



Hugh, bishops and the adventure of faith

Today is Hugh's last Sunday here at St James's, after over 27 years of being a priest for us here. I deliberately saying 'being' a priest because that's what he is, both here and in his paid work as, now, Director of the Walcot Foundation. But it has inevitably involved him doing things too: presiding at communion, as he's doing for the last time today; preaching sermons; he has taught us the faith, presided at weddings, buried the dead, baptised babies, children and adults; he has sat with people as they are dying, visited you in hospital, 'phoned you when things have been tough for you and met you in coffee shops all over London to offer companionship, pastoral care and help. He has also attended sometimes I'm sure what he has thought of as interminable meetings and – something we are hugely in his debt for – creating, building and maintaining the parish's website, unlike any other church website I've seen.

Hugh leaves us today, but I think it's rather appropriate that the gospel for today – that we heard just now – was from the beginning of Matthew's gospel – and is entitled 'The beginning of Jesus's ministry'. As Hugh said last week, there is an element of his own thinking about this which resonates with Tony Benn's statement that he was leaving Parliament to spend more time doing politics. Because Hugh is relinquishing his licence to the parish doesn't mean that he ceases to be a priest, or indeed that he ceases to minister. It is the end of this 27 year relationship between priest and congregation, but the beginning of something new.

Hugh is calling this new phase a 'feral priesthood', and he hopes that it will include an element of 're-wilding'. What form this

will take is not yet clear – but I for one can't wait to see what he does next. Hugh released into the wild is quite a picture – and just as we heard in the gospel that Christ wandered about meeting all sorts while they were going about their daily business, mending stuff, catching stuff, dealing with their families, so I have no doubt that Hugh's re-wilding will be a challenging blessing to any of us who, as I certainly do, continue to want to hear what he has to say and read what he has to write.

And in the spirit of Hugh's ministry which I have been fortunate enough to share for 9 of those 27 years, and in the spirit of the gospel where Jesus today says 'follow me' and then immediately began to walk about where people were working and getting on with their lives, a determination to connect what we are doing here with what is happening out there will guide the rest of this sermon.

Despite our gratitude that in the UK we have a political system which states unequivocal equality before the law of people of different ethnic backgrounds, different genders, a variety of sexualities, we have to acknowledge that just as powerful as the legal, economic, political arrangements that shape our society are the songs, the stories, the myths, the mood music, that are more difficult to define but form the contours of our life together.

And therefore, I can't stand and speak publicly in a Church of England church this Sunday without referring to the House of Bishops statement issued this week about civil partnerships and marriage and the nature of human relationships. The Bishops will have convinced themselves that they had

to issue a statement in reaction to the legal developments recently allowing opposite sex couples to form a civil partnership. They will have convinced themselves that the statement they issued this week is simply a re-statement of what is already the case, and so there is no change. They may have convinced themselves that the temporary fury they possibly anticipated this statement would provoke was worth it, wouldn't last too long, because their main teaching document on human relationships and sexuality, due later this year, was the more serious moment, that this is just an interim statement.

All these facts are true of course, but that's not quite the point.

These kinds of considerations are part of the privilege and burden of institutional leadership, as the bishops remain keen to state their commitment to the unity of the church and, as the saying goes, learn to 'disagree well.'

But these institutional reasonings sometimes lead leaders into very troubling places. As is, I want to suggest what has happened. We've done some copies of the statement for you to read in its entirety if you would like to so that you can see it all and reflect for yourselves.

I won't attempt to summarise it, but the House of Bishops – that's all the Diocesan bishops - have felt the need to reiterate the prohibition on the church offering any blessing to anyone in a civil partnership, and this now includes people who are straight as well as gay.

The net result of this statement is that the bishops have increased the number of people we are not allowed to bless.

St James's, thanks to its former rector Donald Reeves – here today – who bravely and before others, argued passionately for the inclusion of lesbian and gay people in the

church during the 1980s, this church has for perhaps 40 years or so been unequivocal and vocal about its belief that everyone - *everyone* - is welcome and cherished in this place and that we believe anywhere where people love, *without exception*, God is there (1 John 4.16), that they should be able to express that love, and that God blesses that love and those relationships.

And so every time that a new statement, even if it is an old statement, is issued that says the opposite to this, it's vital that churches like this stand up and say so, again. Which we do gladly and without fear.

In a church that takes God and people seriously, we must acknowledge that encountering the administrative vocabulary of this report and its prohibitions are the tender hearts of actual people who are looking for someone to love. In amongst the discussions about canon law and pastoral guidance are broken-hearted clergy who continue to bless the relationships they themselves are not permitted to have.

Hidden in the ecclesiastical politics of unity lies the presence of a God to whom, as we say, all desires are known. And amid the recommendations and interim reports and next steps is the Scriptural insistence [1 Corinthians 13] that love is greater even than faith.

Religious faith lives and breathes in the heart and the gut, infused by the spirit. Our soul is at stake. And the institutional violence, however unintended, of a statement such as that made by the bishops this week hits home in the distress and despair that it reawakens.

The challenge of handling these kinds of statements on the ground is captured by something Hugh often speaks about in his sermons – which is the call as a Christian to keep trying to free ourselves from being bound to pass on the hurts we ourselves have experienced in the violence we mete

out to others, and that the breaking of that cycle is found especially, I want to say *supremely*, in the cross.

Hugh – you have served God and God’s people in this parish for 27 years and so we say heartfelt thanks, most especially for your persistent connection between the life of the church and the life that many of us lead, selling our labour.

For your incomparable humour – I have still never forgotten your description of our Harvest offering early in my time as what might have been found on a supermarket shelf in Eastern Europe behind the Iron Curtain. When I reminded you of that at Harvest this year, you resurrected the metaphor but changed it to a Florida store just before the arrival of a force 10 hurricane. Thank you for making us laugh, for getting us to sing the *Magnificat* to the tune of the Red Flag, for telling us that Karl Marx was something of a modern day saint for you and for your self-deprecation, always wanting to encourage in us a humane and open hearted faith, encouraging us to live with our questions and to see our lives, as you often say, as *an adventure*. We have so much to thank you for.

But I also think that someone should say sorry to you publicly for the cost only you know you have borne over the years, within a church that is, to put it politely, unresolved, but in reality, simply unable – I want to say yet – but unable, as it has shown this week, to embrace the reality of human love and the variety of human relationships. So alongside our heartfelt gratitude, I want, for what it’s worth, to say, that I am really sorry.

The day’s Gospel: Matthew 4.12-23

“Now when Jesus heard that John had been arrested, he withdrew to Galilee. He left Nazareth and made his home in Capernaum by the lake, in the territory of Zebulun and Naphtali, so that what had been spoken through the prophet Isaiah might be fulfilled: ‘Land of Zebulun, land of Naphtali, on the road by the sea, across the Jordan, Galilee of the Gentiles— the people who sat in darkness have seen a great light, and for those who sat in the region and shadow of death light has dawned.’ From that time Jesus began to proclaim, ‘Repent, for the kingdom of heaven has come near.’ As he walked by the Sea of Galilee, he saw two brothers, Simon, who is called Peter, and Andrew his brother, casting a net into the lake—for they were fishermen. And he said to them, ‘Follow me, and I will make you fish for people.’ Immediately they left their nets and followed him. As he went from there, he saw two other brothers, James son of

It shouldn’t be like this.

I have learned from you Hugh that daily life, experiences of work especially, should, often, find their way into sermons that demand a preacher to connect what is actually happening now with the extraordinary energy of the ancient wisdom of Scripture. May your new ‘feral priesthood’ lead you into new adventures, new challenges and a deeper appreciation of the gospel and all it means.

The glory of the good news of the gospel for us today is that it is right in that real-life complex maelstrom of emotion and hope and suffering..... yours and my real life – day to day life - that God comes, sometimes as in today’s gospel, wandering along while we’re doing something else, sometimes in the glory of a human being fully alive, sometimes in the silence of a prayer or in bread broken and wine outpoured.

One of your bugbears Hugh is sentimentality – so none of that here – but suffice to say your name is written into the walls of St James’s and your voice, what you call your approach to Christian faith, has had more influence here than you might imagine and will continue to help shape this community down the years.

And we will say, until we have no more breath to say, that yes God comes - to tell us, as you have told us Hugh - the truth about love. Amen.

Lucy Winkett

Zebedee and his brother John, in the boat with their father Zebedee, mending their nets, and he called them. Immediately they left the boat and their father, and followed him. Jesus went throughout Galilee, teaching in their synagogues and proclaiming the good news of the kingdom and curing every disease and every sickness among the people.”