

Sermon preached by the Revd Canon Hilary Barber, Vicar of Halifax Minster.

Sunday 30th August 2015

It's wonderful to be here in this Cathedral church, as pilgrims from one Benedictine foundation to another. Brecon Cathedral was built around 1093 as a Benedictine Priory by the Normans on the site of an earlier Celtic Church, and became the Cathedral Church in 1923.

Halifax Parish Church dates back to 1078, when the Earl of Warenne, lord of the manor of Wakefield, gave the sub manor of Halifax cum Heptonstall to the Benedictine Priory of Lewes, and we believe that the black robed Cluniac monks constructed a new church at Halifax by the early twelfth century. The ancient Parish church, now some 900 years old, was re dedicated the Minster Church of St John the Baptist following the economic crash in 2009, as the town and Borough of Calderdale reclaimed its Christian heritage and identity.

Like this Cathedral church, we try to follow a Benedictine pattern of daily worship, study of holy texts and scriptures, and manual labour, or rather the management of our estate, and our mission to the town, the borough, and our international ministry to the people of Aachen in Germany, twined with Halifax for over 65 years, and our new relationship with Kowack Cathedral in northern Tanzania, with whom we work as mission partners.

Daily worship is the back bone to all that we do: Morning Prayer, daily Eucharist, the Evening Office, it not only structures the day, it's what makes us different from any other place of heritage, the place is soaked in prayer, every chapel is hallowed. Visitors and pilgrims cannot leave the building without experiencing something of God's presence, be it through culture, education, or civic engagement.

Monthly Lectio Divina, Lent Groups, and preparation for the annual Initiation Service, provides time and opportunity to study Holy Scripture, and other texts which act as windows onto God. Benedict's Rule would have us take study seriously, hence the importance of Education in these sacred places, providing a value added curriculum to those delivering the national curriculum, or a platform for public theology.

Managing our estate sounds desperately dry, and there are times when managing a Grade 1 Listed building is tortuous, with the heritage sector regarding these buildings as museums, rather than mission stations. Cathedrals and Minsters not only provide daily worship and space for education, but also a place of hospitality, welcoming thousands of pilgrims and visitors each year, not only to experience the heritage and holiness of these great places, but also the gathering space for the whole Diocese and a unique space for civic events across the County and region. On the one hand the Benedictine community provides a place of quietness and reflection, yet at the same time, these are places where people meet together and things happen, we might call it *spiritual capital*.

Mark in his Gospel, and in the Letter of James, reminds the worshipping community and the reader, of the hypocrisy of some of the believers. How easy it is for us to be wedded to the law which Jesus came to renew. The Pharisees were renowned for their piety, and in meeting with Jesus, were more concerned with the food laws and ritual, than with the needs of human suffering, which was the concern for Jesus.

James exhorts the community to be *doers of the word, and not merely hearers who deceive themselves*. It can be so easy for the Church to pontificate on numerous subjects, but unless she rolls her sleeves up and demonstrates the good news of Jesus gospel, then those on the outside will accuse us of hypocrisy and hollow words. The Church cannot be prophetic if it doesn't fully engage with a vulnerable and lost world. The culture of austerity, driving the ideology of a reduced welfare state and public sector, not only takes us back to old abandoned Victorian communities of poverty and oppression, but relies once again on the Church and the Third Sector to provide the necessarily net, to catch those who are unable to help themselves, and those who are powerless to improve their own lives and well being.

Mark recalls Jesus speaking to the Pharisees and the scribes about what defiles a person: *whatever goes into a person from outside cannot defile a person, since it enters not the heart, but the stomach, and goes out into the sewer. It is what comes out of a person that defiles. For it is from within, from the human heart, that evil intentions come*. Here we begin to recognise the vulnerability of the human condition, perhaps even taking us back to the first fall and the ability for us to temptation, and play at being God. Jesus lists some of the things which defile a person, leaving humanity broken and damaged. The Christian community, indeed all faith communities are not immune from this state of being. One only has to look at the effects of extreme fundamentalist religious groups, who use the name of religion to justify their behaviour and their actions, often maiming others for life, if not causing death and hatred between peoples and communities.

The Church therefore as well as being a place vulnerable to defilement, simply because the church is made up of people, and people bring their vulnerabilities with them, also has to be a place where healing and restoration can be found. None more so than in places with a Benedictine spirituality, where the Rule of Benedict requires us to seek the vow of *conversatio morum* – the conversion of Life. The spiritual journey is all about being open to change, to being transformed by the power of the spirit which we invite to work within us, to seek not our will but the will of one who calls us to follow him, whatever that might mean. Bonhoeffer wrote that when Christ calls some to follow him, he bids them come and die. Dying from the old order, dying from trying to control our own lives and driven by our own passions, rather than seeking the will of God. Esther De Wall, suggests that for the community it involves *not only death at the end of the journey, but the lesser deaths in life, the dying to live, the loss which will bring new growth*.

Here in the liturgy of the Eucharist, the president will take the bread, and having blessed it, will then break the bread, identifying with the broken body of Jesus with the whole of broken humanity, and then in a wonderful and mysterious way, Jesus uses this as an agent for healing and wholeness, as the gathered community feeds on Christ, and shares in his death and resurrection. Today we come with hands out stretched to receive the broken bread and to have our lives restored. At the end of the liturgy, we are sent out to bring healing and wholeness to a troubled world, to all those with whom we share our lives, and have our being.

I finish with words of hymnody, which I find so influences and shapes our theology:

Charles Wesley and Love Divine, it picks up on the theme of the Christian community being changed, and the earthly journey towards that eternal city;

*Finish then thy new creation,
Pure and spotless let us be;
Let us see thy great salvation
Perfectly restored in thee.
Changed from glory into glory,
Till in heav'n we take our place,
Till we cast our crowns before thee,
Lost in wonder, love and praise.*