



Diocese of Bristol

Sermon given by the Rt Revd Vivienne Faull, Bishop of Bristol at her service of welcome and enthronement

I watched the values of this Diocese played out in September in London where our diocesan cricket team took on the many times champions London in the Church Times cricket cup. Bristol had never previously appeared on the honours board, and I was asked by a Londoner whether the Diocese of Bristol was a recent creation. I was not amused.

Bristol's team may have been anxious, like their Bishop today, but they were determinedly hopeful. They were all men, I'll come back to that, but there were other signs of diversity: lay workers as well as clergy, and at least two from parishes not actually in this diocese. The rule umpires were appropriately generous with their interpretation. And those members of the team who had recently played for the Archbishop's cricket 11, a team formed to play Imams (and usually losing), more recently playing a Vatican team and a team of Asylum seekers (and losing), talked of how their passion for cricket could bridge some of the divides here in this city.

I pray that may be so.

Absent mindedly, I went home with an unintended trophy. Rob Smith and Paul Petersen, would you like your ball back? Let's congratulate them.

The gospel we have just heard is familiar, and, important. As the Archbishop of York has taught me over the last 6 years, the practice of our faith consists primarily in prayer and parties. This story is about both. Jesus has been preaching the kingdom of God and bringing restoration and healing and a crowd

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has responded. He has authorised and empowered those closest to him to go into local communities to continue that work, and to go in vulnerability, carrying virtually nothing with them, ready to receive the hospitality of others. They had returned, with many others.

But the day was, as the Greek puts it, declining. And the apostles were anxious. Anxious because this was a deserted place, because they knew the crowd would be hungry. The details of how Luke tells the story, and his focus on the disciples are telling. The disciples had, it seemed, lost touch with the corporate memory that it was in a deserted place, in the wilderness, that their forebears had learnt of God's faithfulness. Deserted places, wilderness places, anxious making places, are also places of transformation.

There are many across the world who are anxious today as climate change transforms their environment and their livelihood.

There are many in our nation who are anxious, as the crisis in government, over the Brexit negotiation continues.

There are many in the church who are anxious as they observe what seems to be declining faithfulness.

This gospel speaks of hope in the place of anxiety. The disciples ask Jesus to send the crowd away. They have lost faith in their giftedness and calling. But Jesus doesn't let them off the hook. Nor does he explain how the great challenge is to be met. Jesus simply refuses to collude with their hopelessness. 'You give them something to eat' he says. He tells them to get the crowd to sit down. And they do.

As the gospel continues there is no explanation of how the miracle happens. There is only the indication that the disciples have shouldered the responsibility, sensing again that they are authorised and empowered.

In the seeming intractability of so much that faces our world, Christ calls to us to take the responsibility for which he equips. Christ calls us to go forward in faith, as people of hope.

I honour those in this Diocese, from Bishop Barry Rogerson onwards, who have seized the moment, whether in the ordination of the first women as priests in the Church of England, or in the successful bids for national funds for resourcing churches, But, less publicised, I have already discovered the reservoir of hopefulness within this Diocese.

- Those Churchwardens and PCC members who work not just to keep their parish church open, but to transform it, wrestling to perfect plans, raising funds, finding allies so that the building can offer the hope of new life for the whole community.
- Those volunteers who work alongside who are without food or a home. Those who keep company with the lonely and those facing mental illness. Those who bring safety to those who are vulnerable and bring healing in divided communities.
- And those volunteers who campaign to change our minds and our hearts and our behaviour so that our beautiful, fragile planet may continue to be a place which God can again call good.

I honour that courage.

AS it continues the gospel speaks of gathering what there is so much which scatters.

The size of the need in that crowd is made clear. There are more than 5000 men, far more than the local population. And I pause there. Because to write so specifically of 5000 men is odd. And its impact is powerful. For those who are marginalised know that what is not counted does not count.

Luke is the writer who, at least on the surface, pays most attention to women's perspective, and the perspective of other groups then on the margins of the community of faith. It was Luke, in the second volume of his account, the Book of

the Acts of the Apostles, who celebrates the impact of the power of the spirit, quoting the prophet Joel's vision of the last days when God pours out his spirit on all flesh, on sons and daughters, on young and old, and on slaves, both men and women.

So I puzzle at Luke's description, whilst being sure that there were children and women, slaves as well as freeborn, frail as well as hale in that crowd. And then another detail. Jesus told his disciples to make the crowd sit down in groups of about 50. In a crowd you can spectate, you can be anonymous, maintain your ambivalence. In a group of fifty you can know and be known.

One of the reasons I am committed to maintaining the life of parishes is because it is there that we can know and be known. We I can discover companionship and solidarity, and in doing so we can subvert the culture of consumerism, and the impact of austerity which divide us from each other. I honour those in this diocese, from Bishop Oliver Tomkins onwards, who have gathered rather than scattered, who have welcomed those who are not Anglicans, or not Christians, those who are not wealthy, or strong, or white, or straight, I honour all those who have created Christian communities where all are welcome.

Finally this gospel speaks of the way Christ makes himself known, how he took and blessed and broke and gave the food. Later in Luke's gospel, we are told the travellers on the road to Emmaus, recognised Jesus in the breaking of bread. I honour those, amongst them Bishop John Tinsley and my predecessor Bishop Mike, who have through their teaching and preaching have made Christ known, and I honour those who, not just in word but in sign and sacrament, have enabled Christ to be known.

We began with the hopeless disciples. The story ends with an extraordinary sign of the profundity of Christ's transformative presence. Twelve baskets of broken pieces were left over. And Luke would go on to tell of the continuing transformative power of Christ's spirit, in the overflowing generosity of the church as it grew.

So I honour my colleague Bishop Lee Rayfield, who has guided this Diocese with such generosity over the last year.

This gospel speaks to us all of Christ's gifts of courage, and solidarity and generosity.

And it speaks especially to this Bishop as she follows Jesus in gathering and guarding, encouraging and commissioning, protecting and blessing and so builds on the work of her predecessors Oliver and John, Barry and Mike

We began this service with a prayer of St Augustine. And I end with his words of instruction to Bishops on their calling, to rebuke agitators, to comfort the faint-hearted, to take care of the weak, to confute enemies, to take heed of snares, to teach the uneducated, to waken the sluggish, to hold back the quarrelsome, to put the conceited in their place, to appease the militant, to give help to the poor, to liberate the oppressed, to encourage the good, to endure the evil, and - O - to love them all.

Please do pray for me in that calling.