

## HERO, SAINT OR SERVANT (both Church and Bishop)

Well, so far so good. When I got to the great west door I was remembering Archbishop Stuart Blanche who when he got to a similar point, and was about to knock boldly on the door with his pastoral staff, whispered to his chaplain: 'Are you sure we've got the right place?'

Having established that I was indeed expected, you might be wondering 'what sort of bishop are we getting?' Two elderly women had been friends for decades. They'd travelled all over the place together but recently their main activity had been meeting weekly to play cards. One day they were doing just that when one looked at the other and said: 'Now don't get cross with me; I know we've been friends for a long time, but I just can't think of your name. I've thought and thought but it's no good. Please tell me what your name is.' Her friend glared at her. She kept it up for a good three minutes, until finally she said 'How soon do you need to know?'

I feel a bit like that. 'What kind of bishop are we getting?' How soon do you need to know?

Perhaps a better question is 'what kind of Church are we needing for today's complex society and its sophisticated citizens?' There are various models in the window, different styles of Church on display.

1. Firstly, there's *the Church as all-action hero*. A Church that identifies the problems and fixes them. A Church that swoops to the rescue whenever there's a need, and keeps well clear of ecclesiastical kryptonite. The Episcopal model here is 'Bishop as Superman' – slayer of heresy, scourge of injustice, rippling with theological muscle.

Well – sorry. That's not the Church of Jesus Christ. Heroes have a very limited shelf-life, after all. They last as long as the latest fashion. We've all played the game with TV and sports celebrities called 'I wonder whatever happened to...' Heroes don't last long. The Church of God on the other hand, isn't in the market for short-term celebrity. Any faith which has a crucified figure at its heart isn't looking for easy popularity or offering a 'seven-step programme to success.' Church history is littered with failure, which is what you'd expect in a world where evil doesn't play by the rules - by definition.

The Church is concerned, then, not about heroic status, but about the long term, and often unspectacular transformation of human lives and social contexts. It bears witness to the unsettling, unmanageable, unrestrained presence of God just beneath the surface of things, all things. It lives with - and sometimes names - the slow, steady undertow of grace that many people experience and aren't quite sure what to do with. This isn't the Church as hero; it's the Church as sign, as interpreter, as quiet witness.

2. Here's a second model in the window. *The Church as saint*. This is the Church as a place of unvariegated goodness, a place of sanctity and peace, 'the milk of human kindness by the quart in every vein,' every bishop's fantasy. In this model the bishop is 'super-saint' – even if he harbours an irrational urge to support Chelsea or watch the last episodes of Neighbours. (These aren't sins by the way; they're just mistakes).

Someone once defined a saint as 'a person who lived a long time ago - and has never been adequately researched.' Quite possibly. Because we know the reality – the Church is us, not very saintly, not always exemplary, but doing our best to hold things together in our scattered existence. Same with this bishop – not very saintly, not always exemplary and sometimes exposed by those closest to him. When one of our daughters was very small she was arguing hotly with us that we didn't love her. We couldn't love her because we didn't appear to be doing as she wanted. We

assured her we loved her completely but it wasn't good enough. She turned to me and said: 'Anyway, you shouldn't lie; you're a man of God!'

The 'Church as saint' doesn't wash. We too get trapped in a prison of small things and spend too much time shadow boxing and trying to hit ourselves on the nose. But at the same time, the Church is one of the best places to bump into a saint or two – people who have a magnetic holiness, an earthy sanctity, people who have been 'dipped in God and new-created' as D.H. Lawrence put it. These are some of the loveliest, most rounded and humane people I've ever met, and I know there will many of them in this diocese too. It's true also of course that one of the New Testament words for Christians – *hagioi* – means that we are all saints, by virtue of belonging to Christ. Alleluia! But too often we don't display the sainthood the world expects. Too often we fail to be Christlike.

Church as hero; Church as saint – neither are accurate descriptions of the Church we have or, really, the Church we need.

3. So here's a third model in the window. *Church as servant*. The diocese of Oxford has done a lot of work on this model. 400 clergy have been through the Developing Servant Leadership programme and it's excellent. In the NT reading we heard St Paul writing to that boisterous church in Corinth: 'We do not proclaim ourselves; we proclaim Jesus Christ as Lord and ourselves as your servants, for Jesus' sake.' Now here we're on to something. The Church is one of the few places in our society not committed to self-aggrandisement. We live in a very narcissistic culture where it's accepted as normal that we should be constantly absorbed by our appearance, where looking like Johnny Depp or Keira Knightly is a social necessity; and where 15 minutes of fame and abuse on Big Brother is seen by many as their highest aspiration. You've seen all the celebrity magazines, I'm sure – Hello, OK, Closer, Heat and all the rest. I'm amazed that the Beckhams have that many interesting things to say about their lives (perhaps they don't...) I just want David Beckham to keep those crosses coming over into the goalmouth.

But in this kind of culture it's quite liberating when a huge body of people actually have as their distinctive characteristic that they point away from themselves and towards Another. The Church is always pointing to Jesus Christ. Jesus is the Church's magnificent obsession, the Holy One who got it right, time after time, and who we long to emulate. He is what we're about as a Church. We proclaim Jesus Christ as Lord. And to those of other faiths I say, with Archbishop Sentamu: 'I greet you in the name of Jesus Christ, who to you is a prophet and to me is a Saviour.' We meet most happily with the strengths and joys of our various faith traditions around us. Let's explore further.

But Paul says not only that we proclaim Jesus Christ as Lord, but that 'we proclaim ourselves as your servants, for Jesus' sake'. And this is where the rubber hits the tarmac. How can the Church do that satisfactorily in today's contested public space? How can we serve with humility and strength? How can we be servants without being servile? How can we love robustly without being a soft touch?

There's a fable about a woman who was delighted to discover a new shop in the High St which said it sold Anything You've Ever Wanted. She was even more surprised to discover an Angel behind the counter. He was dressed in jeans and a T shirt that said 'The fringe benefits are out of this world', but he was an angel nonetheless. He asked what she'd like from the range of Anything You've Ever Wanted, and she began to list them. Good health, enough money, long life, a new England rugby team, friends, travel and so on. For all the family of course. Eventually the angel broke in. 'I'm sorry,' he smiled. 'I don't think I've made it clear. Everything here is free, but we don't give away the finished article. We just give away seeds.'

The servant Church gives away seeds. It doesn't deliver your whole life on the back of a truck. It doesn't try to dominate or hector. It just offers wonderful, creative ideas and values and beliefs, wrapped up in that extraordinary life that went to the end of the world and back – the life of Jesus. These ideas and values and beliefs are the seeds of a new world.

We have seeds of hope for communities where habits of low hope have become the norm. (And there are many in this diocese). We have seeds of compassion and healing for the walking wounded in our society. (And every church knows where the local needs are.) We have seeds of resistance for those facing huge odds on their path to justice. (For example, our trade relationships with developing countries need a radical overhaul). We have seeds of mercy and encouragement for those who've got stuck at first base and want a new start. (The Church specialises in forgiveness and renewal).

And the good news is: there's a seed store in every town and village in this diocese; it's called the church. We're the original convenience store – at the heart of every community.

But a servant Church doesn't want to go it alone. We look for partnerships, for ways of serving with other agencies, public bodies, universities, schools, businesses, charities - anyone as concerned as we are that everyone should discover their full story and live at full stretch. I look forward to forging and furthering some of those partnerships in the years ahead.

There's no denying we face dangerous and complex problems in our society. Matthew Parris, writing recently in the Times, gave a catalogue of global woes and concluded: 'I shall attempt no prophecy. I know only that, as I write, the world is pretty well stuck.' And who could deny it? Woody Allen had a nice line for it, as always. He said: 'More than at any time in history [humanity] is at a crossroads. One path leads to despair and utter hopelessness, the other to total extinction. Let us pray we have the wisdom to choose correctly'. Some choice! But it's true, for example, that no responsible body in society today can afford to ignore the environmental time-bomb and the urgencies of climate change.

And yet our old western answers - those of adversarial politics, of unrestrained development, of social progress through enlightened self-interest – these answers look increasingly threadbare. But we've come so far up the mountain we daren't look down; and indeed if we did, we'd find that an avalanche had destroyed the route behind us anyway. So on we go, higher and higher, with the air getting more rarified with every step we take. And so we need every resource we can find, every partnership, every prophetic voice to help us chart an ethical and sustainable future for our fragile world. In this maelstrom of pressing needs and issues a servant Church isn't a complacent Church. It's a committed one, and it brings real gifts to the table.

Chief Rabbi Jonathan Sacks wrote of an American naturalist who came across a group of army ants going round and round in a circle for two days until most of them dropped dead, and they did this for the simple reason that when a group of army ants is separated from its colony each ant just follows the one in front. But if the ant in front of you is lost, so are you, and that applies as much to humans as to ants. So, says Jonathan Sacks, 'the great religions are [like] satellite navigation systems. They attempt to chart our position in the universe *absolutely*, not just in relation to the car in front of us. They do so in roughly the same way as the SatNav, by bouncing a signal (prayer) off something that stands outside [ourselves], and listening carefully to how it returns.'

And this is the insight and the gift that the great faith traditions bring to the table. Human societies don't do very well when they try to limit consumption, or hold on to peace, or deal with climate change, or fight poverty, or respect refugees and so on. We need a deeper, older wisdom. Could we please turn on the SatNav? 'We proclaim not ourselves' (that route is exhausted, finished) 'but

Jesus Christ as Lord, and ourselves as your servants for Jesus sake.’ The Church doesn’t bring certitude to the great issues of our time; what it brings is wisdom.

The Church, and this new bishop, are here to serve a world that isn’t safe, in the name of a God who isn’t safe either. In *The Lion, the Witch and the Wardrobe* the children are talking to Mr Beaver about Aslan. ‘Is he a man?’ asked Lucy. ‘Aslan a man!’ said Mr Beaver sternly. ‘Certainly not. I tell you he is the King of the wood and the son of the great Emperor-beyond-the-sea. Don’t you know who is the King of the Beasts? Aslan is a lion – the Lion, the great Lion.’ ‘Ooh!’ said Susan. ‘I’d thought he was a man. Is he – quite safe?’ ‘Safe?’ said Mr Beaver. ‘Who said anything about safe? Course he isn’t safe. But he’s good.’

God isn’t conventionally safe. God isn’t going to sort everything out for us if we close our eyes and pretend. God isn’t safe in that way. But he’s good. Deeply, exuberantly, extravagantly good. Christians entrust their lives to the goodness that we see embodied in the life of Jesus and etched in love on the cross. I’d rather give my life to love and serve Jesus Christ than trust the alternatives offered in our confused culture. As someone said, ‘Let the half gods go, that God may arrive.’

So the Church – and this new bishop – present ourselves not as heroes, nor as saints, but as servants, for Jesus’ sake. Servants of a beautiful, damaged, and much-loved world.

It’s good to be here.