

Farewell Eucharist for Michael Everitt as Archdeacon of Lancaster

Genesis 49:29-33.50:15-26 Matthew 10:24-33

Blackburn Cathedral 13 July 2019

May I speak and may we all hear in the name of the Living God, Father, Son and Holy Spirit.

I cannot be other than I am. Bishop Julian asked me what readings I wanted today. I replied “those as set for the day.” I firmly believe that the Church guided by the Holy Spirit shapes how we must engage with life, scripture and our faith. “Are they suitable?” he asked. “I am confident that they will be.” I replied.

As I prepare to go to a community whose very existence is from finding a resolution as to where to locate the bones of a Holy figure; you can imagine my delight that our first reading was about Joseph’s bones needing to be taken out of Egypt and into the land of ancestors.ⁱ Archdeacons often have to deal with issues to do with bones. This time last year, I was preparing to rebury bones from Tudor times in my Churchyard in Preston.ⁱⁱ The great missionary Cuthbert who evangelised the north of England in his life, then had his bones taken on a great journey as the monks sought a safe place for them to be reburied. Some in Lytham claim he was even brought here into Lancashire. Proclaiming the good news of Jesus Christ even in death, his bones finally finding their resting place on a hill that was to become the place where Durham and its cathedral were built.

Bishop Julian has also publicly given me permission to say what I like. His exact phrase was “Tell us as you see it” I recall. My desire to remain true to the call of the lectionary could give me as a text:

“Nothing is covered up that will not be uncovered and nothing secret that will not become known.”ⁱⁱⁱ

Maybe he, and indeed you, are wondering quite what might follow.

My text however is,

“You are of more value than many sparrows.”^{iv}

The altar frontal here at Blackburn Cathedral features 4 birds. A peacock, pelican, phoenix and dove. The peacock represents immortality; the pelican the self-giving love of Christ through the shedding of his blood; the phoenix, resurrection and the dove, the Holy Spirit. There isn’t however a sparrow!

At any time in the history of the world there are leaders who parade as if like peacocks. Indeed, the Shah of Persia used to sit on a peacock throne. The peacock makes a great show and his cry is piercing and travels great distances. However, a peacock cannot fly terribly well. Their plumage whilst spectacular hinders them. You might know that there are peacocks around, they might even inspire a mixture of awe and wonder, they are in reality more style than substance. Even if as I discovered early in my time as archdeacon, they can cause disturbance by landing in your space. I make no connection with political leaders of our time, of course!

However, we learn from another great saint whose bones are located in Durham cathedral, the Venerable Bede that in the year of our lord 627, the King, King Edwin encountered a sparrow of a man who changed everything. That sparrow, so beloved by my previous colleague, Archdeacon John Hawley, was of course St Paulinus. Paulinus as we all know, evangelised in the east of the diocese, including mass baptisms in the river Calder. One of the many reasons why Whalley Abbey is a blessed place, (*locus Benedictus*) and an apt centre for discipleship. Paulinus argued the case for Christianity to Edwin. A drab sparrow to a peacock, and in response one of the king’s advisors had a vision:

“O king, it seems to me that this present life of man on earth, in comparison to that time which is unknown to us, is as if you were sitting at table in the winter with your ealdormen and thegns, and a fire was kindled and the hall warmed, while it rained and snowed and stormed outside. A sparrow came in, and swiftly flew through the hall; it came in at one door, and went out at the other. Now during the time when he is inside, he is not touched by the winter’s storms; but that is the twinkling of an eye and the briefest of moments, and at once he comes again from winter into winter. In such a way the life of man appears for a brief moment; what comes before and what will follow after, we do not know. Therefore, if this doctrine offers anything more certain or more fitting, it is right that we follow it.”^v

Paulinus, the sparrow, having entered the king’s court, showed them that there was more to life than they immediately could see. He placed all the issues of the world both the grand schemes of humanity and the perils and dangers of life into an eternal framework bound by the one who is the Alpha and Omega, the beginning and the End, namely Jesus Christ our Lord. Paulinus the sparrow thus evangelised the peacock of a King.

Poverty transformed riches into the ways of the divine economy.

I must confess that when I am bird watching I am more impressed by the spectacular, the large, or the colourful. Indeed often, I will ignore the Little Brown Jobbies, the LBJs, the sparrow like birds, as being either too insignificant or too difficult to categorise. All too often I fear society and indeed the church does the same. Instead of celebrating the sparrow it is the peacock, pelican, phoenix and dove. Or even the swallow, or in Standish the Owl with its rat which gets the attention. However, it is the sparrow, the bird of the air which are cared for by the almighty. They are the ones whose fate he is interested in. They are the ones humanity is compared to.

Embodying the current occupant of Paulinus’ seat in York, Archbishop Sentamu, I share a beautiful story from Africa:

The birds were arguing as to who should be king. The Hornbill with its magnificent beak claimed the glory, the parrot disagreed it had both plumage and the gift of tongues, the eagle wondered why there was a discussion and the sparrow said it should. All the birds laughed. The eagle gave a challenge, whoever can fly highest will win. They all agreed. Up they soared higher and higher, until only the eagle could be seen in the heavens. “I knew I was king” said the eagle to itself. Just then the sparrow, who had hidden on the back of the eagle, climbed up onto its feet and then flapped its wings taking it higher than the eagle, thus winning the contest. However, being a bird content in itself, once back on the land allowed the eagle the grandeur.^{vi}

As a church we need to celebrate our community of sparrows. Whether they be hedge sparrows or house sparrows, whether rural or urban. It was the sparrow of Paulinus that converted the King. Whilst the world and the church might at times be seduced by fashions and grandeur. Indeed, it might use terms such as “zeitgeist” or management speak, this is not the language of the kingdom of heaven and therefore will not be eternal. (Indeed, “spirit of the time”, and simply managing rather than flourishing show the temporal nature of such terms.)

As a diocese we are committed to being “*healthy churches transforming communities*”. A Healthy church is one that honours all rather than a few, that celebrates diversity and ensures like birds at a winter bird table that all are fed, nourished and cared for. It is by such actions that we are both transformed and can transform others. It is by celebrating all and including

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them into our vision and life that we will make disciples, and together like a murmuration of starlings we can bear witness to the glory of our heavenly father who has given us life. Not by arguing like the birds of the story, but by recognising our mutual gifts, plumage and skills that leaders will be raised, to serve in the variety of locations and contexts. And as Jesus spoke of himself, it is as a mother hen gathering her brood under her wing, that the whole church as the body of Christ in the world, protects and develops the young and the vulnerable.

The humble sparrow, which at first sight is forgotten, has a beauty that is to be honoured. Its presence and existence, whilst common is precious to God. As in the life of Paulinus, it acknowledges God before others, and thus is acknowledged by Christ before his father. We must do the same in the diocese here and now, to be true to being “healthy churches transforming communities.” For if the bones of our ancestors, whether Joseph, Cuthbert or Bede can speak of faith and help shape faithful communities, then so too can the countless sparrows of our diocese; more so than peacocks. This is part of the distinctive calling of the diocese of Blackburn. It is a challenge to the wider church, who maybe, do not share this vision. May you rejoice that Jesus tells you that:

“Everyone who acknowledges me before others, I also will acknowledge before my Father in heaven.”^{vii}

For in Christ’s eyes he knows that the sparrow is cared for by our Father, and
“you do not need be afraid, you are of more value than many sparrows.”^{viii}

Amen.

i Genesis 50:26

ii <https://www.bbc.co.uk/news/av/uk-england-lancashire-45044275/tudor-bones-found-in-preston-given-church-burial> **BBC News 2 August 2017**

iii Matthew 10:26

iv Matthew 10:31

v Bede: **Ecclesiastical History of the English People** book II chapter 13

vi As with all traditional tales the moral can change. Sometimes the birds are adapted for culture

vii Matthew 10:32

viii Matthew 10:31