

***'For I decided to know nothing among you
except Jesus Christ,-
and him crucified.'***

Bishop Stephen's Inaugural Sermon

Chelmsford Cathedral

Saturday 27th November 2010

*'When I came to you, brothers and sisters, I did not come proclaiming
the mystery of God to you in lofty words or wisdom; for I decided to know
nothing among you except Jesus Christ, and him crucified.'*

1 Corinthians 2.1-2

Since the Prime Minister's invitation to be the tenth Bishop of Chelmsford landed on my mat - the *last* PM (*correct* spelling) (laughter); and since I went to see the Queen to swear a not-very-ecumenical oath, and then chat about Essex . . . And I can offer, if the media are listening, the following exclusive:

'Her Majesty likes, and eats, jam from Tiptree, but is not so keen on oysters from Colchester.' (Laughter)

Though, for the record, I like both (laughter) and I am fishing for an invitation to the big oyster festival I missed this time round!

And since I learned that I do not have to change my name by deed poll - for surely I am the first Bishop of Chelmsford for 48 years who has not taken as his text Luke Chapter 1 and verse 63 which, in case you don't know, is

'His name shall be John.' And they were all amazed. (Laughter) . . .

Well, brothers and sisters, the amazement this time round is that you have got a Stephen and since it has been quite a long way to get here, from the arrival of that letter and all the other highfalutin shenanigans right through to this grand carry-on in the Cathedral . . . And, by the way, we clapped the dancers and clapped the singers - I think it's about time we clapped the Choir! (Applause).

This is all becoming rather un-Anglican!

But since all this has transpired, people keep saying to me, with a mix of concern and consternation in their voice, sucking through their teeth like a builder surveying his predecessor's work, 'Chelmsford, eh?' (Laughter) The good people of Berkshire - and I'm glad some of you are here - have been saying, 'We thought you did quite a good job as Bishop of Reading. What have you *done*?' (Laughter) So let me tell the good people of Essex that I'm glad to be home in God's own county! (Applause).

People kept saying, 'It won't be easy'; 'I don't envy you that one,' (this is the other bishops, of course); 'How large! How difficult! How *complicated*!' As though being a bishop in general and of Chelmsford in particular was like being appointed Captain of the *Titanic*; or perhaps you think of the Church of England as the *Marie Celeste*!

Well, let me start as I mean to go on. I start here and now by saying to you, let us banish all talk of difficulty, of complication. Yes, of course there will be challenges. Nothing of lasting value ever comes without a cost. But, brothers and sisters, what could be more joyful, more delightful – what greater honour can there be, than to follow in the service of our Lord Jesus Christ and be called to leadership and ministry in God's Church; to be a custodian and a herald of the precious treasure of the Gospel?

Brothers and sisters, we have been sent with a message of Good News for the world! Therefore how can we be anything but joyful, animated, and eager to share with others all the goodness that we have received? God has called us to build the kingdom of his love where a new humanity is revealed and made available. And, if I can borrow for a moment the phrase of the hour, the 'Big Society' was always our idea first! (Laughter)

It is this vision of God's new community and God's reordering of the world that brought me into the Church in the first place; and it is this vision that sustains me. And it is this - and this only - that we will joyfully seek and celebrate together while I am your bishop.

Over thirty years ago, when I first started wondering whether God might be calling me to serve as a priest in his Church, I went to see Father Ernie Stroud, sometime Archdeacon of Colchester, now retired – and who I hope may be somewhere in the congregation . . .

He was the vicar of the church of St Margaret's, Leigh on Sea, where my family and I discovered faith. We talked about the joys and demands of Christian ministry and sent me away with two biographies to read: the Life of Basil Jellicoe, the great slum priest and evangelist, and a life of William Temple, that great Archbishop of Canterbury during the Second World War. And both these books inspired me and have shaped my thinking about Christian ministry and faith.

I did indeed seek ordination (you will be relieved to hear that) and I thought it was Basil Jellicoe I would try to emulate. As an ordinand in this diocese, I was offered a parish in Loughton. And, with apologies to the good people of Loughton, I never took up the offer - rather pompously turning it down because it was not quite the slum that I was looking for! (Laughter). In fact I've already received a letter from the churchwarden of Loughton, wishing me all the best and praying for me, saying 'I think I'm right in saying you were the person who looked at this parish.' Goodness me, the churchwardens of the Church of England have very long memories!

And you will have discovered from reading the notes in the service book, while you've been waiting rather a long time for this service to commence, that I have travelled all around the country following a call 'to make Christ known'.

I'd like to take this opportunity to thank my wife Rebecca and my three boys; because it's not easy to be married to a bishop and have a bishop as your dad. And we have moved far too often and it's hard for them. And I want them to know that I am here and we are here because we believe that God is calling us and that He has a purpose for our lives.

So, to my great surprise, the Church – and I hope God – has called me to be a bishop; first in Reading (and I give thanks for six very happy and fruitful years in the

diocese of Oxford) and now Chelmsford, East London and Essex; returning to the places where I grew up and that I still think of as home.

And so, more and more, I find it's William Temple that I turn to for inspiration; not just vision of a Christian society of justice and equity – though we need that vision today – but the way that he approached ministry. When he was enthroned as bishop of Manchester, this is what he said in his inaugural sermon:

'I come as a learner with no policies; no plans already forged to follow. But I come with one burning desire. It is that, in all our activities sacred and secular, and social, we should fix our eyes on Jesus, making him our only guide.'

He went on:

'Pray for me that I may never let go the unseen hand of the Lord Jesus and may live in daily fellowship with him.'

Brothers and sisters, I can do no better today than to make these words my own. Likewise, I make my own the words of the apostle Paul that is my text for today: that 'I may know nothing among you except Jesus Christ and him crucified.'

You see, we do face many challenges. There is dis-ease and conflict in our world. We have forgotten how to live in peace with our neighbours; often we don't even know our neighbour's name. We abuse and exploit the natural resources of our planet and stress the equilibrium of its life. We spend vast sums of money on ever more sophisticated ways of killing each other: jealousy, fear and greed invade us, overwhelm us and, in so many cases, poison the well-springs of our hearts.

Meanwhile, thousands of people grow up knowing little or nothing about Christian faith and have no contact with the Christian Church. The values and disciplines of the Christian Church which we share as individuals and communities are left as personal choice where there is supposed to be public truth: Good News for a needy world.

You see, the Gospel is medicine. It meets us at our deepest need. It calms fears, forgives sins, wipes tears away. And this Gospel is not a set of rules or regulations; not a manifesto or a programme. It is a Person.

So fix your eyes upon Jesus. Know him in his death and resurrection. Make him your guide. And if, within the Church, we find ourselves swamped in disagreement on matters of profound importance; and where integrity is not the monopoly of one side or the other – that's why it's so painful. And, again, there will be only one way through. We must fix our eyes on the One who has fixed his eyes on us; who loves us with a love stronger than death.

You'll probably hear me say this hundreds of times over the next few years, but let me say it loud: You can go to the Church of England for a lifetime and nobody gives it to you straight. You are loved. You are precious in God's sight. He has a purpose for your life.

And, together, our task as God's people in this great diocese is to know and reveal that love which God has for us in Christ. This is my prayer for myself and for our diocese. That is how I come to you. I do not have a master plan in my back pocket; I have only a prayer in my heart.

So when people say to me, 'Bishop, what is your vision?' you'd better get used to hearing me say, 'I don't have one. Not yet. Not on a plate. Not on my own.' Once together, fixing our eyes on Jesus, making him our guide, we will discover – and, in discovery, be surprised, provoked, delighted that God loves his Church and has a purpose for his work.

Pray, therefore, that we, each one of us, may first of all live our lives in community with God. This must be our first priority. And when we live this vocation of prayer and service, within the community we call the Church, God can do great things.

Now, of course, the Church has many failings, and it is my sad duty to report that this bishop shares many of them. But if we fix our eyes on Jesus; if he is our guide, then from the wellsprings of our hearts, now cleansed by the Spirit of the living God, we will find joy in living and proclaiming the gospel of Christ.

So do not bang on about how difficult and complicated it all is. Put away all cynicism, gossip, prejudice and lack of love. Stop taking yourself so seriously and, instead, join me in the great adventure of the Christian journey.

And, finally, in our Gospel today, Jesus says that his Church must be 'salt' and 'light'. And let me remind you that here salt does not mean you are supposed to be like the little sprinkling over your chips to make them taste a bit nicer. It is preservative. This is what Jesus means; like a piece of salted cod - you stop it from rotting. This is what Jesus longs his Church to be: a household of peace and joy where true and lasting values are held, taught and celebrated.

And light. We are supposed to be light; light that shines in the darkness. Light that reveals the way. Light that dispels fear. Jesus says that we, his people, are supposed to be 'a city set on a hill' receiving and radiating the light of Christ.

So, brothers and sisters, who are we - gathered in the midst of this Cathedral today; this motley band of muddled and broken humanity? We are the inheritors of a great vocation. We are the ones who are called to share the light of Christ today and shine with that light in our own lives.

This is what Basil Jellicoe did in the slums of London. This is what William Temple taught. This is what countless Christian people are doing every day in the diocese. And it is to this that we recommit ourselves: nothing less than the beauty of the Gospel and the building of God's kingdom here.

Tomorrow is Advent Sunday, the beginning of the Christian Year. Let us begin again, inviting God into our hearts, letting his Gospel shape our lives. And let us know nothing other than Jesus Christ and him crucified. We have great Good News to live and share. Brothers and sisters, go back to your parishes - and prepare for government! Amen. [Applause]