

Blundell's School, Tiverton

15th June 2019

Old Blundellian day 2019

Thank you for your welcome on this special occasion. And how good to follow the music of Peter Hurford whom I lived near when I worked by St. Albans Abbey, where he built up that great International Organ Festival.

What is an OB Day preacher to do? He (or she) could dredge up nostalgic memories of school, but few of you are old enough to relish memories from over 60 years ago, nor would they have much relevance. In those days it was unashamedly called Old Boys' day, so things long ago moved on.

Or your preacher might tiptoe through the political minefields. What place for independent schools? What morality in tax allowance? What regulation, or freedom, of curricula?

Or your preacher might wax philosophical about the deeper purpose of education, inculcation, aspiration?

But for a Christian service in a Christian chapel there is one thing your Christian preacher must do. He, or she, must do their best to preach the Christian gospel – **respectfully** in a school which is avowedly and rightly welcoming to pupils (and parents) of all faiths, or none, **but boldly and clearly** in a country which treats religion of any kind as a ceremonial sideshow, a crowd-puller for royal weddings, an annoying interruption in the Today programme's political seriousness,

a quaint hobby for a dwindling band of old folk and do-gooders, or a bogus sidetrack for the scientifically advanced.

But then this country, this Britain, is a bit of an oddity when viewed amongst the millions of believing Christians in the United States, in Africa, in Korea and increasingly in China, and the billions who hold to other faiths in the Arab world, in Iran, in India, in Indonesia. Is religion dying off or, worse perhaps, is it an increasing source of conflict between religions ever more passionately divided?

So here, in Blundell's chapel, on this day, in this little microcosm of our nation, itself more passionately divided than for many decades past, your preacher must try to preach a Gospel which truthfully presents the truths for which Jesus lived - and died.

And what is that Gospel? One small phrase, just five Greek words, is on the lips of Jesus seven times in the Gospels. It's one which brings us as near as we can get to the historical Jesus, and it's the situations in which he uses that phrase which are deeply significant, not least for today's distraught world. And that phrase shows us who he is and what he's about.

The phrase "*your faith has saved you*" is what he's reported to say when he heals a woman who has been bleeding for twelve years with no-one able to cure her, what he says when he stops on the road for a blind beggar whom everyone else ignores, when a Samaritan leper he's healed comes back to say 'thank you', and when an outcast woman from the streets

bursts into a posh dinner party to weep over Jesus' feet and anoint them with oil.

She's an outcast, but so are they all. The woman's bleeding means she's unclean and can't be touched; the beggar's blindness meant he couldn't be let in to the Temple and its holiness; the Samaritan leper was one of the Jews' most hated neighbours – so close genetically and historically that they were loathed; is there anything so poisonous and hard to heal as a family feud or a falling-out between neighbours who once were friends? And the woman who anointed Jesus' feet - you can hear the posh guests, the club, saying "who let her in, kick her out" - could the same happen at our lunch today?

To each one Jesus says "*your faith has saved you*", and he says it in front of the crowds who spurn them. And it's their faith, their actions, Jesus commends. The bleeding woman has pushed through crowds who despise her in order to reach Jesus and just touch his cloak; the blind man has jumped to his feet, leaving his cloak on the ground with the few coins which passers-by think is all he's worth; nine other lepers the Samaritan has been with have gone off to give thanks in the Temple as Jesus instructed, but the Samaritan's come back to thank Jesus himself because he knows the Temple will not let him in; and the woman who disrupts the dinner has spent a fortune on the ointment she'll pour over Jesus' feet. "*Your faith has saved you*". They themselves have started the process.

Each has seen in Jesus **something** which gives them the courage, the insight, to break across boundaries, to break through taboos, to risk ridicule, with actions which ring down the centuries and still challenge our presumptions, our prejudices, and our safe, conventional, morality.

To see **that** Jesus is to see the deepest truth at the heart of the universe with its astonishing patterns and symmetry. Did it evolve in an entirely whimsical and haphazard manner, or do the laws of physics not point to a deeper, not entirely fathomable, intentionality behind it all, what we might call '**God**', some driving force which calls us, coaxes us, to seek harmonies where we can? That force which has brought, out of the primeval soup, human life with all its creativity, its artistry, its capacity for selfless, sacrificial, love.

We still hear that Margaret Thatcher once said "*There's no such thing as society*"; she did, but then she added: "*It is our duty to look after ourselves and then also to help look after our neighbour*". She knew well that when Jesus was asked "Who is my neighbour?", a trick question from a lawyer but today it would be maybe John Humphries or Andrew Marr, Jesus replied with the story of the Good Samaritan, not the Samaritan I mentioned just now but the one who helped a man who'd been mugged on a lonely road, a hated Samaritan reaching out to help a wounded Jew.

Mrs. Thatcher used that story when she told the General Assembly of the Church of Scotland that the Good Samaritan could only help the mugged man because he had money. That Church Assembly was also when some drunken Scottish

bigwig said he'd always fancied her, to which she replied: *"Quite right, you have excellent taste, but I just don't think you'd make it at the moment"*.

When she said *"it's our duty to look after our neighbour"* she was pointing to the importance of **Community**. Society might be nebulous and impersonal, but Community is you and me doing what we can, and working together at it. The Blitz famously pulled Londoners together. Two years ago the dreadful fire at Grenfell Tower had a similar effect on those living around it. Can we not get better at Community without such tragic happenings?

Three weeks ago I was in Poland in a little country churchyard. There I saw a large memorial to forty-two bodies in a mass grave: men, women, children, who'd died when the Nazis forced them out of Auschwitz on a death march away from the advancing Russians. When the last Nazis had gone, the local Polish community gathered the fallen bodies from the roadsides and gave them burial. Now the monument lists their names and, by their names, a Cross or a Star of David, showing Christians and Jews buried together.

Two weeks before that, I was in Normandy, including a visit to the D-Day beaches recalling our deep bonds with Europe. In the house where I was staying, there were two young Sudanese men, Muslims, refugees from their country's dreadful conflict. One had gained permission to stay in France, the other was still being shuttled backwards and forwards between France and Italy as each country played 'pass the parcel'. The Catholic couple who owned the house

were gladly giving hospitality and, with their friends, supporting these bright young Sudanese; they'd got to know them and were conscious of the gifts they would bring.

A young Libyan friend of mine, a Muslim lawyer now teaching in Aberdeen University, has just written a groundbreaking book on Islamic International Law, resurrecting the writings of an 8th century jurist whose deeply humanitarian understanding of the Qur'an not only challenges later misinterpretations but goes far further than Western scholars and lawyers many centuries later who've given us our current International Law.

More than anything today's world needs young people able to think widely and to use their imaginations. That's what **this school** is ideally about. In recent years teaching about religion in senior schools has made huge strides but the number going on to read theology at university has almost halved. Far from being mainly geared to people heading for priesthood, **university theology** fits students for an extraordinary range of worthwhile jobs - diplomacy, international development, journalism, social care, politics – because in a grown-up way they learn to work across all sorts of different disciplines – language, philosophy, history - teaching you to look...and to learn. Careers advisers may need to broaden their horizons. Parents too.

Far from religious faith being something outdated, any understanding of the world shows how religious faith shapes people and societies, deep forces giving mental maps and sometimes ideas and attitudes of which we're barely aware.

We need to be better able to grapple with what is true and what is not. And when we look down the centuries of history some of the deepest, longest-lasting and most productive resources of different civilisations have been those of **faith**.

“*Your faith has saved you*” said Jesus, to those who saw in him something which inspired them to step out, overcoming their fears. In those four stories (those two women desperate and despised, the blind beggar, the Samaritan leper) we see so clearly **who** Jesus is and how, in him, we learn the nature of God’s creative love which moves the sun and the stars and cares for each tiny creature, even you and me.

What could be more essential for this school to teach?

Day after day our TV screens show us such terrible images of disaster and suffering, and of the human miscalculations and folly which so often cause them. How do we handle such pictures? Do we become junkies for greater detail, more bloodshed, more tears? Or grow a thicker skin to protect our feelings? Do we write a cheque and think that’s it? Or can we learn to take them into prayer, deepening our compassion while at the same time becoming able to trust them into the hands of Jesus whose compassion so far exceeds our own?

“*Your faith has saved you*”, says Jesus. “*Step out*”.