

St Edmundsbury Cathedral

Sermon by The Very Revd Dr Frances Ward

10 September 2017

Jeremy Paxman has written, this week, in the Financial Times, a personal appraisal of the Church of England. As a thorough-going atheist, he was always going to take some convincing. But his article is surprisingly sympathetic for one known for his keen, uncompromising, critical perspective. He concludes his piece:

The Church of England has at last woken up to the existential crisis that has been obvious to others for years, and it is now in a race against time. Disagreements over new liturgies, polite squabbles over gay and gender rights, its wish to share its authority with Islam, Sikhism and Judaism — these have all been indications of attempts to adjust to the world the rest of us have been living in for years, but which seems to have somehow caught it by surprise. Society has moved on and the Church is struggling to catch up. But all is not yet lost.

Paxman appreciates the careful and thoughtful reasonableness of the Anglican way of life. And yes, in a world of sound bites and echo chambers, we do value a different way of knowing, that comes from worship, from music, from prayer.

That's fine, though, if your imagination gets God. But it leaves the question real about how to bridge the enormous chasm about what we do here, on a Sunday morning, and what captures the imaginations of so many today, who don't know and often care less about the traditions of faith we hold dear. I met a nine year old relative of mine a few months ago in Australia who asked me why, if my name was Frances, I wore a T around my neck. Had I explained in any depth, the other relatives in the room — all atheists, who think I have wasted my life — would have not been happy; seeing my explanation as an attempt to proselytise.

How might we recapture the imagination of the nation? One way comes to me after this last Wednesday, when this Cathedral was full — 600+ — of folk many of whom don't usually come to church. We had gathered to celebrate the life of Annabel Holmes, who has died, aged 50, after a 15 year struggle with cancer. I preached about Emily Bronte's poem which begins 'No coward soul is mine', and is, as Bronte faced her own death, a triumphant assertion of the glories of heaven and the afterlife with God that she knew awaited her. Bronte ends the poem sure that even if everything were to go — the earth, the moon, suns and universes — if all ceased to be, every existence would continue in God. There is not room for Death because God is being and breath; and God can never be destroyed. Annabel, too, had no coward soul. She too believed absolutely that there is an afterlife; that she would be with God in a reality that is more real than this one.

Jeremy Paxman reported how many people said to him that they got the Church and its role in society today; the way it holds our national memory, our history and culture in its countless buildings around the counties of England. What they can't get their head around is God. The church might not be as unfashionable as it used to be, but God is still deeply alien to most people's imaginations.

Annabel, with her long experience of life and dying, had no such problem. She knew that in order to make sense of her imminent death, a God of love was a perfectly comprehensible and reasonable proposition.

St Paul, one of the most intelligent minds of all ages, wrote to the Romans that 'now is the moment to wake from sleep, for the night is far gone, the day is near.' He knew a sense of urgency, just as we do, today, as we contemplate the future. The Church of England is showing signs of life, of continuing purpose, and it would be greatly helped if we were to feel more confident in the reasonableness of God's reality, to say that God's love more real than anything here on earth.

I know how hard it is. I found it impossible to tell my young second cousin why I believed in God with my other relatives around. But there are many who will listen. Emily Bronte compares the deeper life with all the other things we can become preoccupied with – unutterably vain, she called them. As she faced death, she knew that deep sea of love that sustains us and continues to create us, and dispels our doubts. It's a poem worth reading to inspire us to be more explicit with friends and family about what motivates us to Church, enabling us to comprehend the ultimate questions of life and death. People are often surprisingly interested and intrigued.

And here at the Cathedral there are many signs that new generations are inspired. Last Saturday 15 of us went to Walsingham – a group explicitly seeking to know God's purpose for their lives. One of them was Sarah, who today begins her placement with us as she trains for ministry in Cambridge. One of a number who are responding to a sense of vocation – as across our diocese, across the nation, people are coming forward seeking to test their vocations to be priests, or readers, or enter the religious life.

Today we welcome Calum and Reuben as deputy head choristers, and Theo Geileskey as a full chorister this afternoon. We welcome Thomas Hawkes as organ scholar. Along with Sarah, all at different stages of life; all publicly prepared to commit to roles in the Church.

Jeremy Paxman underestimates, I believe, the impact of our musical tradition on young people today. That fantastic repertoire that we value here, and around the Cathedrals of the land, offers so much to young people. The thorough training that Mr Thomas and our music staff give pays off in all sorts of ways – not only in enhancing their musicality, but also in helping young people to learn good habits and disciplines, key life skills. I'm thrilled that the In Harmony Project that this Cathedral is offering to the Diocese and County, with funding from the Foundation of St Edmund, is taking off in the way it is: with real enthusiasm to develop music in the churches and benefices across Suffolk. A great example of outreach, that will engage many, many people over the next decade, drawing people towards church and a deeper knowledge of God in their lives. Introducing those unaware of how much richer life is when we believe in God.

Our imaginations are immeasurably enhanced by the musical tradition we support here. Art and creativity are not marginal to Christianity, but central, and to become a chorister here is to receive a musical formation that lasts for life. It's a musical and artistic tradition that shapes our imaginations with real moral and emotional depth, enabling us to draw on poetry, art, music as a resource deep within us to help us through the complexities of living in today's world. As we welcome the choir back after their summer break, we are thankful for all they offer us in our worship, to inspire us and stretch our imaginations to begin to comprehend the grace of God, and so to enrich us in our daily lives.

Augustine of Hippo is reported as saying: 'He who sings, prays twice'. In fact, these are the words of a contemporary who wrote the following: 'He who sings well prays twice'. What Augustine did write was even more powerful: 'Those who sing praise, not only praise, but also praise

joyously; those who sing praise, are not only singing, but also loving the one about whom they are singing. Or, more simply, singing belongs to one who loves.<sup>1</sup>

Ours is a reasonable faith; one that inspires the imagination with God who is being and breath beyond our farthest thought, the reality that underpins all other reality. That reality is love, which gives and forgives, and transcends life and death. The Christian faith inspires the imagination and is active wherever two or three gather in the name of Christ. Let that love inspire our faith, and let us inspire others.

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<sup>1</sup> *Corpus Christianorum Latinorum vol. 39*