

Psalm 74, 1 Kings 22:29-45, John 12:27-36a

Oh Lord who calls us to walk in obedience and light with you, open our hearts and minds, that in reflecting on your word, your voice may stir us to a more faithful walk. Amen.

First of all may I express my thanks to Bishop George Sumner for permission to preach in his diocese and the invitation to be here today; to Bishop Michael Curry for permission to preach in his province; and to Bishop Anthony for permission to preach in his church [laughter]; and to you for listening for a few minutes [laughter]. It is a huge privilege to be here at this conference.

The role of ordained ministers, whichever the Church, is to ensure that all for whom they are responsible are walking in the light of Christ, in their freedom as children of light. Through Christ there is salvation. In him there is life. With him there is light. From him there is wisdom.

Unless that light is shining freely and unhindered, the call of the Church to the world is vitiated. Unless its minister lead its people faithfully, there will be confusion within as well as without.

The metaphor of light and children of light makes no sense when we divide. God's light is one light; the children of light of whom Jesus speaks are children of one light.

Let me be clear, although as Anglicans we are already in a Church divided globally since the Great Schism, and far more so since the Reformation (and my goodness, as Protestants we're good at doing that), we are called in everything we do to be together, despite all the difficulties involved: to be together in an often painful living out of what it means collectively to be children of light.

We are called to be children of light, yet we live in a world of puzzlement and confusion. Like switching on the main beam of your car headlights in fog, all you see is reflection without illumination.

The nature of ordained ministry is to seek to ensure that the Church shines a light that illuminates – and yet to find oneself doing that in a confusing world, where options and choices often have the appearance of equal validity.

There are all sorts of themes that can be drawn from the passages that we have heard. If we go to the Old Testament lesson, Jehoshaphat is operating in a fog of confusion. The Old Testament reading is the final part of the fabulous story of Micaiah Ben Imlah – whom Ahab, King of Israel (a bad king) complained only prophesies bad things about him.

The story is one of politics, manoeuvres and disasters. The puzzlement is about Jehoshaphat. Why did he get into such a mess? How did he get into an alliance with Ahab? He was meant to be a good king and yet was alongside the most glaring examples of bad Kings of Israel. He was a good man keeping bad company.

And he had been warned. In the previous scene it was he who said, "Are there any prophets here who speak the truth?" So Micaiah turns up and he's told by the soldiers bringing him, "Look, just tone it down for a change. The King's not going to be happy." He doesn't, and the King wasn't happy.

The theology remains consistently Deuteronomic, of course, to say that Jehoshaphat was okay, but he did not clear things up properly and thus there was a flaw.

But the passage is left open in its meaning. We all know Ahab was bad, and he received the fate prophesied about him. We can make a realpolitik argument that Ahab's Israel was the regional superpower and Jehoshaphat was essentially a vassal King.

Yet what is clear is that he was uneasy, uncertain, and could not see a way out. How was he to live in the reality of daily decisions? It is in the reality of daily decisions that ministry takes place.

The Psalmist sends a psalm of lament and protest with a plaintive note, not of faith but of puzzlement. Faith in that he still addresses God, but he says, "Do not forget the clamour of your foes, the uproar of your adversaries that goes up continually."

The experience of church and life is often of seeing our expectations not met. The Psalmist speaks not out of disappointment but out of catastrophe. Jerusalem has gone, the enemy is everywhere triumphant.

There are moments when we may look at the Church and want to join in the lament. How did we get here? How do we have a Church divided, numbers of faithful declining across the western world?

Our response – the call of what, in the title of your conference, you rightly call 'the ancient order' – [our] vocation is to point to the utterly compelling and transforming life of Jesus Christ. That light shines as a steady light of hope, and a steady call for his whole Church to trust, to put aside the longing for power, and to be transformed.

The passage starts with Jesus' declaration that this is a decisive moment. He needs nothing, but in perfect transparency speaks of being troubled – yet only so those around him who are willing to hear may know the truth. They are to be transformed, the world is to be transformed.

With him there is no confusion, whatever the state of the world. He is to be raised up and on a cross find triumph; the great surprise of John's gospel. His light burns up the fogs and dispels the darkness – and we are called to be children of that light. We are called to be children of that light.

Transformation is the divine response to confusion. Enabling transformation is the divine vocation of the ancient order. The vocation of the minister is transformation of all they meet, people and places. Not by their own strength but by bringing them face to face with Jesus Christ. The vocation of the church is the transformation of the world in the power of the Spirit.

We should be the true radicals, the extremists of love, the subversive underminers of inertia, those that turn the whole world upside down.

In this strange role I have, a few years ago I was talking to a senior politician about extremism – as one does.

“What is it with your bishops about our policy on extremism?”, the politician said.

“What do you mean by extremism?”, I replied.

“An extremist is someone who puts their faith before their country,” they said.

I hope everyone in this place is an extremist. [Applause]

And I said to the politician, “I’m afraid you’re talking to one.”

That is the history of the Church at its best – transformation.

That is the radicality of the vocation. For to be a child of light in a dark world, and above all to lead the children of light, will require a firm decision and a walk of ever-growing closeness to Jesus who calls us.

Even as I say those words, I think of my own walk, and I think how much I need continually to reflect on that call.

To be a child of light is to lose our fear of the muddle and mess both of world and church. There is a mess. Fear drives much of our divisions and many of our scandalous arguments. Out of fear we want tidiness and clarity, and that will not happen before the return of Christ. Tidy churches are dangerous churches.

As children of light, following the pattern of Jesus, caught up by his transforming love, we know that those who are disciples will be opposed and that the good news of Jesus will be rejected by many.

To be a child of light is to step into a new world in which we see ourselves as we are – because we’re in the light – and we see the world as it is, in the way that Jesus did. It does not make us naïve or credulous, for Jesus was neither of those things, and withheld himself from some, knowing their hearts. It means that we know that despite our sin we are forgiven.

Who here has come mourning their sins?

Perhaps, who has come here *not* mourning their sins? Then you really shouldn’t be here.

Who here has come mourning their sins in everything from sex to money to power, to anything else you can think of?

Who here wishes they thirsted for Christ, desired Christ, rather than too often finding themselves desiring pleasure, rest and comfort?

Who here mourns the sins of the church, of which we are a part?

I remember shortly after I became Archbishop, sitting at breakfast, looking at some news in a Church paper and muttering to myself, "They really ought to *do* something about it." [Laughter.] And one of our children saying, "They? That would be you then, dad." [Laughter]

As children of light we know that we are sinners. But we know also as we look at ourselves in the light of Christ, that we are washed, and we rejoice – not for ease of forgiveness, but in awe at the cost of it and that we should be its recipients.

That sense of forgiveness, of grace, must capture us and lift us into different ways of dealing with our differences, with our diversity. For we begin with knowing that we have been transformed, not through ourselves but through the grace of God.

I'm so grateful for this conference, and I'm so grateful for the Communion Partners and Gracious Restraint Churches – because you have continued to be fully part of our wounded Communion, with its many struggles, over serious matters. But your full communion with Canterbury is a model for all of recognising that we are one by vocation not by choice; that we belong to one another because of God's sovereign and gracious action, not because we choose to be one.

Radical vocation lives out the tensions of diversity and identity based in the reality that our identity is in Christ – not in what we make of ourselves or think of others – and in Christ we live in complexity, but as children of light.

As children of light we know that the world is broken, and that the church always and everywhere is full of sinners; but also that the darkness cannot overcome the light we bear, nor indeed the Church that holds it.

That is the heart of the ancient order: God-given unity. The promise of cleansing. The offer of absolution. The experience shared of new creation. The confident expectation of all being made right.

Yet fear has so often led our knowledge of the light to become self-hatred and anger – and our anxiety about the world to lead us to the exercise of power and clericalism.

The ancient order is the steady work of ensuring that light shines clearly in a confusing world and enabling the Church to navigate those complexities. Like the Psalmist it leads us to encourage prayer that is ferociously honest with God – yet now we end all prayers, aloud or silently, with the words "Yet Christ is risen."

The radicality of the vocation comes because we follow Jesus – the risen Jesus Christ, the revolutionary Jesus Christ. We do not just shine a light into the darkness: we confront the darkness at every point. And that causes trouble, as I have found out. [Laughter]

The ancient order remains, the heart of the Church, but it needs to rediscover how to proclaim the gospel afresh in each new generation – in the words we use at the installation of every clergyperson in the Church of England.

To do so the ancient order must be filled again with the radical excitement of following Jesus. I hope the Presiding Bishop agrees with me. He certainly seemed to in May... [Laughter]

Like a planetary probe turning so that its solar cells face the sun, Jesus' coming in history turned history smoothly and perfectly to face a new light for its energy.

The children of light take holiness as utterly essential. Yet being children of light, they see themselves and are gentle with sinners. They see the world as it is, illuminated by the light they have, and they take the light into the darkest of places.

They disagree, but they see each other as children of light and do not hate. They minister forgiveness and inspire mercy, yet they do not offer cheap grace. Above all their hearts desire God and they yearn for more of Jesus.

The world rarely sees such radical vocation in the ancient order. It does not more than rarely see the rationale of discipleship illuminated by the shining purity of its ministers. It hears judgement, not hope through repentance. That must change.

At Lambeth Palace we have a small religious community, the Community of St Anselm. I think are some alumni here today. Centred round a permanent community – a Roman Catholic one of ecumenical vocation – young adults come to spend 10 months living together drawing on the great traditions of Benedict, Francis and Ignatius. Meditation and studying with the word. Serving the poor. Self-examination and retreat.

The Community of St Anselm seeks to establish in them a profound radicality through work and prayer. Through self-reflection. Through service with the poor. Through the painful process of sharing in community with those who are deeply different in nationality, worldview, church, life experience and character. It is in micro what we pray for in macro for the Anglican Communion – even more so for the universal Church of God.

To be caught up in such a radical and ancient vocation will have one more privilege – that of suffering. Jesus speaks of that. It will be rejected.

The world does not want transformation. People feel no need of rebirth if that means that they must release their hold on their politics, their worldview, their aspirations, and take hold of what Christ gives.

That then is our task. To inspire the forsaking of all things to gain heaven. To offer the possibility that the cacophony of this world's sorrows and sins might be replaced by the harmonies of hope of life. It will cost all. It is the greatest and most eternal adventure that is. Enter it and you will suffer, you will struggle and will wonder. Yet you will be held by the everlasting arms, and the eternal God will be your refuge.

You will be transformed, and as that happens by the grace of God, we together – people of God, the whole people of God – will transform the world round. Not through power and persuasion, but as children of light, through the light of Jesus.

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