

FAREWELL EUCHARIST SERMON

Yesterday marked the 40th anniversary of my ordination as a priest – many of us clergy have similar anniversaries – We reflect on the journey and where it has led – we ponder what may lie ahead. I think again about those lovely lines of TS Eliot, ‘*We shall not cease from exploration. And the end of all our exploring will be to arrive where we started and know the place for the first time*’.

I come from a family tradition of clergy so there was always a whiff of vocation around – two grandfathers, at least one great grandfather, an unfulfilled yearning I think in my mother. So Jeremiah’s words - ‘*Before I formed you in the womb I knew you*’ catch me at a deep level I wriggled a bit - not wanting to give up too easily. And I sometimes feel, ‘I have been here before’

In 1961, my grandfather Ernest Bateman preached a sermon in Dublin on the 50th anniversary of his ordination in 1911. He described his identity as a Christian, an Irishman and a citizen of the Empire. But of course the 1916 Easter Rising, Irish Partition in 1922 and the declaration of a Republic in 1949 meant that you could not be those three things at the same time. He set about helping his community to come to terms with the pragmatic necessity of being Irish. – and he stirred my lifetime interest in the interweaving of faith and identity.

So in 1976 I plunged into ministry in North Belfast – then as now an unstable and dangerous place. But we were young. It was to be the beginning of 29 years ending in Portadown of the Orange Order parading conflicts. I thought that the Irish church might just need a Desmond Tutu – but it didn’t. Nor did Ireland seem to need a

Mandela.. But they were wonderful years with brave and loving people – rich in warm relationships and trust I believe implicitly that God was in Christ carrying out the greatest reconciliation of all – the reconciliation between God and his people. We were called to be salt and light in a dark place. But sectarianism, that toxic mix of faith and identity, always held faith communities in a tight grip.

So do the fires of vocation still burn bright? Yes they do. Our move to Scotland demonstrates that, in the world of vocation, almost anything can happen.

In our diocese, we have been working together to help our congregations to find their vocation – what they are called by God to be. That has been the purpose of the mission planning – and of Casting the Net. That too has been the purpose of all the development work with our clergy and lay readers Our ‘ism’ here is not sectarianism but congregationalism – a defensive-minded contentment with who we are and where we are. But if you want to see how we have been getting on, remember the recent Diocesan Gathering of 170 people here in the Cathedral – or look at our Facebook page and see how far we have come.

Then came the role of Primus helping the Scottish Episcopal Church to find its vocation – its calling to be salt and light in today’s secular society. Some of it is about how we as a historic Scottish church can be both Scottish and Christian today. We come not from the classic roots of Anglicanism but from the Scottish Reformation. The first time I heard somebody say ‘English Church’ I felt a stab of irritation – but I knew myself to be at home dealing once again with the negative interweaving of faith and identity.

I have been privileged to represent Scottish Episcopalians to the Anglican Communion – we are among the most passionate Anglicans but also the least compliant. I found our vocation neatly summed up by a commentator on Thinking Anglicans –that we and the Church of Scotland are called to be churches both progressive and orthodox.

In the Same Sex Marriage debate we have been trying to express the unity in diversity which has been a hallmark of global Anglicanism – but seems to be very difficult in our times. Archbishop Justin calls it ‘Good Disagreement’ Professor Iain Torrance calls it ‘constrained difference’. I have settled for ‘unforced graciousness’.and we have been blessed in that work of reconciliation

And so the end of all our exploring will be to arrive where we started and know the place for the first time’.

My grandfather ended his sermon like this – speaking of his hopes for his grandchildren

‘I was happy as a child, but I am glad to think that my grandchildren will grow up in a world in which children are free as well as happy, in which what goodness there is is sincere, what religion there is is genuine, where while there are great perils, there are great opportunities.’

A prophetic statement from one generation to the next but one. I am happy to have played a part in the way in which God has been working out his purposes among us. I offer my hopes, my good wishes and my prayers for the next stage of God’s story of vocation as it unfolds.

