

Inhabiting the world distinctively
Lent Lecture 2016

I appeal to you therefore, brothers and sisters, by the mercies of God, to present your bodies as a living sacrifice, holy and acceptable to God, which is your spiritual worship. Do not be conformed to the world, but be transformed by the renewing of your minds, so that you may discern the will of God – what is good, acceptable and perfect.

- Romans 12. 1-2

These verses from Paul's letter to the Church in Rome have become very important for our diocese and for that agenda for renewal which goes under the heading *Transforming Presence*.

Transforming Presence has four priorities, inviting the church in this diocese to inhabit the world distinctively, to evangelise effectively, to serve with accountability and to reimagine its ministry. The first of these, to inhabit the world distinctively concerns what is often referred to as discipleship, namely what does it mean to follow Christ and live the Christian life in and for the world today?

In these Lent lectures we will look at each of our four priorities in turn, and this is itself part of a process of refocusing our attention on these priorities following our consultations across the diocese last year.

Romans 12 is a good place to start. Under the theme of transformation, Paul describes the church as being Christ's body where we each have a part to play. He then lists the marks of an authentic Christian life. In particular he says, "Let love be genuine."ⁱ

This is what discipleship means:

- to *know God* as he is made known to us in Christ;
- to *be transformed* by Christ; and then, discerning God's will,
- live a life *patterned* on Christ and *seeking to build his kingdom in the world by sharing his love*.

Our holding crosses were a first step in encouraging every Christian in the diocese to think about how their life is patterned on the great commandments of Jesus to love God and to love your neighbour as yourself.

We will return to this central theme of love as the authentic mark of discipleship, but in order to get there let us look at some other texts from Christian history that will help us make sense of our vocation to follow Christ, and learn from those who have gone before us.

And as you may know, in Lent we are sending out some new information on *Transforming Presence* to all the parishes. This includes some very simple leaflets about our four priorities, but also a visual aid to help us teach about these things – a gift box, containing things that – for this evening – illustrate the life of a disciple.

So the first gift out of my box is a hazelnut. And we therefore begin with the 14th century English mystic, Julian of Norwich. In what must be the most famous passage of her much loved and moving account of the revelations of God's love that she received when struck down with fever and thought to be dying, she says this -



“And he showed me a little thing, the size of a hazelnut, on the palm of my hand, round like a ball. I looked at it thoughtfully and wondered, ‘What is this?’ And the answer came, ‘It is all that is made.’ I marvelled that it continued to exist and did not suddenly disintegrate; it was so small. And again my mind supplied the answer, ‘It exists, both now and for ever, because God loves it.’”ⁱⁱ

Our starting point is God's love and God's faithfulness. God who is the source of everything, for in this hazelnut Julian saw that God *made* the world and everything in it; that God *loves* the world and everything in it; and that God *sustains* the world and everything in it; and that the basic Christian vocation - this is what missionary discipleship means – is to express, embody and communicate the faithfulness of God as we have seen and received it in Jesus Christ. We are those who are formed by him and sent out by him – we are his disciples; but we are also those who by the outpouring and the indwelling of the Spirit bear his likeness - we are Christians.

Julian was an anchoress, that is she lived a solitary and enclosed life, in a cell that was built onto the side of a church. You can see a reconstruction of Julian's cell in the church that bears her name (or does she bear its name?) in Norwich today. In the century before her birth a rule of life called the *Ancrene Riwe*, was written for three enclosed sisters near Salisbury, possibly by their bishop. It is very likely that this Rule is very similar to the one Julian lived by.

What is interesting and relevant for our discussion of discipleship today is the description of an anchoress's cell. It had three windows.

One would open onto the church so that the anchoress could participate in the worship of the church; hear the Mass and receive the sacrament.

The second opened onto an inner room, so that a servant or some other person could bring food and clothes, and take out whatever else may need removing. I will leave this to your imagination.

And the third, which was curtained by a black cloth with a white cross at the centre, opened onto the street, so that the anchoress could look out into the world and speak with people who came in need of her counsel and help. It also meant that she saw the world through the pattern of the cross which was cut into the curtain.

These three things:

- participation in the worship of God;
- the attentive consideration of daily needs so that we inhabit the world in a way that is sufficient, equitable and sustainable; and

- service to a world that is always seen through the lens of Christ

seem to me to be helpful headings for addressing the challenges of discipleship today, for, on the one hand, discipleship is often measured by our participation in the church. (I well remember leading a mission in Barnsley where the bishop came to kick us off, and in the sacristy before the Mass began, was introduced to Fred, 'our head server'. Well Fred was indeed, the head Server of the church, but he was also Deputy Head of the local Comprehensive School which was serving one of the largest and most challenging council estates in Britain. Which was the greater living out of his discipleship? His swinging the thurible on a Sunday morning or his day by day, week in week out, service of these young people? Of course, the answer is both. He had a window on the world and a window on the Church. But within the Church itself only one received real value; only one was deemed worthy of a mention to the bishop. We will all have had similar experiences).

On the other hand, sometimes our service to the world is cut off from the worship of God, becoming an end in itself. Or, neglecting the ministries of worship, spiritual direction and evangelism we end up like a General without an army, and with it the service we are able to offer – the number of people actually available to do the things God wants us to do - declines.

Thirdly, we have neglected the inner window altogether. Even if we pay them scant attention, we at least recognise the conjugate foci of the spiritual and the missiological. We even speak about them as belonging together, flowing from each other, two sides of the same coin, forgetting that this vision of discipleship isn't a coin at all, but a three legged stool. Alongside the nurture of a spiritual life – and let me make this plain: I do believe that the most urgent priority facing the church in this land is simply that we teach people to pray (but I will return to this) – and alongside this the nurture for an outward focused life, where each individual Christian discerns how they can best participate in the mission of God through their own acts of service, kindness, witness and generosity, we need to pay careful attention to what I am calling *the way we inhabit life itself*.

The *Ancrene Riwe* speaks about contentment, sufficiency, and 'enough-ness'. These are alien and difficult concepts for our world today, and perhaps provide the biggest challenge to our discipleship: not just how we say our prayers; not even how we witness to others; not just the good deeds we do, but our carbon footprint, the car we choose to drive, the coffee we choose to drink, the clothing labels we choose to wear. Learning to inhabit this life in this culture in this particular time in a way that is joyfully and distinctively Christian and models a contented simplicity is probably the biggest challenge and also – whether we like it or not - the acid test of our spirituality and witness.

So let me name my biggest fear for our Church of England. It is that people see our faith in Christ as a leisure activity. You know how it is: some people do watercolours, and some people do car mechanics for beginners, and some people do conversational French, and we do Church. We love it. It is our hobby. We are very committed to it. But it doesn't seem to have any impact on the lives we lead Monday to Saturday. Yes, we go to church a lot; and, yes, some of us seem interested in persuading others to come along as well. But when it comes to observing whether being a Christian and attending church makes any discernible difference to life, the answer seems to be 'not much'.

It is this that has to change. Of course it will mean a greater waiting upon God. After all that was the root of the anchoresses' life. It will certainly overflow into greater witness and a more effective and fruitful evangelisation. It might also mean that we will worry less about these things and lose some of our gruesome earnestness. But most of all it will be apparent in the lives we lead each day. It will start shaping the decisions we make and the choices we make, so that, slowly, our lives will reflect more evidently, the life of Christ.



So my second gift is a window with a cross in it – an invitation to see the whole of life, and especially the world, through the lens of following and knowing Jesus.

But let us explore this idea of the distinctive Christian life a little further, and also go further back into the literature about Christian discipleship. The Second century letter of Mathetes – not a person, but just the Greek word for disciple– to Diognetus – we do not know who he was – is a defence of Christianity at a time of spasmodic persecution and is one of the earliest surviving pieces of Christian literature outside of the Bible.

In it, the writer says this -

“For Christians are distinguished from other men neither by country, nor language, nor the customs which they observe. For they neither inhabit cities of their own, nor employ a peculiar form of speech, nor lead a life which is marked out by any singularity. The course of conduct which they follow has not been devised by any speculation or deliberation of inquisitive men; nor do they, like some, proclaim themselves the advocates of any merely human doctrines. But, inhabiting Greek as well as barbarian cities, according as the lot of each of them has determined, and following the customs of the natives in respect to clothing, food, and the rest of their ordinary conduct, they display to us their wonderful and confessedly striking method of life. They dwell in their own countries, but simply as sojourners. As citizens, they share in all things with others, and yet endure all things as if foreigners. Every foreign land is to them as their native country, and every land of their birth as a land of strangers. They marry, as do all [others]; they beget children; but they do not destroy their offspring. They have a common table, but not a common bed. They are in the flesh, but they do not live after the flesh. They pass their days on earth, but they are citizens of heaven. They obey the prescribed laws, and at the same time surpass the laws by their lives. They love all men, and are persecuted by all. They are unknown and condemned; they are put to death, and restored to life. They are poor, yet make many rich; they are in lack of all things, and yet abound in all; they are dishonoured, and yet in their very dishonour are glorified. They are evil spoken of, and yet are justified; they are reviled, and bless; they are insulted, and repay the insult with honour; they do good, yet are punished as evil-doers. When punished, they rejoice as if quickened into life; they are assailed by the Jews as foreigners, and are persecuted by the Greeks; yet those who hate them are unable to assign any reason for their hatred.

To sum up all in one word--what the soul is in the body, that are Christians in the world.”ⁱⁱⁱ

This remarkable passage describes the Christian life not just as a good and moral life, but as the life of what you might call a 'resident alien', living fully in and for the world, but knowing that true belonging lies elsewhere and that this life is best understood as a journey home. But with a purpose and a mission in the world – to be the conscience and its compass of the world as the soul is for the body. Of course, this way of living is not only the heart of the Christian life, following Jesus was 'in the world, but not of the world'; it is also the gift we share, the knowledge that because of Jesus we have a homeland in heaven.

So my third gift is a passport. But not my current one, one that has run out. I do live in the world, but my belonging to the world will expire. My real life is hid with God in Christ^{iv}, and my destiny belongs in Christ in the new creation that will be the fulfilment of all things, and while I am in the world I love it and live it to the full, but also point beyond myself to Christ.

In order for us to learn and share this way of life – and here we might usefully remember that the very first Christians were called neither 'Christian' nor 'disciple' but 'follower of the way'^v - the work of Christian instruction and formation must take a more central place in the life and priorities of every church. Here in the Chelmsford diocese we are looking at this in a particular way under the heading of 'formed in order to be sent'.



Last year the senior team in the diocese went on a pilgrimage to Holy Island in Northumbria, tracing, as it were, the steps of St Cedd back to the place where he was formed and sent. We were struck by the idea that Holy Island, and places like it, and for that matter Bradwell itself where Christianity began in Essex, are not best understood as places of arrival, but places of departure; not places to which we travel on pilgrimage, but places from which we are sent on mission. What Cedd experienced on Holy Island and then replicated in Bradwell, Tilbury, Southminster and Upminster; what then happened at Barking Abbey and Waltham Abbey, was 'being formed in order to be sent'. It is the very pattern Jesus speaks about in St John's gospel on the night before he dies, when he says to his friends, "As the Father has *loved* me, so I have *loved* you" (John 15.9), that is 'I have formed you as a community by the love that I receive from the Father and share with you'; and then on the first night of Easter, "As the Father has *sent* me, so I *send* you" (John 20.21): the community that is shaped and formed by love is now sent out to share that love in the world as representatives of Christ. Like the different windows that the anchoress looked through to sustain her life in Christ, so the life of those who follow Jesus is as both disciple *and* apostle - one who follows and at the same time one who is sent. **We therefore want every church in this diocese to be a school for missionary disciples**, places where we follow Jesus and places where we are sent out by Jesus to express, embody, and communicate God's faithfulness. Thereby **we continue the ministry of Christ by being his transforming presence in the world, his gift of life.**

Next year I will be visiting every deanery in the diocese to teach about how we can up our game in this ministry, and help every Christian to work out what it means for them to be a disciple of Christ.

We will need resources for this ministry.

We need to **teach people to pray** and in encourage them in the life of prayer each day.

We need to help people feel more comfortable with the scriptures, improving levels of biblical literacy and helping all of us to **read the bible prayerfully**.

We need to **know more about our faith**, and be able to give a reason for the hope that is in us.

And as I have already mentioned, we need to think about what you might call **Christian lifestyle**, the way we love our lives each day, the way we inhabit the earth, the values we live by, the way in which the faith we celebrate on Sunday shapes our lives for the rest of the week.

One of the resources that has already helped us is the *Pilgrim* course. This is a course for those how want to find out about the Christin faith, i.e. it is an evangelism course for enquirers, but it also provides resources for those who want to go deeper into the content of Christian faith and the living of a Christian life. Here are also many others good written and web based resources for teaching the Christian faith and growing disciples.

But of course our greatest resource is not a book, a blog, course, a three minute video or a degree in theology, but God himself who made the world and sustains it by his love.

And so we are led to the scriptures themselves: the Holy Spirit is the greatest resource for our discipleship; and the aim of our discipleship is not good church membership or even specific ministry, but holiness, the sanctification of our whole life before God. "There are a variety of gifts, but the same Spirit," says St Paul.^{vi} This Holy Spirit is the one who enables us to know that Jesus is Lord, and it is in the power of the Holy Spirt that we are born again and cleansed from sin and become part of Christ's body, the Church. Within the Church says St Paul, there are all sorts of gifts and ministries, just as a body has many different parts no one is better than the other. All belong to each other. All are precious.

This not only describes our Christian life, it is also a radical message of hope to a world which is usually looking to divide , conquer and exclude, all too willing to put people in boxes or place them outside altogether. Look at the way we squabble over how many refugees we might take. We act as if we were the owners of the world, not its stewards; as if nation mattered more than humanity. And yet the revelation of God in Christ is that we belong to each other; that we are one humanity inhabiting one world, and that in Christ we are a new creation, made to enjoy God, here in this life and for ever.

The greatest gift of the Spirit, says St Paul, is love. His great description of the church as the Body of Christ in 1 Corinthians Chapter 12, is followed by the great description of the nature of love – its kindness and forbearance - in chapter 13; and is preceded in Chapter 11 by his description of the Eucharist, the feast of love, whereby we remember Christ's love for us on the cross and are fed by his risen life.

Jesus also says that love will be the great authenticating mark of discipleship; and he says this to his friends around the table on the night before he dies, having just washed their feet –

“I give you a new commandment, that you love one another. Just as I have loved you, you also should love one another. By this everyone will know that you are my disciples, if you have love for one another.”^{vii}

Whenever we see and experience this love, and whenever others see it, so they will see and experience the presence of Christ. Therefore we must love each other more, and we must love the world.

Neither is it too fanciful to see that it is this self-forgetful love, that we see in Christ and that we are called to embody, that is the reason the Christian faith has triumphed, even against the savage persecution of the past and can triumph over the hedonism and self-absorbed indifference of today.

Let me give you one very famous example from the past. You probably know that Constantine was the first Christian emperor of Rome, though how much of a Christian he was himself – to keep power he had most of his family murdered! – is another matter.

His nephew, Julian, became emperor after him, and though he was raised in a Christian family, his education was steeped in Greek philosophy and the writings of Aristotle and Plato on the subject of the virtuous life. When he became emperor, therefore, he announced that he was a follower of "Hellenism," the old Greek religion of Zeus and Athena and innumerable other deities and he set about trying to stamp out Christianity. But it was far too late. Christianity would not go away.

What made the Church so successful among the masses? He asked himself. It couldn't be Christian doctrine, he thought, for he was sure that his own philosophical arguments had disproved Christianity conclusively. So it had to be the way Christians actually lived their lives.

Consequently, in his capacity as "pope" of the new paganism, Julian wrote a letter to his head priest in Galatia, ordering him to make sure that the pagan priests acted more like Christians. Julian was very specific: "Christians have charity, and we don't, and we need to imitate them if we're going to compete."^{viii} And the final nonsensical evidence for this was famously expressed when he noted that the Christians he encountered didn't just relieve their own poor, they "relieve ours as well."

Thus Julian failed. He was killed in battle, and an old story says that, as he fell from his horse, his last words were "You win, Galilean."

And centuries later, another Julian, the one we began with, wrote this at the end of her book and as a summing up of all that she had learned from looking on the passion of Christ:

“Love was his meaning.”^{ix} The whole meaning of the Christian life and the Christian response and the Christian vocation summed up in a single word.

But love isn't easy. It doesn't always come naturally, and if even loving those who are close to us is hard, how much harder to follow the way of Christ and love your enemy, and offer those who smite you the other cheek, and share your possession and your wealth, and walk the second mile of love. But in Jesus we see what perfect love looks like, the love that lays down its life for its friends. And in the gospels Jesus says that if you want to be his follower you must take up your cross.^x



So I have two final gifts. The first is quite an obvious one: a holding cross, though I hope you will go on giving and receiving these crosses in your parish at baptisms and confirmations and at other times when we can invite people to follow Christ, for the cross is the badge and mark of Christian discipleship, the sign that is made on us at our baptism and confirmation, the banner under which we march, the only thing we have that is really worth sharing and that which we hold onto as Christ, in his dying, holds onto us. As Julian of Norwich put it: “He has restored us by his passion.”^{xi}

The second is less obvious. I have a shoe and a pebble. And though I can't give you all a hazelnut (though I did try to source them for this evening) I can give you all a pebble as you leave; and I invite you to put the pebble in your shoe and walk home with it this evening. It will be uncomfortable, but it won't stop you walking. Hopefully, it might remind you both of your vocation to follow Christ, and that following Christ isn't easy. We return to Romans



12. We are called to live a different life, a life marked by “mutual affection and perseverance in prayer”,^{xii} by readiness to forgive. “If your enemy is hungry, give him something to eat.”^{xiii} Love one another, “for love is the fulfilling of the law.”^{xiv} And if your step is a little more painful than usual, remember the way of suffering that Christ walked for you.

ⁱ Romans 12. 9

ⁱⁱ Julian of Norwich, *Revelations of Divine Love*, Tr. Clifton Walters, Penguin Classics, 1966, Pg. 68

ⁱⁱⁱ *The Epistle to Diognetus*, Manchester University Press, 1949, Pg. 79-81

^{iv} See Colossians 3. 3

^v See Acts 9.2; 18.25; 24.14.

^{vi} 1 Corinthians 12. 4

^{vii} John 13. 34-35

^{viii} Julian, quoted in Victor Duruy, *History of Rome and the Roman People* (Boston: Dana Estes and Charles E. Lauriat, 1887), volume VIII, p. 175.

^{ix} Julian of Norwich, *Revelations of Divine Love*, Tr. Clifton Walters, Penguin Classics, 1966, Pg. 211

^x Luke 9. 23

^{xi} Julian of Norwich, *Revelations of Divine Love*, Tr. Clifton Walters, Penguin Classics, 1966, Pg. 69

^{xii} Romans 12. 10 & 12

^{xiii} Romans 12. 20

^{xiv} Romans 13. 10