

SERMON BY THE RIGHT REVEREND DR BRIAN CASTLE, BISHOP OF TONBRIDGE

Institution of Sue Diggory at Crockham Hill 26th March 2014

Isaiah 58.1-9a; Luke.1.26-38

It's a real joy to be part of this new beginning, as we launch Sue's ministry here in Crockham Hill. I want to draw on two sources in what I say, the first is the picture at the back of the service book and the second is the festival of Mary that we are celebrating today.

The wonderful picture at the back of the service book says something about Sue's priorities which reflect what should be the priorities of every Christian ministry.

Firstly, the picture of Sue and Richard together speaks powerfully about the importance of relationships. At the heart of what we are about is forming relationships. We are called to form a relationship with Jesus Christ and that relationship should feed and enrich our other relationships. At the same time, our relationships with others should broaden and shed light upon our relationship with Jesus Christ. One of the great insights we gain from Jesus' relationships with those he met in his ministry is deep generosity and welcome to all. He was particularly open those who thought and acted differently from him regardless of where they came from and the ways in which they believed. For Jesus, all were welcome.

Secondly, in the picture Sue is standing outside the church. It's a poignant reminder that there is an important link between what goes on inside the church is closely related to what goes on outside the Church. Who we are and who we worship inside church are intricately connected with who we are and who or what we worship outside church. Our worship and devotional practices should be flowing out into the world in the way that we live our lives. There needs to be consistency between both. In the first reading tonight, the people of Israel gets the sharp edge of Isaiah's tongue because they there is no connection between what goes on in their worship and devotions and what goes on outside in the world:

Why do we fast, but you do not see? Why humble yourselves, but you do not notice? Look, you serve your own interest on your fast day, and oppress all your workers. Look, you fast only to quarrel and to fight and to strike with a wicked fist. Such fasting as you do today will not make your voice heard on high. (Isaiah 58.3-4)

Thirdly, Sue is standing holding a glass of wine. This reminds us all of the importance of celebration, not only in Sue's life but in the Gospel. Jesus was frequently at celebrations and parties and it is there that he had some of his most significant encounters. Think of the changing of water to wine in Cana in Galilee; important conversations with the likes of Zacchaeus the tax collector and with his own disciples. Celebrating, which is at the heart of worship, is an important way of drawing in others. Celebrating in church and community is a form of mission.

I couldn't resist that reflection on the picture, but I want to move across and say a few words on today's celebration of the Annunciation, of Mary's saying 'yes' to God. It is such a significant occasion that Lent is suspended as this event is celebrated. We learn something important about the church from this feast of Mary.

First, Mary was open to awe and wonder and being surprised by God. St. Luke writes,

And the angel came to her and said, 'Greetings, favoured one! The Lord is with you.' But she was much perplexed by his words and pondered what sort of greeting this might be. (Luke 1.28-29)

We live in tired and often cynical times when so much is controlled and there are processes for everything. We need to be clear about the outcomes of our actions and all the risks need to be assessed. In middle of this, the Christian faith is saying, 'Be open, be ready and willing to embrace unexpected.'

I have a 2 year old grand-daughter who is discovering the world through her fresh young eyes. It is a real joy to walk with her on this journey of discovery and hear her say 'Wow' when she sees a bud turning into a flower, a caterpillar crawling in the grass, when she sees anything that she has not seen before. 'Wow.' Being open to the world in awe and wonder is an important part of the journey of faith. We need to restore the 'wow' factor to our faith.

Secondly, we need to be willing to ask questions. Mary was nearly overwhelmed by her experience, but she sat and thought and pondered. Then she asked questions:

How can this be, since I am a virgin? (v.34)

A Christian community needs to be a place which asks questions and struggles with deep, deep questions of God and society. No questions are out of bounds. The Church is called to be a safe place where the joys and tribulations of being human can be discussed. We need to be a place where we can be open and honest and express doubt and uncertainty and not think that there is anything wrong with us for doing so; where we can talk about life, love and forgiveness and where we can talk about death and the way it affects us and society.

Finally, the Church needs to be a place which encourages us to take the extra step of commitment in response to God's generous love. Mary said those wonderful words:

Here am I, the servant of the Lord, let it be with me according to your word. (v.38)

Mary was probably a devout young lady, but in this story she moves from being an observer to a participant. She makes that extra and generous step of commitment. This Church knows all about the extra and generous step of commitment. Octavia Hill is buried in this church-yard. As you will know, Octavia Hill was a social reformer motivated by her faith who, while a teacher in London, saw the dreadful conditions in which most of her pupils lived. She was so moved by what she saw that she bought slum properties and managed them more sympathetically to free a few poor people from the tyranny of corrupt land-lords under whom they suffered and languished.

Mary was open to take the extra step of generous commitment, Octavia Hill was open to take that extra step, how far and how ready are we to do the same? 'Let it be with me according to your word.' Are we ready to say those words? Are we being called to move from being observers to participants in some act to which God is calling us? The Church should be a place which helps us in our commitment to God, to move from where we are to where God is calling us.

New beginnings, new possibilities, new opportunities, new challenges, new leaps of faith. New ministry encourages us all to see our lives differently and to respond to God like Mary, 'Let it be with me according to your word.' I wish you every blessing as you launch into this exciting new chapter.

26th March, 2014.