

The Parish Church of St Laurence, Ludlow
A Sermon Preached
at
The Parish Eucharist
The Second Sunday in Lent
16th March, 2014

Stan worked for Avery Scales and drove around Greater Manchester in his little van servicing weighing machines in shops and offices. A faithful member of the congregation, he was in the choir when I was a curate in Ashton-under-Lyne. I have a distinct memory of him one Palm Sunday (and Palm Sunday was either Stainer's *The Crucifixion* or Maunder's *Olivet to Calvary*), with tears in his eyes singing that movement "God so loved the world" from John Stainer's oratorio *The Crucifixion* and saying to me afterwards: "They catch you, those words".

Indeed, and so they should!

I'm not sure how this has happened, and sadly it is now nothing new, but in the midst of our church's seemingly endless obsession with her domestic agenda we may be excused for thinking that we have forgotten that there is a bleeding world out there for which Christ died. Where, might we ask ourselves, is the church's prophetic cutting edge and our seminal contribution to the building of a decent society where love is at the heart of justice? What does it mean for us today to be the living presence of Christ in the world?

We underestimate the urgency of our missionary task at our peril. This came home to me with a piercing clarity the other week when, in discussing with a bereaved family the appropriateness or otherwise of certain symbols on a grave stone, I was asked by the daughter-in-law: "Why is the cross a Christian symbol?"

Next year is the fortieth anniversary of the enthronement of John V Taylor as Bishop of Winchester. His enthronement sermon was entitled *Christ at Both Ends of The Line*. It was a reflection on the message from Jesus given by the angel to the first witnesses of the resurrection: "See you in Galilee". The sermon was a powerful plea for the church to get involved in the world - our Galilees - of work and where decisions are made and not to become bound by our Jerusalems of church and institution. It is a message we desperately need to hear and heed today.

I sometimes feel that we take the church as an institution far too seriously and not least in these over-managed days where many feel like apparatchiks of Church House Westminster. By all means take God and each other and his creation seriously (and that we must and God forgive us if we don't!), but not the church. The church is provisional. The history of the church is one of alterations and crossings out, written in pencil and not indelible registrar's ink.

Jesus came proclaiming the Good News of the Kingdom of God. Right at the heart of that are those powerful words "God so loved the world." Those of you who love the Book of Common Prayer will remember hearing those words, The Comfortable Words, week by week at the Eucharist after the absolution. God so loved the world; not, God so loved the church.

It was John Robinson, in many ways The Church of England's Tony Benn of the 1960s, who wrote in 1965 in his book *The New Reformation?* that the house of God is not the church but the world. "The house of God is not the Church but the world. The Church is the servant, and the first characteristic of a servant is that he lives in someone else's house, not his own."

Bill Vanstone was a great Manchester parish priest as well as being one of the greatest post-war theologians of his generation. He turned down all the glittering prizes so that he could stay with his people on the Kirkholt housing estate in Rochdale. The sitting

room of his Vicarage was like Hilda Ogden's front room with ducks on the wall. A committed chain smoker, he went once, with a particularly bad chest, to the doctor's. The doctor advised him to go on to a milder cigarette. So he came off Capstan Full Strength and went on to Woodbines.

Towards the end of his ministry he started to write books. His first one was *Love's Endeavour, Love's Expense*, an extended essay on the self-emptying of God in Christ. At the end of the book there is a poem entitled *A Hymn to the Creator* and it concludes with these words:

“Thou art God; no monarch Thou
Thron'd in easy state to reign;
Thou art God, Whose arms of love
Aching, spent, the *world* sustain.”

Just as the Holy Spirit drove Jesus into the wilderness in this season we observe as Lent, the Holy Spirit drives us into the world. Lent concludes on Maundy Thursday as we listen to the Gospel reading of Jesus washing the disciples' feet: the ultimate picture of power being manifested in service, self-giving and love.

God grant us grace in the midst of all our temptations and distractions, to look outwards and get stuck in and be his powerful servants for the Kingdom of God in His world. Amen