

Palm Sunday 2019

The Lord GOD has given me
the tongue of a teacher,
that I may know how to sustain
the weary with a word.

Those of us who have been involved in the SHAPE course have been going on a journey of self-discovery. Starting with some key life Experiences we have been doing exercises to reveal the main features of our Personality and our principal Abilities; we have been allowed to dream and tap into our Heart's Desire and out of all that we have come to a conclusion about our main Spiritual Gifts so that, in the light of all the above, we may fine-tune a bit how we seek to serve God and others in the church and the wider world. You may be interested to know, reassured perhaps to know, I hope not surprised to know, that my top spiritual gifts were Leadership and Teaching.

I suppose I shouldn't have been surprised to learn that. I don't know how many surprises there have been for others, but for me in the journey I have made in my ministry in the past few years that has been reassuring and encouraging. It was actually in an annual ministry review about six years ago that Bishop David asked me what would most energise and fulfil me in developing the ministry I offer and I replied 'theological training and formation for ministry'. That's how I first got involved in ministry training. I now host the Cambridge centre for ERM, I am responsible for the delivery of training to our Licensed Lay Ministers, I teach some of the modules, and I am being looked to as the key person to shape future patterns of training for new pathways to ordained ministry. I am going to be spending some of my sabbatical time researching new developments in this and working with a group of northern dioceses who are looking to provide new forms of clergy training that are less reliant on academic assessment and more focussed on helping to form faithful and competent ministers of the gospel.

I love teaching – seeing people's eyes light up as they engage with a deeper grasp of things, broader perspectives, wiser judgments, all in the context of a praying and faithful Christian learning community.

And that's what I hope we are, you are. I am, bold enough to believe that in this context, in this pulpit, I live out that calling:

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I've often found myself saying recently that the toolkit that we ministers of the gospel take around with us is not a very full one. Sometimes, to be honest, I feel a bit of a fraud – I have very little to offer: physically, bread, wine, water, oil. But often I don't have even them in my bag. All I have is WORDS: the deep and hallowed words of Scripture, liturgical words (often taken from Scripture) that the generations have laid down as paths of prayer, and sometimes my words, drawing from both, seeking to link those precious and holy words with the lived experience of today, to show that they are not just empty words, in fact far from empty words – full ones, full to the brim with meaning, relevance, wisdom, challenge and hope. God words. And sometimes I leave someone's home or climb down from this pulpit and I feel that a little miracle may have happened. Mere words have opened hearts, minds and imaginations so that they have been grace-givers, they have imparted life.

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It is a great joy to be a teacher. The prophet felt that joy;

Morning by morning he wakens –
wakens my ear
to listen as those who are taught.

But there is another side and that is our real theme for this morning. The servant of the Lord who is speaking here is both a Teacher and a Leader – as I am – and for him it was morning by morning a delight and I read those words and shared his joy. but then I read on:

I gave my back to those who struck me,
and my cheeks to those who pulled out the beard;
I did not hide my face
from insult and spitting.

That is part of the calling of the Leader that I, of course, shy away from, and so do you. We read this passage today because it is one of the so-called servant songs in Isaiah – and Christians have never been able to read those songs without seeing them as a prefiguring of Jesus and particularly of his passion, his suffering and dying for us. Those songs reach their crescendo in Isaiah 53:

Surely he has borne our infirmities
and carried our diseases;
yet we accounted him stricken,
struck down by God, and afflicted.
But he was wounded for our transgressions,
crushed for our iniquities;
upon him was the punishment that made us whole,
and by his bruises we are healed.

We turn now to Holy Week; we follow Jesus to the Cross. There we recognise that in order to save us he could not save himself: that was the temptation of the crowds, the soldiers, and the mockers as Luke tells us. 'Save yourself' they cry. To save them he chose not to; he submitted to their scoffing, their scourging, their shouting – because that was what he had to do, it was the only way of saving them, of saving us.

That pattern of submission was Christ's calling and it is a Christian calling. On occasions it has to be our calling if we are to be faithful to Christ's example.

I am sure our Prime minister has her faults and has made loads of mistakes but I do not envy her position. How grateful I am - proud even – that she has those church doors to pass through every Sunday for some moments of grace: we see that walk down the church path every week on the news after another seven days of braving the storms of anger and heaped-up humiliations. Whatever she does she cannot win, I suspect, and probably the only way of getting beyond this will be for her to bravely and uncomplainingly allow the assassins to shed her political blood and let out upon her all their disappointment and aggravation and violent indignation. But perhaps I betray too much of my political sympathies. Forgive me if so. But I'm just trying to make a link across two thousand years and also across today's sacred-secular divide. Sometimes the Christian's calling, the leader's calling, is to submit to the dark forces that are out there in the world, in the church sometimes. Sometimes that is the only way that the darkness can be pierced and the light shine through. It is the way of the cross – it is the way we are called to walk this week as Good Friday beckons. And as a teacher and as your Christian leader, least of all must I flinch from that solemn duty.