

For Mary Prior Philippians 2:1-5

Mary, our Lord Lieutenant, listens to sermons. She comments on them afterwards; she can remember what you said. Even months later, when I have quite forgotten, she can remember what I said. It is just one example of that grasp of detail that makes her so impressive, so attentive, and makes her ever so slight scary.

So, <https://tweetdeck.twitter.com/ary> will probably remember a story I have told, in part, once before. Years ago, I was Dean of a Cambridge College and pretty well every Sunday night, in term, we would have visiting preachers: elderly bishops, washed up Deans. My great coup was to get Robert Runcie to come and preach. Robert Runcie, formerly Archbishop of Canterbury; Robert Runcie, MC; an officer in the Scots Guards, and a tank commander in Normandy in 1944. Mary is good at regiments and medals, it is important to get the details right. Runcie was a seriously impressive man and there was a bit of dash and style too. In Magdalene College, Cambridge the preacher always stood just in front of the altar at a little lectern and the congregation sat side on, facing the central aisle. Arranged like that we could all feel a little detached and preachers usually boomed at us. Runcie was different. He put his forearm on the lectern and half turned so that he had a slightly conspiratorial air. And then he dropped his voice. The whole chapel craned forward to hear him better. And then he spoke to us about the little virtues. Not the big things that clergy usually talk about, like love, faith, and hope. He spoke, that night, of the lesser virtues: duty, kindness, decency...

Now, I want to say something about Mary and her virtues, and I want to say something about public service. First though we are all going to look very serious and do some theology. We are going to establish why this is so important; why what Mary does is important. So, we are going to think about the first reading we heard from Philippians, the one that began:

If then there is any encouragement in Christ, any consolation from love... make my joy complete: be of the same mind

Now, Philippi was an interesting place. Named for a Greek King, Philip, father of Alexander the Great. Later, the Romans came and fought a great battle. Brutus died at Philippi, defeated by Mark Anthony. Philippi was on a trade route, all kinds of people passed through and brought all kinds of religions. High end Philippi was posh and powerful, other parts of town were desperate and poor. It wasn't Bristol, but it was quite like Bristol. And, the Philippians were divided, two churches met in two different houses. That's why you keep hear Paul urging the people of the city to live in unity. We heard it tonight – *be of the same mind*, - and you hear it late in the letter

be of the same mind in the Lord. Phil 4:2

Be of the same mind. It does not mean be alike, be similar. It means 'In the mad mix of all your difference, learn to think together; be different, but like minded'. The Philippians assumed that if people disagreed with you, you just put them right, and you over-ruled them. The Philippians believed in power. Paul challenged them.

The Philippians were interested in power and who has it. That is very definitely a Bristol kind of conversation. In Philippians it was about Greek and Roman citizens, emperors, governors, elites, and ethnic groups. In Bristol, it is about Mayors and metro mayors, about councils and community groups; about cuts and funding and Merchant Venturers and the homeless, and lots more besides. It has us talking about power a lot. Just like the Philippians.

Paul is really interested in this business of what power looks like. It has a very famous passages which goes like this

Christ Jesus: Who, being in the form of God, thought it not robbery to be equal with God: But made himself of no reputation... Wherefore God also hath highly exalted him, and given him a name which is above every name: That at the name of Jesus every knee should bow
Philippians 2:5-10

That is St Paul grabbing hold of you by the shoulders, telling you about power, and giving you the gospel in your face.

The God of glory, empties himself. God becomes one of us, ordinary, vulnerable and human. In ordinary, vulnerable, human things you can see God. That is the gospel and it is news in Philippi where they think gods are into sitting on thrones, and smiting and generally being the boss. It is a startling thing to say. But that is not *all* that Paul is saying. Paul tells us that God ends up looking like a slave. The God you bow down before looks like a slave. That is a political point. Remember, this is Philippi where they want to know who you should bow down to, how much you should bow down and where they want to argue about that. And here is Paul saying, 'Real power looks nothing like that. God doesn't use that kind of power. God empties himself. God gets crucified.'

Paul explains that we are human and humans fall out with one another. Then humans try to overrule their differences with acts of power, laws and walls, armies and arguments. *Be of one mind* says Paul. The interesting thing is not how you insist, how you get your way, but how you learn to live together. *Be of one mind*. We keep thinking it is just a question of giving the right orders, knowing the right people, making the right decisions. And it is not. It is knowing how to be human together that counts. And that is why we hear what we heard tonight

Let each of you look not to your own interests, but to the interests of others

Paul wants us to think about one another and our common life. Later on he will say

Finally, beloved, whatever is true, whatever is honorable, whatever is just... think about these things Philippians 4:8

Do you see? He is writing to people who *want* to be powerful and know *who* is powerful, and he is telling them to forget all that and to be just human instead. He is telling them to be truthful, honourable, just, and kind. He is telling them to do the little things well, He is telling them to be decent and good.

For the best part of ten years Mary Prior, Lord Lieutenant of the City and County of Bristol, has been amongst us as one who has done just that. She is the permanent representative of the Crown and I have seen her, at more occasions that I can count, represent Her Majesty the Queen with grace and proper dignity. I have walked her in and out of this Cathedral again and again and I have been in no doubt that the Queen's Majesty has been here. Mary is a great servant of the Crown, a great ambassador for the Crown. And yet Mary's humanity and warmth and kindness have never been smothered by the role.

Tim will talk about Mary's service to the city and to its people, its routines and its organisations, but even he will struggle to do justice to the scope and scale of her achievement. I just want to remind you that we have had amongst us a woman who really understands public service, because like St Paul she understands that what we have to be is human and do the things that help us live together. Like Robert Runcie that day all those years ago, she draws us into something personal as well as public. She does not want us to be impressed, and bow down; she wants us to know we are liked and loved and to be lifted up.

Mary understands power, power does matter, we must get the use of power right, but what matters to her is not power, but kindness, honour, trust and all those other small, significant virtues. She knows our differences and she does not dismiss them, but she does think we can *be of one mind*. She is a woman of faith, she understands what the gospel tells us that in being fully human, being fully human with one another, we can touch the glory of God.

Tim will say this too, but I must not leave it unsaid. When I walk Mary in and out of the cathedral, John is by her side. She has walked with us for ten years and he has walked with her. She would say she has been blessed by his support. We have been blessed too, fortunate to have his friendship, his wisdom, his company and he has been in his own right a formidable servant of this city and county.

Be of one mind. Let that be her legacy. Make no mistake it is not easy. It is costly. It has been hard work for Mary. She will tell you it has been a privilege and she will mean it, but it has been hard work. Long hours of course, but more than that, real engagement needs costly commitment, grace, patience and the ability to forgive and be forgiven. It is costly, I have argued with Mary once, I think you probably only ever argue with Mary *once*. If you haven't done that I can tell you two things. One, don't go there. Two, if you really must, look her in the face. You will see that even with the light of battle in her eyes there is still a smile.

Mary, you were waiting for me inside this cathedral, on the day I was installed as Dean. You spoke the first words that day. You have been my adviser, my prompt, my prop and stay and my friend. Around us are hundreds of people who would say the same. You are surrounded by affection and admiration today. And we are, all of us, surrounded by the love of God which summons us to *be of one mind*. Summons us to carry on what you have been and what you have done amongst us, that we might be more committed to relationship than power, more interested in how we can be raised up not bowed down, how we can be of one mind. You may be about to retire but your work is barely begun. It is our work now, and in the power of the God who humbles himself we will strive to be of one mind.