

St Edmundsbury Cathedral

2 July 2017

I remember, when I was a raw curate in the North West of England, one of those real saints you encounter, every so often, in life. Tom and Vera had met in Blackpool, on the annual Whitsun holiday from the cotton mills and coal mines. When they were youngsters, most of Lancashire would take to their bikes and cycle to Blackpool for a well-deserved rest. The mills and mines closed for two weeks a year and everyone went for their holiday; so it was a great time to mix and find your future partner. By the early 90s, when I was a new priest, Tom and Vera were in their sixties, and were faithful, kind, and thoughtful. They had given their lives to hard work, and now continued that hard work for the church. Theirs was a life of giving, of service. Their greatest joy was to please the Lord God. The gospel reading reminds me of the simple, effective actions they would do. Whoever gives even a cup of cold water to one of these little ones in the name of a disciple ... Tom and Vera anticipated opportunities for small acts of kindness – it was their one desire in life to show forth love, to please God.

Then Tom started to lose weight. He didn't have much to lose, but what he had, fell off him. He became breathless. His face showed signs of tiredness, of pain. He reported that the doctor had been asking him if he'd ever worked with asbestos. He couldn't remember. But the whole congregation soon was aware that Tom was dying, and it seemed that asbestos had caused the lung cancer that now had spread. Mesothelioma.

So a real welcome to all those here this morning who do great work, bringing to the attention of the world how devastating the disease is. It was in the 1970s that the connection was first made – so in the early 1990s, when Tom was dying, there was very little awareness. Now, many more know, thanks to your work nationwide.

This year at this cathedral registered on the Inclusive Church website, and we continue to work at our inclusive welcome. We aim to welcome all comers – and indeed our gospel this morning is a gift. 'Whoever welcomes you welcomes me, and whoever welcomes me welcomes the one who sent me.' Here we do our very best, each of us, to show the love of God as we greet people, pilgrims, visitors through the week, whatever their circumstances or identity. And yes, different organisations and charities that work hard to serve the needs of others. You need to be thanked and celebrated – and that is what, as a Cathedral, we are here to do. Thank you, for all the work you do.

So an inclusive welcome; the opportunity to celebrate the loving kindness of others. Cathedrals need to be inclusive if we are to be faithful to the gospel of welcome. A warm welcome helps to draw people near to God. Then our worship, inspiring music, stimulating preaching, imaginations captured by the beauty and light of this holy place. This Cathedral is here to speak of God; these living stones shout aloud of God's presence. Our tower: a beacon of faith, hope and love in Suffolk. That is what we are for.

And when it comes down to it, it's us – you and me – that show forth that faith, hope and love.

I have never forgotten Tom and Vera's witness to God. I learned so much from them during my curacy about Christian love. Tom and Vera taught me to strive to please God in all I do. That I needed to lay aside all my ego and its desires, difficult though that was – and is. I needed to forget myself and focus on others. I learned that a joyful, loving, self-giving heart is what God desires.

We are reading through St Paul's letter to the Romans at morning prayer. Today's epistle is worth pondering further – as indeed is this letter as a whole – it is a real gem, a jewel in the Bible. St Paul writes:

When you were slaves of sin, you were free in regard to righteousness. So what advantage did you then get from the things of which you now are ashamed? The end of those things is death. But now that you have been freed from sin and enslaved to God, the advantage you get is sanctification. The end is eternal life. For the wages of sin is death, but the free gift of God is eternal life in Christ Jesus our Lord.

Paul highlights a choice of life before us. We can lead a life in which we are captured, captivated by the things of the world – what he calls the gratification of the flesh. Feeding our passions and desires for material wealth. Filling ourselves with stuff that makes us feel good for a moment, then makes us want more. Paul knew the temptations of addiction, of greed, of selfishness. Of habitual anger that dominates some lives. Of regret, bitterness. This he called 'the flesh': his shorthand for all those desires that beguile or trap us, and ultimately do us harm. The community in Rome knew all about such things, in those decadent times at the end of the Roman Empire.

Paul presented a choice, another way, the way of Jesus Christ. In Jesus, the desire for God is born. To desire God is to enslave yourself not to the flesh, but to the spirit of love. We have a basic choice, says St Paul. To choose slavery to sin and the flesh; or slavery to God. Slavery to God is, though, not real slavery at all, because then we are more free than we can imagine. The love of God sets us free in a way unimaginable when we are buried in desire to gratify the flesh. The free gift of God is eternal life in Christ Jesus our Lord.

Tom grew thinner and his breathing harder. The whole town knew him and suffered with him. He didn't give up, though, on his love and kindness for others. He never felt a moment of self-pity, or anger. He continued to seek to please God in everything he did. He followed the way of love until he died. And, somehow, his dying wasn't the end of life at all. He really did show us all that love is stronger than death.

It's hard to watch someone die when you know it shouldn't have happened. It's right to fight for justice, for recompense. But Tom taught me the best lesson. That we all die

sometime, and to die with love, rather than bitterness and regret, is the greatest triumph of life over death.

This Cathedral holds a wonderful sculpture that we contemplate as we say morning office in the Transfiguration Chapel. It is by Elisabeth Frink, and it shows Christ crucified, an emaciated body, with arms outstretched. Christ's arms reach out from his suffering to all of us in love, welcoming us to a life beyond anything we can imagine, where we are free from pain and made whole again. Located in the transfiguration Chapel, Christ reminds us of a life where we will be transfigured by love. I look at that figure, and I see Tom's body, wracked with cancer; and I see his Christ-like love. I know the ultimate truth of the universe, that Tom knew and lived. That the God of love calls us to a life of a glorious liberty; a life of truth and love that transcends death.

Almighty God, you have broken the tyranny of sin and have sent the Spirit of your Son into our hearts whereby we call you Father: give us grace to dedicate our freedom to your service, that we and all creation may be brought to the glorious liberty of the children of God, through Jesus Christ your Son our Lord.