

Sunday 21st Oct 2012. 10.00am and New College Oxford

In the name of the Father, Son and Holy Spirit.

There is no way round it. God has a sense of humour. It's official.

Here we are –looking for a new Archbishop of Canterbury. Rumour, intrigue, - all the usual fun and games. Yesterday our very own John Pritchard was being touted as the dark horse. Church politics seemingly leaving the Holy Spirit out of the game. We could have a fun time together listing all the qualities and attributes that you know they ought to have -a certain physical attribute being a given of course. We'd end up realising that no one person could possibly fulfil all the needs and desires of the church and from the look of our texts today we would also recognise that someone who is desperately keen to do job is probably mad and certainly not suitable.

Hebrews 5 verse 4 –'No-one elects themselves to this honoured position - He's called to it by God.'

That rules out James and John then. The Mark reading sees them bickering about status. They want the OBE, the Knighthood -the Peerage -after all they are part of the inner circle -they have trudged round the arid countryside with Jesus -in on it from the beginning. Jesus was clearly heading for kingship -they wanted jobs for the boys. They were entitled.

I have a lot of thoughts about that sense of entitlement -at various levels. It's in the news of course. There is only one thing worse than being a pleb and that's being a toff.

Maybe the whole debate is out of date anyway.

I'm reading a fascinating book at the moment called 'Emergence Christianity' (Phyllis Tickle) It's difficult to sum up in a few sentences, but the basic thesis is that we are in the midst of a once in every 500 year upheaval – the shift that we used to try and label 'post modern' and which now has a label which seems more likely to stick -'the Great Emergence' – I think it is a way of putting words to what we all know is going on -even if we only express it in a longing to go back to the way things used to be.

Listen to this:

‘The Great Emergence is an across the board and still accelerating shift in every single part and parcel of our lives as member in good standing of twenty first century Western or westernized civilisation.

Intellectually, politically, economically, culturally, sociologically, religiously, psychologically –every part of us and how we are and how we live has, to some greater or lesser extent, been reconfigured over the last century and a half, and those changes are now becoming a genuine maelstrom around us.’

I’d love to explore this more with you -and I will -specially the position of Christianity within it all. But today let me just point out that it is our extraordinary access to knowledge that has been one of the game changers. Wikipedia is at least 6 per cent more accurate than are our most respected print-copy encyclopaedias. Knowledge is no longer power. Hierarchy is challenged. Institutions don’t get the respect.

Later today I’m preaching at New College -and there they are at one of the best -colleges of the best university in the country. Many will learn well academically but will learn nothing else, and will leave here with an extraordinary sense of entitlement -you know the sort of thing -‘but I went to Oxford you know’ - -Andrew Mitchell went to Nuffield college, and, allegedly, feels entitled to call someone who asks him to obey the rules a ‘pleb’ -it may or may not reveal something about the Tory party. It most definitely reveals something about his character. Well -he’s a goner!

Thankfully there will also be many of those young people whose learning is deeper will have a more proper estimation of themselves.

Because this is what it is all about. How do you get your sense of self worth?

To what extent do you need status, money or power to feel good about yourself.

We know now that the foundations of how you form your sense of self-worth begin very young.

If the love and affirmation that you get from you parents is always conditional it is always going to be hard to feel ok simply because you are you.

The hunger to be loved and valued is a very strong driver. If the basic message you get is -the better you do the more I love you -hmm -life is going to be a challenge.

Here in Bucks we have constant arguments about this very thing around the 11+

You may think it is a simple thing for a parent to encourage their child by saying 'if you pass the 11+ I'll get you a bike' -but of course the 11+ is supposed to measure a particular element of your natural intelligence. You are not supposed to be able to do better by trying harder -it doesn't measure effort it measures IQ

So if you fail -it is not what you have done that had caused you to fail, it is who you are. Who you are that is simply not good enough.

That's rubbish if you fail, but it is also rubbish if you succeed. 'My Dad thinks more of me because I passed.'

.....And you end up at a place like Oxford - and if you are not careful you are driven by the need to prove your value through academic success.

You get married, and get the fabulous job, and have the perfect family -and from the outside everyone sees a hugely successful person -and on the inside you feel as if you are a treadmill -proving your worth to yourself, your boss, even your family. And dreading making a mistake, or getting ill, or coming second -because if the success is taken away there might just be nothing left.

Mark 8.36 –Jesus said: 'What good would it do to get everything you want and lose you, the real you?' er....think Lance Armstrong -he thought he had everything, but actually he was nothing. Hollow, empty, a shell of a man.

Jesus' analysis of this problem is clean. This is what he says: 'Whoever wants to become great must become a servant'

A great person -someone with integrity and maturity, someone who understands the purpose of their life, first has to get over putting themselves at the center of the universe. It is in serving and indeed loving others that you become fully yourself.

For Christ the defining moment came at his baptism. As he rose from the water, his life's work only just about to begin, God spoke:

Mark 1.11: "You are my beloved Son, in whom I am well pleased."

There was no transaction -just the totally unconditional love and approval of the father. He could not, by whatever means get God to love him more, because his Father's love was already the best and deepest that could be.

This has to be the golden core of the Christian faith. This is the life-changing Good News.

Just make it personal: God says to you: 'You are my beloved daughter/son, in whom I am well pleased' The Message version puts it this way: "You are my child, chosen and marked by my love, pride of my life."

You cannot earn, or deserve any more love -there is no more love, you have it all. Nor can you forfeit that love, because it isn't a deal. God loves you because he loves you. Full stop. He will not stop loving you if you stop loving him.

If you can internalize this it sets you free. You are of no greater value than anyone else, you are of no lesser value than anyone else -because -like them you are of infinite value. At the moment, in our country that isn't the experience of the poorest, the disabled and disadvantaged.

St Augustine understood this way back in the 4th Century. He said: 'Do you wish to be great? Then begin by being. Do you desire to construct a vast and lofty fabric? Think first about the foundations of humility. The higher your structure is to be, the deeper must be its foundation.'

The Oxford experience is all about building foundations. It is true that many of those youngsters will go on to positions of great power and influence.

It's true for all of us. If the foundations of your life are securely rooted in the love of God then you will have the ability to look for ways in which you can serve, not ways in which you can grasp for power and status.

Jesus goes on to tell James and John that it will be costly and difficult -but his life which was one of love and sacrifice has proved to be the greatest ever -if you have ambition, be ambitious to be like him.

Amen