

FAREWELL SERMON – delivered by Revd David Lewis

Sunday 18 Feb 2018

MARK 1 v 9-15

6pm East Cowton

“TIME TO SAY GOODBYE”

“A” REFLECTIONS

(1) Well..... obviously this is the Final service I shall take around here. It's lovely that so many of you have come along for this occasion. I feel it's almost like I've got the privilege of preaching at my own funeral.

(2) Mind you – the way things are going – before long the clergy will have to organised their own funerals....there's so few of us left!

(3) It said in the reading from Mark's gospel...."The Spirit drove him out into the wilderness". Tonight I'm bound to reflect a little on my time here. If I ever get to write my autobiography there'll probably be a chapter on the years 2004 to 2014....with a title 'The East Richmond Team' – brackets – 'The Wilderness Years'.

(4) Looking back, when I arrived here, in 2004, I can say now that I was still quite 'young' then. I was healthy, I was pretty fit, maybe I was even enthusiastic.

(5) 14 years later..... obviously I'm a bit older and slower. During my time here I've been diagnosed with an underactive thyroid gland. I've had a triple bypass operation. I've had a stent inserted into an artery, somewhere. Tomorrow morning at 10.55am, a doctor is supposed to phone me with the results of a scan on my shoulder....which has some kind of long term injury. So....I arrived here young and healthy. I depart in a state of frailty....bordering on decrepit.

(6) What else has happened during the last 14 years? Well....I have taken some funerals. I believe the one I took here on Friday was exactly the 200th I've done in those 14 years. If my records are accurate I've also baptised c196 people. Weddings....goodness knows..... quite a lot! And I know I have been into Great Smeaton School to talk at Assembly well over 100 times.... with a similar number of talks at the school here in East Cowton.

(7) These sorts of numbers are a bit of fun.....actually, they mean nothing, to me. What matters, I reckon, is that every one of those baptisms, weddings, funerals, school talks, confirmation classes, Bible studies was an individual event in its own right.... a unique and unrepeatable event..."a sacrament of the present moment". And each of those occasions....every one of them....has been a privilege. A privilege for me, to be able to take part in them.

(8) The great thing about ministering in the Church of England, as I see it, is that it does grant you access to people's lives at significant moments. And that is a great privilege.

(9) And so, in these brief reflections on my time here, I would like to say 'thank you'....thank you to all of you...for accepting me into your communities and sharing something of your lives with me over these recent years.

(10) I would also like to say 'thank you' to all of you who have been clergy colleagues, Readers, churchwardens, members of PCCs, organists...and so on. I have decided I will not name any names...because as soon as you mention one name you've got to mention the next, and so on. We would be here all night, and at the end of it someone would be upset that they'd been left off the list! So we'll avoid going down that road. But you know who you are...so 'thank you, all of you'.

(11) I am going to miss countless people in the churches and villages around here. And I am sorry to be leaving North Yorkshire – it has been a wonderful part of the country to live in in so many ways. I shall miss it. And for that matter I shall miss Northallerton...especially Betty's Tea Rooms and the Lewis & Cooper Tea Rooms and the various other cafes and tea rooms... which I suppose tells us where a large part of those 14 years has gone!

(B) MOVING ON:

(1) So...'the Spirit drove him out into the wilderness'. Or, in my case, drives me out to Worcestershire.

(2) Obviously I am hoping that it will go well down there. As I am now 57 I know that it's going to be my final post. As one of my brothers said 'It would be good if it could be a sort of Indian summer.... if you could finish on a high at the end of your chequered career in the Church'.

(3) So far the signs look good. In my contacts with people down there....the bishop, the archdeacon, future colleagues, churchwardens....so far I've encountered nothing but warmth, friendliness and commonsense decency.

(4) The parishioners in Worcestershire seem quite excited at the prospect of a new vicar arriving. Of course, from their point of view, it means the end of a 'vacancy' and no doubt they've got a sense of relief about that.

(5) A few weeks ago they asked me to introduce myself by writing an article and sending a photo....for their equivalent of the Anvil magazine or the Cowtons News. Of course I am conscious that the wealthy widows or divorcees of Worcestershire probably represent my final chance of securing a comfortable retirement for myself. So I wrote a nice article about myself and sent it off with a picture of George Clooney...

(6) But more seriously, what are my hopes for the new job? Two things really....based on the commandment of Christ to 'LOVE GOD AND LOVE YOUR NEIGHBOUR AS YOURSELF'.

Loving God: For me, it all starts and ends with prayer. That's really what it's all about, because prayer means us being with God. (That may be simplification, but in essence it's true....prayer and us being with God...talking to Him, listening to Him, being with Him).

I'd like my new house to become a powerhouse of prayer, if that's not too ambitious. I hope to be a regular visitor to Mucknell Abbey, an Anglican Benedictine monastery just outside Worcester.... I have stayed there six or seven

times and feel at home there, so I want to feed off that. I want to encourage the prayer-life in the churches, and build up the Taize-style worship. So that's loving God.

Loving neighbour: Then there's love of neighbour...which means loving people... and you do that by having a genuine interest in them and respecting them.

Moving house is a dreadful business. I've spent the last 5 or 6 weeks packing (on and off) and the last 3 weeks sifting through office/study from which I've worked these last 14 years. The amount of paper, pamphlets, magazines etc was beyond belief. Lots of it I shredded. Some of it has been burned. I hired a skip and filled half of it with paper. Minutes of meetings, reports, correspondence, most of it years old; stuff that possibly seemed important at the time, but means nothing now. A paper recycling plant or a landfill site is the best place for it.

(7) Of course I know that some paper is inevitable. An organisation has to be organised. But what matters is building real relationships with real people, and trying to care for them. That's what might achieve something for the Kingdom of God: the rest of the bureaucracy is pretty much rubbish.

Loving people is what people remember. It really is all about 'LOVING GOD, AND LOVING YOUR NEIGHBOUR AS YOURSELF'.

(C) CHURCH

(1) And, finally, what about the Church? What about its future?

(2) At the moment, there's a film out called 'Darkest Hour'.... all about Churchill and darkest days and Second World War....sounds like it's very good. ... and I'd like to see it at some stage.

On any realistic assessment, you have to say that there are dark days for the churches around here.... it's clear that difficult times lie ahead. Everybody who is involved in the life of these churches is aware of that.

(3) But one thing, of which I have no doubt, is that the Church (in a general sense, with a capital C) will survive and continue.

It will continue because it is the Body of Christ on earth, and because 'Christ is Risen'.

He was raised from the tomb on that first East Sunday, and He is not going back into the tomb again.

So His body, which is now that living, breathing, organic fellowship of Christians, will continue.

(4) Regardless of what happens to any single church in the villages around here, the Church (capital C) will survive.

Quite what form it will take... who knows? My guess is that 20 years from now (maybe 10 years from now) the Church will look different from the one with which we are familiar. The changes may not be to our particular taste. But if the Lord is doing a new thing – we need to be open to it.

(D) CONCLUSION:

(1) This afternoon, I did my last session with our current Confirmation Class....here in the church annexe. And I showed them the finale of the film 'The Miracle Maker', which is an animation telling the story of the life of Jesus, with the emphasis very much on the events at the end of his life. Fully half of the film focuses on his final journey to Jerusalem, Palm Sunday and Holy Week, the betrayal and trial, the Cross and the Resurrection.

(2) It's a journey which, liturgically-speaking, the Church has embarked upon with Ash Wednesday this last week, for we are now in Lent.

A journey, which we can embark upon in our imaginations, carrying us forward through Lent to Jerusalem and the momentous events of that special week 2,000 years ago.

(3) I've been told I'm good at leading the Confirmation Classes. I don't know about that: you'd have to ask the youngsters themselves what they think!

But if I am any good at it, I'm good at it because that story of Jesus' last week in Jerusalem has never lost its magic for me.

On the contrary, every year the story gets better.

(4) For the last 14 years, every time we've gone through the season of Lent, I've become more convinced than before that this is the greatest story ever told.

Every year, I feel I see new depths and more detail in it. And if that story is true: the story of Jesus going to Jerusalem to sacrifice himself for us, dying on the cross and then being raised to new life: if that story is true, it changes everything.

If it is true that Jesus is God, and He died for us, it must change the way we see everything.... and no sacrifice we make for Him can ever be too great.

(5) So – the Church (with capital C) will survive.... it will continue... it will grow, because He is Risen!

(6) For the local churches, in Yorkshire or Worcestershire, there may well be dark days. But we fight on....striving to know Christ and to make Him known in these villages.

I'll close by quoting some poetry from Alfred, Lord Tennyson: it may be a bit dated and hackneyed, but it expresses something of what I've been saying:

“though much is taken, much remains,

and though we are not now that strength which in old days

moved earth and heaven,

that which we are, we are:

one equal temper of heroic hearts,

made weak by time and fate, but strong in will,

to strive, to seek, to find, and not to yield.

AMEN