

Sermon for Maundy Thursday

"I can't help it about the shape I'm in, I'm not pretty, can't sing and my legs are thin". Not my words, clearly, but the words of a Fleetwood Mac pop song I was singing to myself as I walked home from school one afternoon aged 13. And then I saw him, coming directly my way, moving slowly, making eye-contact with everyone, a beaming smile, looking for conversation, every awkward adolescent's nightmare. Our local vicar. "Maybe he won't see me", I thought, "But what if he does, what if he stops me, and my friends see?" "What if, what if it's catching?" Without further ado I crossed over and passed by on the other side. Why did I avoid him? I guess because he was so ...nice, so pleasant in what I thought was a slightly weedy way .

But the other picture I have of that vicar was very different - when I was a bit older, aged 20, just after my mother's funeral, which he had generously come back to the parish to take. We were outside the church afterwards and my father was a shadow of himself, blinking back tears under the weight of despair. But the picture as I remember it was not one of forlornness because my father was upheld that day, that very moment, physically and spiritually by that priest's strength, a strength borne of faithful practice, which showed itself not in the muscular power that might have impressed me previously, but in restrained strength channelled in compassion, gentleness in fact. I knew then that I had been wrong when as a 13 yr old I shunned what I took to be weakness in that vicar and the vicar gave me a picture that day, a glimpse, a window into God's resilient and unfailing compassion towards us, even with one as dismissive as I had been.

I don't know about you, but I want priests, I want Readers, I want ministers to show me something, something of God, of God's way with us, God's goodness, God's beauty, God's love. This is a calling for all Christians but it is peculiarly the calling of the public minister, because you are set apart, to be visible, visible like I am now. It doesn't mean you're any better than other Christians of course – the American priest Barbara Brown Taylor just before her ordination had a crisis in this regard, worrying that she was far from perfect and that a whole lot of people would see right through her. She confided in a wise old priest who said "You know, you're not promising to be perfect. But you are consenting to be visible, to let other people watch you while you struggle wholeheartedly with them to genuinely, authentically and truly follow Jesus". And the best ministers aren't to my mind anything like perfect, they can be slightly unusual, a little off-piste, but they are those who in the midst of the messiness and complexity of untidy life, make it easier to believe, through their passionate prayerful persistence, through their largeness of heart, through standing in such a relation to God that God comes through.

Fr David Diamond, was one such priest, worked for many years at St.Paul's Deptford, London - I worked there for a couple of years before being ordained and I remember him creased up laughing at Morning Prayer as he related some of the more absurd stories of the saints, such as the saint who showed an early propensity for sainthood when as a baby he abstained from his mother's milk on Fridays. Fr Diamond took God seriously, but found an awful lot of religion quite funny. He wasn't perfect, he worked too much, and of his own confession smoked too much and drank too much, there were burdens he carried, and wounds too. He struggled with all of this, endeavoured to be disciplined ... but through all the ups and downs, his joy in God was profound. The wounds he had, seemed to open a door which in others remains closed, a door which led to a place of joy. I remember Fr. Diamond's funeral, when not only did a sea of clergy turn up, but also people who had stolen from him, physically assaulted him and in one case kidnapped him, they were all there, recognising, not a paragon of virtue, but one through whom something of a forgiving God could be seen, a joyful God, a God whose love reached out even to them. I mention him not to encourage you to drink, smoke or overwork, but to remind you that it is amazing how God's love can

shine through our most broken of offerings, and be seen by others. Indeed perhaps precisely in the midst of our brokenness. The writer William Countryman suggests that we should ask a candidate for ministry “is this person weak enough to be a minister?” By which he meant has this person an honest sense of themselves, has this person genuinely recognised their need and fragility, and grasped the profound meaning of this need in God’s tender embrace in Jesus?

But of course there is also the challenge to be strong enough to minister. Strong enough to be gentle, strong enough to love those who would spite you, strong enough not to be puffed up. So when for example you find yourself in the church hall toilets at midnight on a Saturday night cleaning them and ask yourself, ‘was I ordained for this, was I licensed for this?’ you do well to reply, ‘yes indeed, I was authorised for this too’. Not every week – that would be poor timetabling. And in all of this the challenge to us is, like the woman anointing Jesus feet in our gospel, to be so taken up by the compulsion of loving worship and service that we are not inhibited by the potential costliness and indeed public riskiness of such absorption. And notice what Jesus can do with this kind of devotion – affirm it, embrace it and amplify its significance so that as an encounter it has fed Christians for 2000 years - the tiny gesture of an individual woman’s public devotion echoing down the centuries through Jesus’ unyielding hospitality to such public, risky adoration. What did Thomas Merton say? That Christ “may exercise His power through our smallest and seemingly most insignificant acts”

But I want to let you into a secret. Bishop Martin needs help. Actually, I’m using him as a cover. In fact, I need help. I believe Jesus shows us what it is to be a human being fully alive, I believe he shows us what God is like, I believe it, but I need help seeing it, and all the people of God need help seeing it – and to those of you in public ministry - your public ministry is a big part of our help in showing us....This isn’t the only task in the life of faith, but it is your task; in Scripture and Sacrament, in your habit of heart and mind, to help us to see better. And you are ordained to this ministry, you are licensed to this role because this is not a summer job but a way of life that needs sticking at – we know your emotions are as fickle as ours, your mind is as tricky as ours, you’re as much of a mess as us but the Church exacts vows out of you and asks that you to re-commit here every Maundy Thursday so that you recall you have promised you will be dedicated, dedicated not to ever-changing whims, emotional flights of fancy or trendy thinking but dedicated to our Lord’s story, dedicated to making it visible and **showing** it to the people of God and the world.

So show us; ,
show us how to feed on Christ,
show us how to receive forgiveness,
show us how to understand our place in Jesus’ story,
show us how to encourage one another in Jesus’ way and
show us how to take bread and become bread for others.
And may God bless each one of you to do so, Ame