that the central tenet of our faith we so often forget? Risen life comes after death – and we must not fear that.

That's why the second symbol is perhaps the most powerful of all in this place, but so often the one most neglected. It is found on the great rood cross – but how often do we stop to reflect on what it says to us? It is the words that are written under the crucifixion scene:

*"When you pass before this image honour it: but worship not the image, but the one it portrays"*

In our service, in our work of building the kingdom of God, we rightly take great pride in this, our surroundings. But there is a dreadful danger and a besetting sin we need to name and confront: that we worship the building instead of God. That's the deep meaning of all Church buildings, it is what that inscription reminds us of and we lose sight of that at our peril.

It is God whom we worship – it is God whom we are called to worship. No image, no church, no architect, no building no matter how good can or must ever distract us from that purpose. For our God does not come to make his home amongst us in bread and wine because we've got a nice church. He comes because those who gather to worship him are faithful. For wherever the sacraments are celebrated with faithful people the God whom we are called to worship is there.

Whether we worship in a Grade 1 listed building, or put an altar in the car park matters, in the final analysis not one jot. What does matter is that we are faithful. In the journey we undertake now, in our plans for development, in whatever our likes or dislikes; whether we are in this building, the hall or gathered in some other place – what God asks is: will you be faithful. For we can talk of what we like or don't like, we can opine about whether we think its proper or not, we can create false dignities, we can dress it up or strip it down – for these things are ephemeral if we are not faithful. This building will be a cold museum to a bygone age if we are now anything less than faithful to building the kingdom of God, if we do not seize the opportunities God puts before us and stop talking and start discerning, deciding and doing.

We need to be fearless not fearful. Engaged in the service of God and his people, not self-service. We worship God in the beauty of holiness not because that enslaves us, but because it sets us free to enter ever more deeply into the well spring of faith that we might grow in holiness. We do this because it is what God calls us to: together we build the kingdom of God. That is our call, that is our message, that is our duty and joy, that is our vocation: that is our vision.

For in building the kingdom we grow in holiness – we become the saints of God. That is our work, this is our task, now is our time. Do not be afraid, says Jesus. They left everything else and followed him. We must leave those things that hold us back.

Building the kingdom of God in fearless service, in the beauty of holiness. Serving God and our community.

This is the vision I set before you. For you can, I can, we can, if we try – but if we never try, we never will. In generosity, with positivity, through faithfulness let us listen to Jesus and let us cast out our net anew and together build that kingdom with new fire, new commitment and re-newed enthusiasm. The nay-sayers and doom mongerers are nothing more than the prophets of the day before yesterday – however loudly they yell. Jesus says Follow me - now. I say to you – lets get on with that. Amen.