

Installation Sermon

June 24th 2023

How do you respond to a crisis?

For me, a recent clergy residential became a fascinating case study in just this. It was a freezing cold night when at 3am the fire alarm went off. Very loudly. And it didn't stop. The conference centre, it would seem, was burning down! So in temperatures of about minus 5 we obediently assembled in the car park.

Which is where it was possible to observe how people respond differently to crisis. So for example one observable reaction was panic. These panicking priests flapped about, worrying about loved ones or complaining about their plight. Another reaction was organisational frenzy. For example one priest started to take a register, another informed his family, another appeared in full cassock with cape and cincture as if ready to administer the last rites. A third possible reaction was denial, and these priests didn't appear at all, claiming the next day they had slept through it all.

Now all of these are wholly understandable, indeed in some cases commendable, reactions to a crisis. But one thing I did not notice a single person doing was singing. I can tell you that for sure. As we stood in that freezing car park in our pyjamas waiting for the fire brigade to give the all clear, not one single person started to sing.

The Gospel that we have just heard was set against a backdrop of crisis. Mary and Elizabeth were facing a massive, multi-layered crisis of extreme proportions. Mary was a teenager, pregnant out of wedlock and facing social disgrace. Elizabeth was a woman of great age who had little chance of surviving childbirth. Both were powerless women in a patriarchal society. Both were living in extreme poverty. Their nation was under brutal Roman occupation.

So how did Mary and Elizabeth respond to such extreme crisis? They burst into song! They sang their hearts out! They sang a song their ancestors sung and they sang it with uncontainable delight. And their song was not about escaping crisis or pretending it wasn't happening. It was Mary's song that transformed the crisis, for she knew that God was scandalously making his dwelling within her very self to bring about his plan of salvation.

Fast forward to 2023, and at times it feels that we have become almost accustomed to crisis. In the nation we have lived through austerity, Brexit, a global Covid pandemic, a massive cost of living squeeze that has pushed millions of families over the edge and a terrifying war in Ukraine, all against the backdrop of a climate crisis.

And the Church, which we hope might be our refuge in crisis, has been incredibly adept at manufacturing crises of its own. We have locked ourselves into a mood of anxiety about declining

numbers and income. We're worried sick about schism, division and disharmony, not least because of the Living in Love and Faith process. We heighten the mood of crisis by insulting each other on social media. We live in fear of the future as if we have forgotten that Jesus has already won the victory.

As happens in crisis, it's not hard to observe a range of responses to all this. Some parts of the church have gone into organisational frenzy, producing a new strategy or resource every day and so exhausting parochial clergy. Some people have given up and resorted to declinism, assuming that the crisis means that the Gospel no longer has any power and the Holy Spirit has left his church. Many churches have simply become locked into insularity and lost the confidence to proclaim.

But there is another way. In the face of crisis, we could sing. We could sing the song of the Gospel. With Mary we could sing of that kingdom transformation that only Jesus can bring, a transformation that will burn away our fears and anxieties like dew in the midday sun.

Friends, Christians of Lancashire, let's sing with Mary the Gospel song. In the face of miscomprehension, opposition and division, let's lift our voices and sing that song until we are hoarse. Let's sing it until every single person in Lancashire has heard and responded. Let's sing Magnificat: the song of the Kingdom. And let's sing it for three good reasons.

First, because this song is a song of joy. So as we sing it, let's grow in every corner of Lancashire communities of joy.

When Mary sang Magnificat, there were only four people there, two of whom hadn't got round to being born. And yet between them there was (in Jeremy Taylor's words) such a collision of joy that it echoes through the centuries. How? Because their joy was not rooted in the contingencies and circumstances of their lives. It was rooted in Jesus and in relationship with him. It was rooted in a profound trust in his saving work.

By contrast, a cloak of anxiety seems to have fallen across so many of our churches who are locked in the past and anxious about the future. But it is not our anxiety that will draw people to Jesus, rather it is our joy in the Gospel. And Jesus is the cause of that joy.

So let's shake off our anxiety and grow joyful communities in parishes across the Diocese. Let's find fresh joy in our worship and in the friendship we find in the churches we grow. Let's go on planting new congregations to serve different demographics and neighbourhoods. Because every single person in this beautiful county deserves to be served by a joyful fellowship of Christians committed to service and worship and proclamation.

Second, this song is a song of justice. So as we sing it let's strive to build now the justice of God's kingdom.

Listen to what Mary sings. 'He has filled the hungry with good things, and sent the rich away empty.' She knows that because God dwells in her womb, so God's kingdom of justice is amongst us.

What a contrast there is between Mary's vision of a world renewed and the realities of life in the United Kingdom today. Lancashire is a place of extreme social inequalities. There are streets in Morecambe where life expectancy is just 48, the lowest in the country. By contrast in Ribble Valley it is 84 which is just about the highest. Our coastal communities and mill towns have been massively hit by economic insecurity and pandemic. A culture of low pay means that many work hard but are still dependent on food handouts. We seem to be willing to accept poverty and injustice as if it were somehow inevitable.

It is not God's plan that children should go hungry, that labour should go unrewarded, that gifts should go unused and undiscovered, that so many should fail to flourish. So the work that our schools and parishes do to address injustice is heroic, because it is our task to live now as if God's future kingdom of justice had come. We do that as we feed the hungry, empower the disempowered, help our children to discover their true value and purpose and live in harmony with the created world. These things are not bolt-ons to the Gospel. They are the Gospel.

And as we address injustice in the nation we also need to name and address injustice within our own church, one that embodies so many of the inequalities that we so freely condemn when we see them elsewhere. We cannot accept any longer a situation in which some dioceses are sitting on vast piles of inherited cash whilst others in the north have next to nothing. We cannot accept any longer these wealth disparities between dioceses which mean people in Lancashire pay more in parish share for fewer clergy because we didn't get lucky when the big bucks were being handed out. How will God honour a church which is so keen to address injustice when it sees it elsewhere but will not first remove the vast log in its own eye?

And thirdly, this song is a song of the young. So as we sing it, let's place our children, our young people and our schools right at the very heart of our common life.

Mary was just 14 when she sang this song, one which so inspired the ageing Elizabeth and which has inspired so many generations since. A teenager, filled with the joy of the Gospel and sharing that joy with others. A teenager, set free by Jesus to believe, rejoice and proclaim the good news of his salvation.

The Church often engages in ministry to the young as a kind of insurance policy. We do it to make the adults feel a bit better about themselves because it suggests the church may have a future. But

the desire for institutional survival is the wrong starting point. The right starting point is the Gospel song all ages can sing together.

We want young people to be inspired by the person of Jesus. This wonderful current generation, so many of them in this cathedral today, is a searching one. They are asking profound and challenging questions about purpose, about relationships, about the future of the planet. Christians believe the goal of that searching is found in relationship with Jesus. So let's create the spaces where we can have those conversations. Imagine every parish engaging in ministry to the young. Imagine a network of children and youth workers supporting that ministry across Lancashire. Imagine an even closer partnership between churches and our amazing family of church schools for the benefit of the young.

But equally, we want young people to inspire the church, just as Mary inspired Elizabeth. The song is incomplete unless all ages sing together. So let's create the places where young people can pray, worship, sing and lead. Let's follow the lead of Jesus and place the young right at the heart of the community as role models of Christian discipleship. That's a true kingdom vision.

So in the midst of endless talk of crisis, let's sing the song of salvation to Lancashire. A song of joy. A song of justice. A song of the young. A song that will change lives.

A few years ago I was leading a pilgrimage to Bethlehem. We found ourselves one morning in a beautiful, circular chapel on the Shepherds' Field, but there was such a hubbub of sound it was impossible even to think. People were gossiping and chatting, tour guides were shouting, it was a racket. So four of us started very quietly to sing. We hummed in harmony the tune of Silent Night. And one by one people stopped talking, they listened, and then they too started to sing until the whole Chapel was singing the song of Jesus. And when they stopped, the silence was sublime. It was a foretaste of the perfect peace of heaven.

Let's sing. Let's sing the Gospel song. Let's sing with all our hearts, so that all might know Jesus Christ through whose saving work we sinful mortals are raised up to play our part in the eternal music of the heavenly choir. Amen.