Bishop Michael’s sermon

Chrism Service, Wells Cathedral on 4 April 2023

In my middlish twenties, I had the immense privilege of living in a small town on the coast of Tanzania in East Africa. Back then, it was a pretty remote place. No internet or e-mail. Smart phones not invented. International calls with the UK eye-wateringly expensive. Our town had just one television set, found in the main hotel. Most communication happened by post, which took a long time to get through.

Getting news of what was going on in the world was challenging. Fortunately, our next door neighbours had installed an enormous radio receiver in their garden and liked to have the BBC World Service on very loudly at 7 o’clock each morning. So to get the news, first thing in the day we went out of our house, in our pyjamas, and stood in our driveway to listen.

This all sticks in my mind, because I can still recall my astonishment on hearing the news on 1 September, 1994 that the day before, the IRA had announced a complete ceasefire and that they were willing to enter into talks on the political future of Northern Ireland. Talks that eventually resulted in the signing of the Good Friday agreement whose 25th anniversary we shall mark next Monday.

If, like me, you grew up with the reality of the preceding 25 years of conflict in Ulster, this development was almost inconceivable. Division, the bitter and brutal words of the opposing sides, violence which spilled over into bombings, were an accepted and expected part of our everyday lives. The idea that this might be coming to an end was extraordinary, hard to take in.

Reconciliation, the overcoming of differences and divisions is a positive good that we all say we want. Indeed, we would say that it lies at the heart of the Gospel.

Yet the reality of achieving reconciliation presents phenomenal challenges. It’s much easier to be in the group that says ‘too difficult, not possible’. In Ireland peace was opposed by people from both sides of the Republican/ Unionist divide. Ian Paisley spoke of the peace process as ‘a dark hour of treachery’. The ceasefire itself broke down in 96 before being reinstated in 97.

If not actively opposing reconciliation, often, our reaction to living in places of division, polarity and difference can lead us to suggest that what we need is to live in safe spaces. Where our integrity can be preserved. Where good boundaries can make for good neighbours. Where our security can be assured. Where we can be safe with others of like mind to ourselves.

Yet almost all efforts at achieving reconciliation demand that those making a new reality possible have to go against the immediate interests of their own group. This is costly and difficult and immensely challenging.

I don’t know enough about the troubles to give you an analysis of what enabled this in the peace efforts of the 1990s. What I’m more interested in is how, as followers of Jesus, we can draw on his strength to make reconciliation possible in our lives and our day recognising that while it’s what we say we all want, achieving it is extraordinarily difficult. Where can we find the conviction and the resilience, the nerve and the faith to bring about the reconciliation that Jesus invites us to achieve?

The roadmap is set out in today’s Gospel. In word and action Jesus shows us what’s needed for reconciliation to take place. At this point in the narrative, Jesus is facing the prospect of betrayal, arrest, trial and execution. He’s about to go completely beyond his own interests to lay down his life so that the ultimate gain can be achieved. By his cross, sin and death and evil will be overcome, his victory won and his kingdom secured for us. But at what extraordinary cost. And in this situation, what does Jesus do and then tell those who follow him to do also? So that they can live like him? Follow his pattern? First he washes the disciples feet. Then he commands them to love. By doing these things Jesus creates and calls for not a safe space but a brave space – where new possibilities can arise, hostility be overcome, imagination of a different future made possible.

How does this happen? Let’s start with Jesus’ action, the washing of the disciples’ feet. As those of you who will re-enact this on Thursday evening will know, this is definitely a brave space to be in. What will you find when the person in front of you takes off their sock? Can you be trusted to be tender with bunions and corns? And should your ministrations press unhelpfully on any exposed nerve endings, will the outcome be a reactive response that sees their foot colliding with your mouth? Not safe at all.

Yet it’s to such a space that Jesus calls those who follow him ‘If I, your Lord and teacher, have washed your feet’, says Jesus, ‘you also ought to wash one another’s feet’.

Having demonstrated what it is to enter a brave space, Jesus then commands his followers to live in it. Now I know that we’re all devotees of ‘Love Island’ here in Bath and Wells. Well no one gets ‘commanded’ there. In our day we regard love as that to which we’re moved, that’s of the heart and the emotions, of connection. This isn’t what Jesus is talking about as he meets with his disciples on the night of his betrayal. The love of which he speaks is an act of the will. It’s not something we do because we feel like it. It’s not erotic love based in attraction. It’s not love we feel for our family or group because we’re of them.

The love to which Jesus commands us is that which disinterestedly and often sacrificially seeks the good of the other who is other.

It’s much easier said than done. That’s why Jesus makes it a directive ‘This is my commandment, that you love one another.’ Now this isn’t like being told to go over the top in the first world war. Jesus wants us to understand why it’s needed if his life is to flow throughout the world. So he tells his followers ‘By this everyone will know that you are my disciples, if you have love for one another.’ The love Jesus commands us to embody has a purpose. It’s so we can live, and be seen to live, as his disciples. So that we can be expressions of Jesus’ life and love for all the world to see and experience.

So as we gather during this week when we remember the betrayal, execution and resurrection of Jesus, I invite you not to live as those who seek after safe spaces. I ask you to forsake the echo chambers of security and separation.

In a world, in a church, that sees so much tendency to division and polarity I invite you to step into the brave space that our Saviour has trodden before us. To suspend the inclination we all have to stand in judgement of others. To perceive positive intent and to refuse to give in to mistrust and suspicion. To enter the space of risk, of denial of self-protection, where commitment is shown through disinterested action whose focus is the other, where love is experienced and lived out as much an exercise of the will and the mind as it is of the heart and the affections.

‘I give you a new commandment’, says Jesus, ‘that you should love one another. Just as I have loved you, you should also love one another. By this everyone will know that you are my disciples, if you have love for one another.’ Amen.