

Chester Cathedral

24.10.10

2 Tim 4, 6-8, 16-18

Luke 18, 9-14

Theme: Community, Pride and Humility

As a child I got to appreciate the novels of Charles Dickens through the excellent BBC TV dramas of the 1960s – Great Expectations, Oliver Twist, – and one character I can see in my mind’s eye still – from David Copperfield – Uriah Heep. He was an odious, slimy man, ever trying to ingratiate himself with others – he was proud of his humility, and made sure others knew: clapping his hands and bowing his head “Oh sir, we are so very ‘umble” “I am well aware that I am the ‘umblest person going ... My mother is likewise a very ‘umble person. We live in an ‘umble abode.” (Pause)

Today’s Gospel reading is all about pride and humility before God, humbling or exalting ourselves before God. We know that humility is a Christian virtue but, this week, three encounters here in the Cathedral have sharpened my awareness that our humility needs to be genuine, from the heart – like the tax-collector standing afar off – its good to recognise that our starting point with God is from a position of weakness and frailty. As St Paul puts it “All have sinned and fall short of the glory of God.”

My first encounter this week was with Father Gabriel Everitt, Headmaster of Ampleforth College in North Yorkshire, who was here last Wednesday to preach at the Commemoration service for The King’s School.

Before I met him I imagined that he would be an imposing figure, a truly head masterly person. But he wasn’t. For a start he was my height (5foot 4inches), so I could look him in the eyes – and he was dressed very simply – in the black habit of a Benedictine monk. In his address he pondered what King Henry VIII might have

thought of a monk giving an address in this place where Henry destroyed and disbanded the monastic community. And of course Fr. Gabriel's address was to the King's School, founded by Henry, what delightful irony.

I was touched by Fr. Gabriel's message, it was all about 2 concepts that today's society finds difficult: - humility and community. We considered the famous saying of the French Philosopher Descartes, "I think, therefore I am" emphasising self and individuality.

Fr. Gabriel contrasted this with an African Proverb "We are, and so I am" emphasising our need of others in order to discover our true selves.

Fr. Gabriel is Headmaster of a school community but at the same time is an ordinary member of a monastic community whose watchword is Humility, the kind of humility shown by Jesus himself, our master and Lord, but also our servant and Saviour.

At Chester Cathedral we are fortunate indeed to have close links with the community at Ampleforth. Their community is a bit complicated, school and monastery – imagine the scope for pride and status-seeking, conflict and misunderstanding.

Our community is, if anything, more complex – we have clergy, staff, volunteers, many different worshipping congregations.

Who are we?

What are we?

How shall we worship God?

How shall we love each other?

(Pause)

How shall we worship God?

My second encounter this week was with the choirs of the RSCM, the Royal School of Church Music, 200 choristers from across Cheshire, gathered here last night to sing for the joy of singing and to praise God for the joy of praising. Week by week in Churches large and small they faithfully lead the musical offering of God's people. Their resources are limited, they are sometimes disheartened, but, again from the words of St Paul – they fight the fight, they run the race, they keep the faith. In other words they stick at it. Brothers and sisters, we are greatly enriched and blessed if we hold in our prayers always the churches and congregations of our Diocese. In worshipping God week by week they reach the people that Cathedrals alone can never reach. They achieve much with seemingly little. And they don't give up, they have stickability.

So there are 2 encounters, undoubtedly with communities of believers that have made me feel humble, but have inspired me as well.

My final encounter was spending just three quarters of an hour with John Vincent, chaplain to 1 Mercian, part of the Regiment I'll be joining for the Warrington to Chester marathon run next week.

1 Mercian has evolved from the Cheshire regiment, and we have a chapel in the South Transept, and a regimented garden near the bell tower which emphasizes our relationship as a Cathedral with this part of The British Army.

Are they part of our Cathedral community? That's a testing question – for instance, as a Cathedral we're also part of Churches Together in Chester City Centre of which the Quakers are a part. Can our community embrace both Pacifists and People who go to war?

And indeed would we classify them as a community of believers?

Faith is not a requirement for entry into the army, indeed, as we know, it includes quite rightly soldiers of other faiths. But the Regiment has Christian roots, and wants to come here for its homecoming service. So, for them, this is part of home and it has been said that in the heat and desperation of battle, many soldiers pray.

Padre John Vincent struck me as a sincere, quietly spoken man, humble in the truest sense. The Mercian Regiment has borne heavy losses during this current tour of duty in Afghanistan. Nine soldiers have been killed so far, most of them young lads. Many more have been wounded and traumatized. John and I sought to plan an appropriate homecoming service here for Thursday November 11th. It will be packed. Folk may have to stand outside. But we can be sure that the service will not glorify violence or war.

Rather I think it will take us to the heart of what this Cathedral is all about. How shall we worship God on that day? Some with anger and grief. Some with many questions for God. But hundreds of soldiers and families will be there and we'll do our level best to ensure that squaddies and officers and grieving relatives can sense God's love for them. (Pause).

I reckon that today's Gospel reading about the Pharisee and the tax collector gives us a starting point for understanding what a Cathedral community might look like. It has to be more than a phrase that we use thoughtlessly or lightly. It implies commitment and love. The scary thing, as we have just seen, is that many come to us and want to belong. People like Father Gabriel and Christians from other denominations – Anglicans from all over Cheshire, not all from Royal School of Church Music churches, but Charismatics, Evangelicals, Prayer book Society, High and Low – this is their Cathedral. And the serving soldier – as one journalist described

on she met “bright, shrewd, incorrigible, vulgar, cynical, heroic.” Yes, they see this as their Cathedral too.

What might the Cathedral community look like? Well, after my encounters this week, I’m pretty certain it starts with the heartfelt humility of the tax-collector in the Gospel, beating his breast “God be merciful to me as a sinner,” Jesus says he went home justified, forgiven, redeemed, included, welcomed.

It’s in the nature of the size of this building and our location at the heart of The City that we will always have complexities and issues in our life together – but that’s ok – it has ever been so.

What keeps us together as God’s people in this place is a recognition that in the journey of faith we can never go it alone, never self-sufficient or self-reliant – it’s terribly un-British. We need God, every minute, every moment and we need each other – to appreciate and affirm the gifts of others, recognising how much of a blessing they are to our lives – and by the way when we say ‘others’ we continually find that we’re going beyond boundaries. (Pause)

To our discomfort and certainly to our surprise, God ushers into his community all kinds of people. Thank God for that African proverb “We are. And so I am.”

