

for John            24.9.22    Cathedral

‘WE HAVE THIS TREASURE IN CLAY POTS.....’

Ain’t that the truth?

To be invited to preach at an old and precious friend’s funeral is a bittersweet honour because it is the honour which one would, all too willingly, forgo. Old friends are irreplaceable. New friends are great but old friends are the ones who have walked practically the whole journey with you, shared the hardships and the joys, been with you in triumph and disaster. They know - and need no long explanation. They have loved and supported and encouraged and corrected and stayed the course and, with you, limped, battered and bruised but cheerful and unbowed towards the gates of the new Jerusalem. I can hear John saying, ‘That’s enough pious claptrap, get on with the sermon!’ But I know he would want me to reflect for a moment on the last part of our journey together. Struggling home over long years, out of the ruin of the bitter civil war that was the Church of England, we were strange creatures yet met everywhere with warmth and welcome and encouraged to take our little wisdom and long experience and join, once again, our new yet ancient brethren in the fields of harvest. In the new dispensation, we discovered that nothing of our former lives and ministry had been lost but rather they had been honoured and gathered up into a new and wonderful understanding and experience. It was an unlooked-for blessing that John and I often reflected on in our meetings and I know he would want me to share this with you. For this generosity we are eternally grateful. Our families – some of whom have made it across the border and some of whom are travelling yet – have been an immense part of that journey to that universal home which is the Catholic Church where all the pieces of the divine jigsaw puzzle finally fall into place and cohere.

Our womenfolk have been, frankly, heroic in their love and faithfulness and fortitude. And that he would want to share with you too.

At the beginning of that great 19<sup>th</sup> century novel of judgement and mercy, *Les Misérables*, the old bishop reflects on the ministry of the priest.

He says simply, 'The door of the doctor is never closed. The door of the priest is always open.' It is a subtle but immense difference. The Presbytery door is a portal through which the world will pass. The priest (and in John's case, Liz and the family too) will have everyone from the duke to the dustman, the beggar to the chief executive tumble through the door and be welcomed and held in trust and confidence and love as part of the family of the parish. That was John and Liz's house and home and haven and 'field hospital', as the Holy Father describes it.

Pope Francis also, famously remarked that the 'Shepherd should smell of the sheep.' By that definition John absolutely stank. He had a shepherd's heart from day one. Even in supposed retirement he would often be found travelling hundreds of miles to those who called on him and whom he carried constantly on his heart. Indeed, and he hated to be reminded of this, at our Anglican seminary, there was a vote at the end of our final year as to who we would most like to be our parish priest. Of the fifty candidates, John got well over half the total votes. Our judgements were wrong about a lot of things but not that.

What would John want me to say to you today? First and foremost John was a preacher of the Resurrection. He accepted, because priests see a lot of death, that death was not, in the words of that dreadful crematorium favourite, 'nothing at all' but rather the terrible and radical discontinuity of life, the separation from all we had ever known since the soul was quickened in the flesh of our being in our mother's womb. But he also knew that the Scriptures

were true beyond any doubt. In death we are separated until we in our turn are called home. But in Christ we are never divided and we come together at that junction of time and eternity which is the Mass.

And he understood that St Paul's allusion to the Resurrection body that awaits us was a longed for reality. The older you get, as more and more works less and less well, the more exciting becomes the prospect of the Resurrection body- nothing lost, all purified and renewed in which we will dwell forever.

He knew also that we are but clay pots. The treasure lies within.

I thought about this last week as I stood on the Lateran Hill in Rome, looking down the Merulana to John and Liz's favourite church in the Eternal City, Santa Maria Maggiore. The Lateran and the baptistery remnant is the site of Constantine's first church in the wake of his victory at the Milvian Bridge and the legalisation of Christianity.

In Augustus' famous 'city of marble' Constantine built a brick church.

It was a conscious public rejection of paganism's flashy exterior and cruel self-centred heart – filled with idols and rapacious and indifferent godlets that were simply the projections of humanity's worst.

Paganism was and is, as my grandma used to say, 'All fur coat and no knickers'.

The Christian Way proclaimed that the glory was within.

To enter the Church was to discover in the humanity of Jesus the divinity of God and the destiny of Man. It was to enter a place of light and joy and reconciliation and peace. The simple exterior disguised a place where time and eternity were intertwined. Where we, with those gone before in the Way and those yet to come, are united in the great family of the Faith and fear is transformed by love.

All of this rests, as Constantine knew, on the Cross of Christ.

'In this sign, conquer', the vision told him – and he did.

The same challenge falls to us in our generation. Many of those who have hoped in Christ have, like the men on the Emmaus road, walked away, disappointed, lapsed, unable to fathom the victory of the Cross. Yet, as they walk, they are joined by the stranger who is, at once, familiar. He listens to their story and then He unfolds the full panoply of salvation history, teaching the Scriptures and their fulfilment in Christ. Then the moment comes, in the twilight day of journey's end, in the breaking of the bread when we know, without shadow, who He is and in whose Presence we have been. And our hearts burn within us as the Holy Spirit rekindles the fire of love on the altar of our hearts. And we return to Jerusalem, to the Apostolic band, to our Mother and to the Family of Faith.

We do not return to a perfect Church. The Church is full of fools and sinners. And we are grateful for that - for you are one – and so am I.

We are the Church of the Becoming, a work in progress, a purification by the fire of God's love that will continue into the purgatory until we are ready to dwell in the eternal Presence.

If this is such a moment for you then I invite you to return – not to what you thought you knew but to this humble exterior which contains more treasure than you ever knew or dreamed. And, in so doing, gladden the heart and soul of this much beloved preacher and teacher, Word bearer, Watchman, Shepherd, friend and brother as he journeys on to the One whom, all his life, he loved and served as a shepherd of souls and a faithful steward of the mysteries of God.

Pray for him often and today, in this Mass, this re-presentation of the Cross of Christ in which we conquer, lift John high on a tide of grateful prayers and hearts that overflow with love for him and for Liz and their family.

May he rest in peace and rise in glory.

