**Sermon for**

**The Consecration of Cherry Vann**

**as Bishop of Monmouth**

**25th January 2020**

**The Conversion of St Paul**

In the Name of the Father and of the Son and of the Holy Spirit. Amen

*"Peter said Look, we have left everything and followed you. What then will we have?" Mt.19:27*

The consecration of a bishop reminds us that we are all called by God: so what is required, we might ask, and what can we expect?

At Christmas we celebrated that God entered the messiness of humanity and demonstrated that the pattern of living we call love will lead us to eternal life, life as it should be, without fear of death. Franciscans call this crib, cross and communion: turning up, getting involved, and the kind of life we consequently share.

The Crib *Turning up*

Some of you will know that Cherry's spirituality has been shaped by the Jesuit community at St Beuno's in North Wales. Gerard Hughes was a priest there and in his book *God of Surprises* (DLT, 1985) he wrote that we should expect the unexpected. Having known Cherry for many years I know that she would not have been expecting to be here, and we are conscious of the great burden that is being laid upon her today. In each of our own life and vocation journeys there will have been things hoped for and unexpected, and (if we have the eyes of faith) moments when God has indeed surprised us (perhaps some of us are still waiting for the surprise to happen!). The deaneries and parishes of Monmouth, Cherry, will be looking forward to you being amongst them, encouraging them, bringing fresh perspectives and offering vision and hope. This is not a task you can undertake alone, and it will be demanding, but with the other bishops, the clergy and the congregations of your diocese, and supported by Wendy and those of us who come from other places and all parts of your life, you can be sure that our faith provides all that we need to inspire and sustain us.

The fragile obscurity of the crib was where the creator of the universe chose to demonstrate the love revealed in Jesus Christ, a life that enters the lives of others, that goes where angels fear to tread, that gives entirely of itself and does not need to speak of itself because its action is louder than its words. We call this *Incarnation*, putting into flesh what hitherto was an idea, making love real, and it's something to which all the baptised are called. That might surprise us! The word vocation is most often applied to those who become ordained, but in truth each one of us who has passed through the water of baptism has been called by God and therefore the ordination of a bishop is a moment for each of us to consider what God call us to be, and to do with our lives. Jeremiah did not feel worthy, whilst Saul was utterly gobsmacked to find himself confronted on the Damascus road! The chief antagonist of Christians became their greatest advocate, and his ministry was characterised by journeys into the unknown and entering the lives of others. Turning up is not enough, we need also to go deeper.

The Cross *Going deeper*

Peter said, *We have left everything, and followed you. What then will we have?* Jesus' response is that things would be turned on their head, *Many who are first will be last and the last will be first.* We know that any kind of reaching out risks reversal. Going somewhere new takes courage, making an offer of friendship risks rejection; it means entering deeply into the complexity of people's lives, and in the diocese of Monmouth, as in Manchester, there is a rich variety of social contexts. Many in ministry will tell you that the most comfortable settings are the hardest in which to be a minister of the gospel, whereas people in difficult situations reveal the true stature of humanity. We cannot be sentimental about the challenge of offering a gospel of transformation to a world ill-disposed to hear it, but we cannot ignore the challenge. In his book *Exclusion and Embrace* (Abingdon Press, 1996), Miroslav Volf reflects that Christ died not only for the poor, not only for the oppressed, but also for the oppressors and for those in whom we find less than the grace and beauty of God. This is a difficult truth. What is it to love our enemies, to embrace that which is different? We call this *Reconciliation*, and Cherry has already done an immense amount of this ministry, moving first from professional music into the life of the church. Her ministry as a chaplain amongst students in Further Education was not a sojourn in an ivory tower; would that the church (and indeed the state) had the resources to do more work in FE which does so much to improve opportunities for people for whom traditional schooling and the universities cannot. That a musician should then find herself ministering among the deaf and immersed in what to most of us is a foreign language and culture, should not surprise us, reminding all of us to really *listen,* whatever language we speak! As a vicar she has known all that pastoral ministry brings, and as an archdeacon I suppose some will have seen her as an *eminence grise*, although those who know Cherry know that this could not be further from the truth! What has characterised her ministry has been to work positively with those who see things differently, for example her willingness to work with those who have been against the ordination of women, and (more recently) on the Pastoral Advisory Group on how the Church of England attends to human sexuality. Their recently formulated pastoral principles provide a powerful digest for the ministry of reconciliation to which we are called: acknowledging prejudice, speaking into silence, addressing ignorance, casting out fear, admitting hypocrisy and paying attention to power. Cherry's formation and experience (as well as her insight and spiritual resources) equip her to lead on Mission and to be an ambassador of Christ, which (as for any of us!) means turning up and getting involved in the hard stuff. *Look, we have left everything and followed you.* So now with Peter we might also ask, *What then will we have?*

Communion *Life together*

Richard Rohr is a Franciscan friar and in his recent work *The Universal Christ* (SPCK, 2019) he cites four world views: material, spiritual, priestly and incarnational. It is only the fourth, he writes, which brings all together in a holistic expression of the universe. Jesus's answer to Peter's question, *What then will we have?*  is *Eternal life*, which means life without limitation. Jesus' self offering on the cross produced the Resurrection we proclaim in all our churches every Sunday. When we embrace the pattern of crib and cross (Incarnation and Reconciliation), when we give of ourselves in a way that makes it possible for us to live with each other, then we achieve Communion, real life together, and we call this *Salvation.*

A bishop is a point of unity (or so I was always told), except that in the church today we seem to find disunity when (say) the bishop is a woman in a church where not everyone accepts the leadership of women, or when the bishop is in a same sex civil partnership in a church where not everyone accepts gay relationships, and where the bishop is English in a Welsh diocese. More importantly we live in a nation whose divisions have been revealed by Brexit, where inequality of opportunity grows, and where the consequences of relentless consumption upon the climate and the natural resources of the planet affect the poorest communities hardest. The church will become part of the solution when it is present, when it engages with the toughest parts, and in so doing allows itself to be transformed, becoming one with those amongst whom it works. It is of course good news to the poor, release to captives, recovery of sight to the blind and freedom for the oppressed.

We worship at the end of another Week of Prayer for Christian Unity, pondering that as Christians we have not yet achieved the kind of incarnational union in Christ that God envisages for the whole world, but that is the vision which we express in our worship, however imperfectly, around this altar with bread and wine. At the ordination of Bishop Cherry, in spite of our differences, could even *sharing* this aspiration be a sign of unity in which all can participate? This is why our prayers are vital, for they give voice to our vision, as we seek to discern what God longs to see when we pray *Your kingdom come on earth as it is in heaven*. I was grateful recently to be reminded that the Lord's Prayer is not *My* father, Give *me* this day *my* daily bread, Forgive *me my* trespasses, but *Our* father, Give *us* this day *our* daily bread, Forgive *us* *our* trespasses, and Lead *us* not into temptation.... it is life *together* that is made possible in the crib and the cross. This crucifix represents that vision. With arms stretched out it is a bridge between earth and heaven, life as it is and life as it should be; it is a place of scandal and yet also the sign of God's love and complete self-giving, which makes all our acts of self-offering into a pattern of life which transforms people and situations wherever it happens. We call it Eternal, because it knows no bounds!

Cherry, may you be blessed in your blessing, and may we all be blessed by God who loved us so much, that he gave of himself that we might know what it is truly to live.

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