

LIVING FAITH SERMON SERIES:
1. SUSTAINING THE SACRED CENTRE

Introduction

This sermon kicks off a short sermon series based on the bishop's 5 strategic pointers to inspire churches in the diocese to grow and develop in effectiveness in bringing God's Kingdom to our world.

The five pointers are:

1. Sustaining the sacred centre
2. Making disciples
3. Making a difference in society
4. Creating vibrant Christian communities
5. Shaping confident, collaborative leadership.

Now the bishop has been at pains to make it clear that he is not trying to tell us what to do – or how to do it but is offering us some material to stimulate our thinking together as a church community.

I have not shared this scheme with you before because we have been working through our own Vision statement and parish development plan but there is much overlap here and so it seemed a good idea to spend a bit of time exploring where the diocese is and to link in with the wider picture.

It will be a task, of course, for each church to make sense of these 5 points in their own context and within their own tradition and the Lent home groups which have been set up to explore these very points will do a lot of that in their discussions.

My job today, though, is to introduce the first pointer on the bishop's list: "Sustaining the Sacred Centre"

What is the sacred centre?

The implication of putting this one first on the list, or at the centre of the logo, is that it is this one that fuels, guides and sustains all the others.

[If I was re-writing this set of points from scratch, I would be tempted to put "Making a difference in Society" up front as a reminder of what our fundamental reason for being here is all about. The others might all, then, be seen as a means to this end and would be given a particular outward looking focus and purpose. You might have your own way of rearranging the 5 which would create an interesting discussion, but let us, nevertheless go with the bishop's order for now.]

And the question I would want to start with is: what is the sacred centre all about? What does it mean? Well, I suppose the obvious answer is "God": having God at the centre of our lives.

And by "God" I mean, to extend a classic phrase: the source, inspiration and energy for goodness, truth and beauty in our lives.

So the big question is: how do we get this, both as individuals and as a community?

How do we get in touch with this source of inspiration love and transformation on a daily basis, so that we

- find ourselves guided through life by a profound wisdom that has stood the test of time
- find ourselves energised and motivated to live life to the full and for the sake of others
- find a strength and stillness in the midst of the deepest sorrows in life
- find a way of coping even when all of the above are absent

As Dom Helda Camara put it:

*If you have a thousand reasons for living,
If you never feel alone,
If you wake up wanting to sing,
If everything speaks to you,
From the stone in the road
To the star in the sky,
From the lizard to the fish, lord of the sea,
If you understand the winds
And listen to the silence,
Rejoice,
For love walks with you,
Is your comrade,
Is your sister, your brother!*

What is it, then, that is going to wake me up to both the wonder of the world and also enable me to face its deepest darkness?

What is giving my life a sense of purpose and direction such that, even on the dreariest or darkest of days I wake up and know it is good to be alive, for God walks with me.

In short, where is God, for me, in this world? How do I connect with the divine?

Many ways

Well, you may be expecting me now to give a severe talk on prayer, discipline and getting up early in the morning!

And you may already be rehearsing your responses to such a talk either by beating yourself up about having tried and failed etc. etc. or having not tried at all or even having tried some stuff and finding whatever it is you did helpful for a while and then no longer being helpful.

Well, I'm not going to give that talk, so please don't switch off just yet.

Because my point would be that we are not talking about chores here: one extra thing to cram into an already busy day,

but we are talking about finding ways of touching the wonder and beauty that is at the heart of everything. So, when we find the way that works for us, we will want to do it!

In fact we won't be able to get enough of it!

And so the key message at this point is that there are many, many ways to find and engage with that sacred centre and that what we need to be doing is setting out on a search for what will work for me.

This is not necessarily to collude with the so called consumer society which has the danger of always enabling us to avoid what really matters or is going to be difficult for me.

But it does recognise that we are all very different and there is going to be no one way of praying which works for us all.

Exploring different ways may be something we can offer more on through the year but just to give the feeling:

- for some, getting up early in the morning and saying a set form of prayer, reading the bible and reflecting, meditating or just chatting through things before God, may be exactly what does work for you – even if it is an effort to get up early
- but for others, this may not work at all either for reasons of your personality or your domestic or work circumstances.

- It could be simply sitting quietly with a piece of music which reconnects you and enables you to find that peace, stillness and courage
- It may be that you need to get away from the distractions of the home and that going for a regular walk in the country could be it
- For others, that connection could come through being creative in some way: painting, writing, making music, gardening
- Others may need to do something more active

What, though, especially if you are veering towards one of these more practical ways of spirituality, makes it spiritual and not just doing something you like!?

Well, a couple of things to mention:

1. That it does become some sort of discipline – a regular part of your life – something that you will do even when you are not feeling like doing it on some occasions. Something that you will work at. This avoids it becoming only a personal indulgence. Daily is good.
2. The intention and awareness with which one does something: in other words not just doing a bit of gardening as a chore that needs to be done but intentionally going about it in an unhurried way with the express purpose of becoming more aware and appreciative of the small detail of the whole process of germination, growth and death and how this might reflect on my own life – or more simply, as a means of letting go for a while of the other worries that plague my life and my thinking most of the time.

There is so much more that could be said on this but my hope is simply that we would each think about trying out something this Lent which may be the thing that is going to help to sustain the sacred centre for you.

And when you find the sort of thing that helps, then work at it! It won't all come suddenly just like that. But it will be your thing that enables you gradually but surely to engage with the beauty, wonder and mystery that will make sense of your life, give you energy and compassion, drive out fear and enable you truly to live life to the full.

Together and apart

A short note, though, on the corporate nature of this enterprise because even hermits will claim not to be praying alone, but will see themselves as taking part in the corporate prayer of the church as a whole.

In the same way, we cannot individualise our spiritual activity but must learn to see even what we do privately, as part of the whole.

We can do this in many ways;

- one is to recognise and learn about how others have followed a similar spirituality to our own and to glean as much as we can from those others who may be more experienced than I – both talking with others and reading the right books will be a part of this.
- The other is to find a way of integrating what is good for me into the communal prayer of the church which is what we call worship.

On this second one, of course, you could say this is exactly where the difficulty is: we are all so very different and are looking for such different things in worship so how can any single act of worship possibly do anything other than frustrate most of the people most of the time!!!!

And yet, of course, there is something else going on when we come together for worship which takes us beyond our personal likes and dislikes – very much into the area of compromise for the sake of love and the desire to be part of something bigger.

The joys are, therefore, necessarily different and are much more related to the simple but extraordinary miracle that so many of different taste, personality and background are even in the same building for broadly the same reason, at roughly the same time!

This doesn't mean we don't try to find ways of being as inclusive as we can whilst also constantly seeking after the very best expressions of goodness, truth and beauty, but the starting point, the real joy is in our communality – the mere fact that we are actually here, together and that we belong to one another.

Resources.

Finally, though, may I direct you towards the resources provided at the back of the church which may be of use to you:

- 4 different types of bible reading notes: all out of date so all free for you to take, try out and order for yourself if you like them
- two different leaflets on prayer: one a very simple set of prayer leaflets which can be used for daily prayer in Lent morning, evening or night prayer; the other a leaflet about different ways of praying by bishop John.
- A daily bible reading list if you just want to follow the set readings (Sundays' are the ones we will use in the Eucharist)
- A leaflet about the bishop's five living faith pointers

Do take anything that you might find helpful. But do take up something this Lent to help and encourage your spiritual life.

Where to now?

The bishop has suggested that churches might focus on one of his 5 pointers in particular each year and has suggested that this year might be the year of "sustaining the sacred centre".

So we may well explore more of this particular one in different ways through the year.

Let me know if you have ideas for how we might do this or things we might offer in the church to make sure we are indeed sustaining the sacred centre of the whole of our church life.

And so to God who is that sacred centre of all life, be all honour glory and praise.
Amen.