

Opening Eucharist

It is so good to be here together. We've arrived. We give thanks for safe journeys. We give thanks for all those who have made some sacrifice to be here, especially those who are taking annual leave.

Let's look around at the room. Who are we, and what are we?

First and most importantly, we are all beloved children of God, the One who loves us more than we will ever know. Each one of us, a 'particular favourite' of God's.

Second, we are a largely white, middle class, well-educated group of people. We are not typical Anglicans. Thank God we are not entirely homogenous, and we are so grateful and relieved that we have some here who will enrich our potential blandness. But let's notice that we do have a certain profile. We have between us a huge pool of talent, skill and experience, and there may well be bits that are missing.

Third, we are gathered for the first time as a community; a leadership community for this diocese. And for these three days together we will form a temporary community of pilgrims, travelling together, seeking God together. In these days, we will discover more about ourselves, more about God, more about what it means to be God's Church, and we will wonder together about God's promised and preferred future for the Diocese of Oxford, knowing that the time frame we are considering 2018 - 25 is but a nanoblink in God's great scheme of things. The opening words of Psalm 131 remind us not to occupy ourselves with things which are too great for us. We can safely leave the big picture to God, and attend simply to our very small part of the garden in this particular season. So together we will pray, we will listen, we will laugh, and eat and drink, we will dream and scheme and wonder. And we will try to inhabit and exhibit compassion and courage from the bedrock of a contemplative engagement with God.

But wait. What does Scripture have to say to us as we embark on this journey together?

Jesus took his small group of followers away from the crowds. His little leadership community. And he said to them, *Look chaps, This isn't about what you think it's about. It's like this:* And he describes to them the life of the true disciple.

He says those words to them which have become so familiar to us that they can cease to challenge us.

Blessed, he says, are those who place their life entirely in God's hands, who aren't bitter or cynical, whose hearts have the right inward orientation.

Blessed, he says, are those who undergo life's hard experiences, crushing disappointments and bitter losses, and yet in mute faith turn to God for help.

Blessed, he says, are those who know their dependence on God. Who are not sucked into believing the myth that they are clever and resourceful people who can manage quite nicely by themselves.

Blessed, he says, are those who really desire to align themselves with God's purposes, whose lives are an active quest to this end.

Blessed, he says, are those who are gentle, understanding, forgiving and quick to respond to the need of others.

Blessed, he says, are those whose attitudes, words and acts preserve friendship and understanding, or restore it where it has broken down.

Blessed, he says, are those who stand steady in loyalty to God's cause, even when they are ridiculed, denounced or ill-treated. Those who are open witnesses of God's love and action in the world.

The Greek word used for blessing is *makarios*. It's an exclamation of congratulation about a state of happiness. So this is actually a cry of joy based on the nearness of the kingdom of God. Nicholas King's translation of the NT actually translates the beatitudes, *Congratulations to the poor in spirit...* and so on.

It's interesting, isn't it, that Jesus doesn't headline congratulations to the articulate, the clever, the knowledgeable, the wise, those who have solid academic or business credentials; those who have positional power or influence. These things may serve **us**, and I would hope that everyday we would offer them to God in God's service, but they don't give us any rights, and they don't make us right.

What Jesus is highlighting for us here should be the starting point of this pilgrim journey we make together.

I believe the Beatitudes are compelling us to approach these three days in a spirit of deep, deep humility. Deep listening, deep appreciation of the other, keeping perhaps before us the image of the young child whom Jesus used to help his friends to understand that it's not about what they think it's about.

Some of us are parents, and some are grandparents. Perhaps all will have had, at some point, the experience of interaction with a small child. There is something about the trust and openness with which they approach anyone which takes our breath away (and is of course the source of their vulnerability). The image which Ps. 131 gives us is of a small child climbing onto its mother's lap and resting there in complete trust. It's the one which we need to hold onto as we think about what it means to be a contemplative people.

There is work to be done in the next three days, but let's not do it in a way which is frantic, or anxious, or driven. Let's do it out of a place of rest and trust and quiet joy. We rest, quietly in God; we trust him, that all works together for good for those who love him. We are joyful because we know that we are loved and that God is here with us to rejoice with us and to bless our work.

There is a danger, in these days, that we will try to sort out the church. The Church of England faces many challenges, both externally and internally. We need to face these with realism but without anxiety.

Recent work has shown that nearly half of the British population would consider themselves of 'no religion'. But a surprising number of those have a sense that they are more than just their bodies, and that they are part of something bigger. Many of them are people who are compassionate, gentle, just; who work for peace, who act from selfless love. They are our partners; they too are beloved of God; we must recognise and embrace them.

Within the CofE, ongoing differences of interpretation about what is of the Gospel and what is not of the Gospel continue to create pools of internal combative energy, and our understanding of good order has been severely challenged by the recent irregular consecration of a Bishop. Talk of schism is in the air.

But the Church has been there before, and we are still here. We may weep that we are being distracted; we may lament that there are those who believe that purity is more important than compassion. But the key thing for us is to keep our eye on the main thing.

The main thing is to be disciples of Christ, to be the living stones of the Church and to work with God and whoever will partner with us to build the Kingdom. At its heart it is very simple. Our discipleship is about being on the road with Jesus, about being in a community that remembers and celebrates Jesus, about sharing his banquet with all. So as Marcus Borg once said, we gather the folks, we tell the stories and we break the bread. And then we go out.

Back to Ps 131. If, in our time together here, we don't begin by resting in God, by quietly spending idle time with God, then there is a danger that we will rush out from here with a long 'to do' list, so keen are we to get on with the business of doing God's work for God.

That is not the plan. The plan is that we do God's work **with** God; that it unfolds. Some of the seeds we plant will flourish and grow and bear fruit. Others may wither and die. In deep trust and faith, we pray that the values we hold, the values of compassion, courage and contemplation, will hold us. We pray that the 6 strategic priorities we will work on will direct our diocesan energy and resources in ways that build the Kingdom and honour God, and that we will be attentive always to the Holy Spirit as we work.

As we have been reminded, reading from the book of Acts during this Easter season, God works through a surprising and motley crew and in unexpected ways. God is at work in the world and in God's people.

And let's remember that our God is not a God of requirement and reward. Our God is the One who loves us, who accepts us as we are, who calls us, who becomes flesh and shares God's very self with us, and who died taking into himself all the power of evil and horror in the world, transformed it into love and gave it back to us on Easter Day in resurrection power.

We are an Easter people, full of hope and joy and thanksgiving. We begin this time together in that knowledge. Alleluia is our song.

Ven Olivia Graham
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