

Contemplative, compassionate, courageous
The Church of the Beatitudes

Address to the Dynamissio Conference
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Thank you for your welcome. It a joy to be part of this conference. We have explored together the themes of gospel and world and mission and church in the 21st Century. There has been a sense of energy and hope here and a fresh confidence in what God is doing.

I bring greetings and love from England and from the Church of England in this season of change in our economic and political relationships. We remain Europeans through and after Brexit. Thank you for your solidarity with us following the terrorist attack in Westminster this week.

I have spent 13 years in pastoral ministry in local churches. I then spent 13 years helping other people do ministry as the principal of a college and as the first team leader of Fresh Expressions in the United Kingdom. Eight years ago I became the Bishop of Sheffield. Last year I was translated to the much larger Diocese of Oxford and I am trying hard not to be lost in that translation.

How then should we go from this place? What does God send you out to be and to do? To carry on as before? I hope not. These days need to make a difference, to change us.

In every single role, I have had to wrestle with questions of change and vision and God's mission. What is God saying to us as a Church? What kind of Church are we called to be? What are we called to do together? Many of the words we use to describe the vision of the church have become hollow and empty and overused. .

I want to offer you three words to ponder as you go from this conference today. Three words to shape the kind of Church we are called to be. They are three words we are exploring in my own Diocese at the present time. I hope they will be life giving to you also.

I believe God calls us to be a church which is contemplative
A church which is compassionate.
A church which is courageous.

Let me tell you why.

About ten years ago, my telephone rang. It has rung on a number of occasions since but this was a particularly significant call. I was four years into my leadership of fresh expressions in the United Kingdom.

The call was from an English diocese. They were having a conference. They would like me to come and speak. Only, they said, we do not want your normal fresh expressions talk.

What would you like me to speak about? I said. We want you to offer us your vision for the Church of England over the next 25 years. What kind of church do you want to see? What stirs and excites you? What is your vision for the church.

I don't know what you would have said. My first response was what an interesting question. My second response was to thank God they had asked me several months in advance. I needed time to think and pray.

Over the last generation in England and in Germany we have been called to fresh thinking about the mission of God, theologically and practically.

But our reflection on mission leads inevitably to deep questions about the church. What kind of church are we called to be and to build. How is the Church to be shaped by God's mission. How is our missiology to shape our ecclesiology?

What was my vision for the Church? I thought and I read and I prayed and I thought. In the end, the answer I came to was very simple. It has stayed with me through my 7 years as Bishop of Sheffield. It is now guiding me in my early months as Bishop of Oxford.

I quickly got past the idea that my vision was to be a growing Church, a church good at making disciples. I share that vision but it doesn't seem enough. I got past the idea that my vision was a church which reshapes the world. Good, but not enough. I got past the idea of a mixed economy church: many different expressions of church bound together in love.

Something more was needed. The key was to return to a very simple idea, present in the gospels and in the whole of the New Testament.

What kind of Church are we called to be in our generation? Locally and regionally and nationally?

For me it is very, very simple. But I did not reach this simplicity without passing through a great deal of complexity.

We are called to be a Christ like Church, a church which looks like Jesus. We are called to be like him. To have his character.

What does it mean to be a Christ like Church? There are many places in Scripture where you could go to fill out that vision.

I have returned again and again to the Beatitudes in the gospel of Matthew. Matthew means us to take this short text very seriously. He groups Jesus sayings into five blocks of teaching. The first and the most important is the sermon on the mount. At the head of the sermon on the mount he sets these eight sayings each beginning with Blessed. These are primarily words of affirmation, not words of critique. Jesus seeks to mould and shape the

church by affirming what is good before pointing out what is bad. They are also words of joy and hope. Eight times we hear the word blessed: happy, joyful. Eight times we hear a promise of hope.

Note that these are words spoken not to the world, but to the church, to the disciples who come to be with him and to be sent out. Jesus affirms in the disciples, in the church, eight qualities.

We need to remind ourselves over and over again that the beatitudes are addressed to the church in the plural, not to the individual disciple. They describe together the character of Christ. No individual can be like this. But as a church together we can aspire to this ideal and embody these virtues.

This is how we are called to go, sent by the Spirit. This is the kind of Church we are called to be and to build: a Christ like Church.

So let's read them briefly together and rekindle that vision.

Blessed are the poor in spirit. Blessed is the church which knows its need of God, which seeks God in prayer and in worship, in depth and in the rhythms of life, a church which abides, which rests, which dwells deep in the experience of God's love. Too easily we shut God out of our counsels and our habits and our plans. Blessed are those who are poor in spirit.

Blessed are those who mourn: not a saying for the bereaved but for the whole community. Blessed are those who lament for the suffering in the world. Blessed is the church whose heart breaks for the lonely and the oppressed, the refugee, the stranger.

Blessed are the meek. Are we distinguished for our humility, comes from the Latin humus, our closeness to the ground, our preferring of one another – surely the key to our ecumenical relationships. That humility is visible in your conference. Will it be visible in the life of the local church?

Blessed are those who hunger and thirst for righteousness, who seek justice, who are on the side of the poor, who long to set things right deep within their being.

Blessed are the merciful. Blessed is the church when the first thing people encounter in us is love and mercy wherever and however they come to us. Mercy expressed in both deeds and words

Blessed are the pure in heart. Blessed are you when you pursue holiness, single minded devotion to God.

Blessed are the peacemakers, those who pursue reconciliation, those whose faith takes them beyond being nice to resolve differences both in the Church and the world. Europe needs its peacemakers now more than for many years.

Blessed are those who are persecuted for righteousness sake: those who will bear the cost of their discipleship, who live out their faith in the whole of their life, who are bold in their proclamation of faith in Jesus Christ and unwavering in their allegiance.

This is the kind of Church we are called to be in our worship, in our community, in our mission, as we gather together, as we are scattered and sent through the week. We are a community of missionary disciples. We are the body of Christ in the world, the people of Jesus and we are meant to be like him.

I am on a journey at present around the Diocese of Oxford which is a large, complex diocese by English standards. We have over 800 churches, almost 300 schools and over 600 clergy.

For some months now I have been looking for just three words which might describe the kind of church we aspire to be and to build together in the coming years. The larger the diocese the more simple our vision needs to be.

They need to be words which have depth and which mean something across our different traditions, in parish churches and fresh expressions of church, in schools and chaplaincies and for the Diocese as a whole.

I am looking for words which describe what it means to be a Christ like church.

I think we have our three words now and as I prayed about my time with you, it seemed right to share them with you as an example of what it means to be a Christ like, Christ centred church. The kind of church I want to encourage you to be sent out to build.

The first word is contemplative: contemplative. Deeply rooted in Christ as a branch is rooted in the vine. Prayerful. Listening. Reflective. Gazing on the face of Christ. Holding out a fresh vision of the love of God. Taking theology seriously but the kind of theology which is dialogue with God as well as dialogue about God. Encountering afresh the face of Christ.

To be contemplative is to be good news to our active world which is seeking now wisdom rather than knowledge and relationship above facts. To be contemplative is to have a rhythm of life which balances rest and prayer and work and is counter cultural to the spirit of the age. To be contemplative is to listen deeply to the world. To open our eyes.

To be contemplative is to be poor in Spirit, to be meek, to be pure in heart. To love God with all our heart and soul and mind and strength.

My second word is compassionate. To suffer with those who suffer in the world. To love our neighbours as ourselves and for our compassion to result in action. To reach out to those in need in practical, loving service in a thousand different ways. To love our wounded, fractured world in the name of Jesus Christ and the God of love. To extend that love to all regardless.

To be compassionate is to be merciful, to mourn and lament for the needs of the world.

My third word is courageous. For the contemplative life then to move to compassion and then to action, action which springs from a heart made bold for God. Courage is a matter of the heart. Our English word courageous means to live from the heart. To be encouraged is to have the heart put back into you, which is what many of our churches need. To find strength and boldness and imagination in our vision, in our evangelism, in our church planting. To have the courage to attempt impossible things, to risk failure, but to venture all for God if we are called to do so.

To be courageous means to be a peacemaker: to reach out and dare to forgive and be forgiven, to be reconciled and to reconcile others.

To be courageous means to be hungry and thirsty for justice: to dare to believe that the world can be a better place and to seek change for the poorest.

To be courageous means to bear the cost of our discipleship, to be bold and persistent in evangelism, to present Christ in the lives we lead, in the communities we become, in the words we speak, to this world which needs to know and understand and believe.

What kind of Church are we called to be and to build?

We are called to be above all a Christ like church.

We are called to be the church of the beatitudes: poor in spirit, hearts breaking, meek, hungry for justice, merciful, pure in heart, peacemaking, bearing the cost

What kind of Church are we called to be and to build?

The same kind of Church as Martin Luther who sought to reform the church of his day. Luther was a contemplative, a monk, who returned again and again to the Scriptures to wrestle for the truth of the gospel. Luther was compassionate: his theology was shaped by a longing to set people free from heavy burdens. Luther was courageous in his proclamation of the truth.

Will we go now and seek to build this Christ like Church in our generation, to set prayer and compassion and courage at the heart of all we are and all we do.

A contemplative church for a shallow and unreflective world

A compassionate church for a world starved of love

A courageous church for this world divided

May God bless you and fill you with his Spirit and transform us more and more deeply into the likeness of his Son. Amen.