

SERMON FOR MIDNIGHT MASS 2019 | 24.12.2019

Isaiah 52: 7-10; Hebrews 1: 25-29; St John 1: 1-14

You'd have thought that a dog collar was a fairly recognisable sign of the job that some of us do! It does bring a few reactions – the odd smile in the street on a rainy day, the offer of a seat on the Tube and a discount for the Church Christmas tree. But increasingly it means less and less. The person delivering groceries to the house, still asked me if I was going away at Christmas and someone else asked what the letters Rev meant on my credit card. My older daughter has toyed with the idea of borrowing one of my dog collar shirts and walking down the street to see what the reaction would be. I suspect less than she imagines.

And the same is largely true of this building which we now keep open each day. Those who come as visitors think nothing of sticking half-drunk coffee cups or bottles of water onto the altar or using their mobile phones during services. The signs and symbols that many of us take for granted – along with the idea of special places or even special clothes – are simply not part of their experience. They don't mean to be disrespectful; they just don't know what these things mean or why they matter.

Which is exactly what St John was talking about in tonight's famous slice of his Gospel. Talking about Jesus he says: *He came into the world – the world that he had made - yet the world did not know him.* Of course it didn't! How could the world have the first clue what God was up to by sending a small baby into a borrowed stable in the middle of a busy census - in a city already under the thumb of an occupying army? Obviously people had other things on their minds.

Like we have. I guess 2019 has been 'one of those years' – not just because of the Election (though that was demanding enough) but because of so many other things: the slow growth rate, store closures, climate change, various technical and natural disasters, people working longer hours – you name it, we've seen it in 2019.

So to expect that those with little or no religious background would suddenly recognize a dog collar and say: *hey, I want to know more about God and I think I'll go to Church* is about as likely as, say, Jeremy Corbyn smiling at Boris Johnson during the Queen's speech at the opening of Parliament!

This last week the announcement was made that Stephen Cottrell is going to be the next Archbishop of York. In the press there was a limited amount of interest about a) why he wanted the job and b) what he thought the job meant.

And his first comment was this: *The really important thing is to get ourselves back on the front foot, sharing the Gospel message joyfully and effectively.*

For quite a lot of people the most obviously way of doing that would be through mass action for the poor in our society. And to be fair, year on year, Christians are doing remarkable work in setting up food banks and emergency shelters. They are on the front line when disasters occur - as they were at the fire at Grenfell or in the recent floods. They campaign tirelessly for all kinds of charities; the Church has an amazing track record for caring.

But they are hardly unique in that. People of every faith – and people of no faith at all – are doing equally good work. So being a good neighbour or doing first-class charity work is not what defines Christians.

So what does? What Bishop Stephen did, in his first press statements after the announcement, was to take a different tack altogether. *What I am hoping for is that people fall in love with the Christian faith. Our task is to help people to meet with Jesus Christ and to find, as I did, that he is amazing, magnetic and life-changing. Being with Jesus is like falling in love. I want people to discover that Jesus' vision just makes everything else so much better... If it is to be any use religion has to be loving, beautiful - and real. The rest is just a distraction for people who are in danger of taking life – and themselves – far too seriously!*

St John uses different words but the fundamentals are the same. John talks about light – endlessly: *Jesus is the true light that enlightens ... everyone.*

But in any number of different ways. The difficulty with this body which we call the Church is that it is trying to respond to the questions and the scepticism - of such a wide spectrum of people.

The Church isn't like a football club or a political party where there is at least one common factor that keeps everyone going in the same direction. The Church willingly embraces the mad and the bad, the brilliant and the slow, the rich and the poor – and every interest group known to humanity. Absolutely inevitably it is going to argue about all the big debates of our day from support for the developing world to equal rights in marriage and the care for the planet: and we will disagree in heaps because while we are one family we are still very different kinds of people.

But there is something real and wholesome about that. Because if we are caught up in the love of God, if we are given *power to become children of God, the people who have seen his glory*, as St John's describes, then, as in all truly loving relationships, we can cope with all the differences of opinion there ever was.

And it is something the world needs to see: how to disagree and yet not fall out. As Bishop Stephen says: if we can share our ideas with conviction and integrity, if we can share our good fortune with those who are much less well off than we are, then there is a real chance that a new generation will start to take an interest in the bits of our faith that seem so foreign - altars, dog collars and even some silence in Church.

It would so easy to water down our faith down to Christians juts being nice people who do good things. But that isn't Christianity. Christianity is about a group of very ordinary people like you and me discovering that only when we learn to completely rely on him that we are of any use to anybody.

And that takes confidence and it takes energy and, most of all a commitment to get rid of that tired, cynical resignation that everything is going pear shaped.

The truth is that people have always said the Church is going to the dogs. The good news, as St John says, is that the darkness has always tried to snuff us out – and has never succeeded!

Tonight we are not just celebrating a very special birthday, the arrival of Jesus. What draws us back to Midnight Mass year on year is that overwhelming sense that when we are willing to spend time with God - in places like this - extraordinary things start to happen. And we gradually find ourselves becoming genuinely happier.

I don't envy the new Archbishop and the task ahead of him one little bit. Being in the public eye all the time is no fun. But what he is trying to do is to highlight what each of us is called to do: to learn to trust God and let him make things better.

And you don't need a dog collar to show people that.