

Priest at the crossroads

It's a real honour to have been asked to deliver this Jeffry Wilcox memorial lecture. Last week it was All Souls' Day and, as I presided at the very first of the three Eucharists in the cathedral that day, I read out the names of those who'd died in the past year. There amongst the names was that of Jeffry. It was a poignant moment for me as I thought about coming here to Ludlow to be with you.

Back in 1995 I arrived in Southwark after having served for eleven years as a priest in inner-city Leeds to take up the post of Chaplain to the Bishop. Leeds was a fast changing northern city where there was plenty going on, but it was, to be honest, a bit of a culture shock to arrive in Southwark and South London. It seemed like a different country and it seemed like a different church that I'd suddenly entered into.

I knew about Southwark, of course; it had, and it still has, something of a reputation in the Church of England, something of an unruly teenager who needs reigning in from time to time. To be honest, and I'll say something about this later, some of that reputation is no longer realistic, but back in '95 it seemed very different to me and the issues that were being confronted and addressed in the diocese were ones we hadn't yet even been thinking about in Leeds.

I was given a house to live in on the outskirts of Croydon. At that time Croydon had the reputation of being a good place to go shopping. So my partner and I were able to enjoy getting to know another town centre. There was a big department store there, Alders, there was a large and vibrant shopping centre, Whitgift, named after a former Archbishop of Canterbury, John Whitgift, archbishop from 1583 – 1604 whose summer palace was in Croydon and the place where he's buried. It was a buzzing, lovely place – the town not his resting place! But you only had to step from your front door to notice that things were very different to Leeds.

The traffic for a start off, the pace, and the people. I began to realise that I was often the only white face on a bus, that the world around me was more diverse ethnically than I'd ever experienced before. In the language of the great film 'The Wizard of Oz', of Dorothy to her dog, "Toto, I've a feeling we're not in Kansas anymore." It felt as dramatic as that.

That first summer at the time of the Gay Pride march in central London, my partner and I decided that we wouldn't go on the march but we were going up to the west end to shop. So we got on the Tube at Tooting Bec, our nearest station, only to discover when we got to Clapham that two guys in Marie Antoinette wigs boarded the train and sat down. Nobody batted an eye lid; there was no murmur, no looking – in fact and ironically, I think it was only we two who were looking! There was on one level complete acceptance of two men dressed like eighteenth century queens sat on a tube train and on another level, complete indifference. We were the only ones ... surprised, let me say. We'd entered another world, another England.

Bishop's House, the name of the residence of the Bishops of Southwark, is not in some Trollopian close with a soaring steeple to one side, honey coloured cloisters to the other and a sward of green lawn between. No such close exists in the Diocese of Southwark. The Cathedral, if you know it, has only been the cathedral since 1905. Previously it was a parish church and before the reformation it was an Augustinian Priory. So whilst it is the oldest gothic church in London it exists cheek by jowl with the rest of the world around it. The reason for the creation of the Diocese of Southwark was the explosion of building and population in south London following the arrival of the railways. New districts flourished

and old villages – Dulwich and Camberwell and Streatham and the like – became simply dormitories for the clerks rushing over London Bridge into the city.

I love that very evocative passage in T S Eliot's monumental poem 'The Wasteland'

*Unreal City,
Under the brown fog of a winter dawn,
A crowd flowed over London Bridge, so many,
I had not thought death had undone so many.
Sighs, short and infrequent, were exhaled,
And each man fixed his eyes before his feet.
Flowed up the hill and down King William Street,
To where Saint Mary Woolnoth kept the hours
With a dead sound on the final stroke of nine.*

Eliot captures the mood on the bridge that we still see so often on news clips on the TV when they're reporting on stuff in the City of London. The crowd flows 'Under the brown fog of a winter dawn' and so often in the background you see the huge, unsteeped tower of the Cathedral. It's a tidal flow of humanity.

One transatlantic visitor famously asked one of our Welcomers why we'd decided to build the Cathedral so close to a railway line. She received a little history lesson in return for her question!

But for us there, set in that place, in the midst of it all, a built symbol of the incarnation, the proximity of real life is so important. The Poet Laureate, Carol Ann Duffy, came to us to write a poem about the cathedral. This is the poem she wrote – it's called 'A Human Haunt'.

*St Mary Overie, St Saviour, Southwark,
over the river, a human haunt in stone,
thousand years here, the sweet Thames well recalls.
Who came? Nuns, brothers, in good faith, saints,
poets- John Gower, whose blind head, look, rests
on the pillow of his books; Chaucer, imagining
the pilgrims' first steps on the endless written road
we follow now, good readers; Shakespeare,
with twenty cold shillings for a funeral bell-
players, publicans, paupers, politicians, princes,
all to this same, persistent, changing space,
between fire and water, theatre and marketplace;
us, lighting our candles in the calm cathedral,
future ghosts, eating our picnic on a bench.*

Duffy speaks of the human haunt, but the early twentieth century southern USA writer, Flannery O'Connor, coins a phrase that's picked up by Bishop Richard Harris for the title of his latest book.

'I think it is safe to say that while the South is hardly Christ-centred, it is most certainly Christ-haunted.'

Whilst Southwark may be new it's old and haunted by many spectres, but Christ also haunts the area. Church going is still high and not least amongst those who are the latest to arrive

in a district of arrivals. Immigration has been the life blood of our area – it has been and God and Brexit willing, it always will be.

But the Bishop of Southwark doesn't even live by the river where the Cathedral is, but rather lives in Streatham, on the edge of Tooting Bec Common and in the parish of St Leonard Streatham. So when I arrived fresh from Leeds life I had to discover how to negotiate one of the busiest and nastiest junctions in south London on which two churches stand. On one corner stands the Roman Catholic Church of the English Martyrs. It's a good solid building, late 19th century, large, imposing and with a fine spire. But it's a jonnie-come-lately, because on the opposite corner is the church of St Leonard, the church where Jeffrey was the Rector when I arrived, the bishop and his household being his parishioners.

I mentioned a moment ago that south London is made up of new districts and expanded villages. Streatham and Tooting Bec are just such villages. In Leeds if I'd heard the word Beck, such as Killingbeck a mile or so from my old parish, I would have thought of a small brook. But the Bec in this instance refers to the great Benedictine monastery of Bec in France, the source of three Archbishops of Canterbury, Lanfranc, Anselm and Theobald. Anselm, until Rowan Williams, was the greatest theologian to sit in the Chair of St Augustine and it was the Benedictine Abbey at Bec that was given the land that subsequently became known as Tooting Bec after the Norman Conquest.

And Streatham itself was a lovely village, just the place to build your country house for when you needed to leave the dirt and noise of the city. If you want to know more than read the novel by Beryl Bainbridge called 'According to Queeney', a fictionalized account of the last years of the life of Samuel Johnson as seen through the eyes of Queeney Thrale, eldest daughter of Henry and Hester Thrale. The Thrales lived in Streatham Park, a grand house in what was then lovely Surrey countryside. They were brewers who, when in town, lived at their brewery next to what is now Southwark Cathedral. One of their babies is buried in the Cathedral but the rest of the Thrales are buried in the crypt of St Leonard's.

The oldest parts of the present church are 14th century and you can find figures of knights and fine brasses and monuments there. But the church was mainly rebuilt by the Victorians with an equally great spire to that of the neighbouring Roman Catholic Church, so that the homeless project run ecumenically is called 'The Spires Project'. But the church was gutted by fire on 5 May 1975 and had to be completely rethought inside.

I was reminded when I first went into the church of words from St Paul's First Letter to the Corinthians

'The work of each builder will become visible, for the Day will disclose it, because it will be revealed with fire, and the fire will test what sort of work each has done.'

When the church was restored after the fire the damage wasn't hidden away. It became part of the story of the church, 'I bear on my body the marks of Jesus' wrote Paul to the Galatians. This church bears the scars and yet, as with the Risen Christ showing the wounds to his startled friends in the Upper Room, life continues whilst the scars remain.

One of my favourite poets of the last century is the Welsh priest R S Thomas and he wrote this – it's called 'Kneeling'

*Moments of great calm,
Kneeling before an altar
Of wood in a stone church
In summer, waiting for the God*

*To speak; the air a staircase
For silence; the sun's light
Ringing me, as though I acted
A great role. And the audiences
Still; all that close throng
Of spirits waiting as if
For the message.
Prompt me, God;
But not yet. When I speak,
Though it be you who speak
Through me, something is lost.
The meaning is in the waiting.*

We kneel and wait.

I called this address 'Priest at the crossroads' because when I thought about Jeffry and when I thought about St Leonard's, the place from which he retired, the two and the location seemed woven together. The crossroads on which the church stands, over which it still presides, is where the A23, the London to Brighton road and the A216 which leads to Mitcham and Morden, intersect. The A23 is now of course the road not just to Brighton but Gatwick Airport and more locally the Purley Way with the twin towers of Ikea, the rival to the twin spires of Streatham, beckoning shoppers who've abandoned the centre of a now much diminished Croydon town centre to the new cathedrals of consumerism. To the north lies Brixton with its noise and vibrancy and diversity and edginess and as you look from the road beyond Brixton, the Shard and the great commercial buildings of the City of London and Southwark that dwarf and drown the tower of the Cathedral. Fortunately the Dome of St Paul's, a view protected by law, can still be seen.

There are constant queues of traffic at the lights. You have to allow extra time to get through this junction, this crossroads, you need patience in this place.

It seemed to me on meeting him that Jeffry was the perfect priest for this place because he was someone prepared to look at what crossroads offered and not to be frightened of them – he seemed to me to be the archetypal Southwark priest – or what was the archetype! I fear that the fire has gone out of the belly, even for priests in Southwark – that the new priorities of growth in numbers, and management styles and fresh expressions have ousted theology from the agenda.

I found a poem by Kit McCullum, entitled 'The Road Less Travelled'. This is part of it.

*While standing at a crossroads in life,
The urge is to take the most comfortable path;
The road with least resistance ...
The shortest or most travelled route.*

*And yet, if we've been down that comfortable road before;
Have gleaned its lessons in life, and learned from our experiences;*

*Do we yet again follow the known?
Or does our destiny lie in another direction?*

*The fear of the road less travelled is tangible and all too real;
It manifests itself in many ways,
And tends to cloud the issues that might otherwise be clear.*

Back in 1963 the then Bishop of Woolwich, one of the three Area Bishops in Southwark, John Robinson, published a book which caused as much of a stir in the country as Bishop Michael Curry's sermon at Harry and Meghan's wedding did. 'Honest to God' was a publishing phenomenon. It caused a stir because it presented options for the church and options for theology in a way that ordinary people, who didn't have vast theological knowledge, could appreciate and engage with.

Robinson seemed to be talking about the things people wanted to talk about as they emerged from the horrors of war and the realisation of the holocaust and the privations of ongoing rationing, and the rise of feminism and the development of mass media, and all the rest of it - how we do mission, how we do discipleship, how we follow Jesus, how we talk of God in the post-war, secular, modern world in which the church is set? It sparked a movement which became known as 'South Bank Religion' and it was at home in the place in which it began, the Diocese of Southwark.

Robinson struggles with the concept of a world without religion. I'm not sure that what he predicted, that the church would not survive another generation, has actually proved to be true in fact, clearly, it hasn't proved to be true. I think that what Flannery O'Connor said is more like the case, that we are 'Christ-haunted', that people don't not believe, they believe without belonging, to use a phrase of the sociologist Grace Davie. People haven't abandoned God they abandon the church. As G K Chesterton famously said

When a man stops believing in God he doesn't then believe in nothing, he believes anything.

The Christ-haunting is real and the institutional church is irrelevant for the exercise of most people's business with God. And you can understand this. As you head along the A23 to Purley Way's world of choice, to Ikea's yellow brick road through the must have's of modern living, why would you stop at the church, why would you stop even at a church on the cross roads like St Leonard's.

In much of his thinking Robinson is influenced by Dietrich Bonhoeffer, the German Lutheran theologian murdered by the Nazis who for a time lived and worked in the Diocese of Southwark. And reflecting on what Bonhoeffer says Robinson writes

'There is a way .. to the transcendent in a world without religion. And on that way the Christian must be found if he is to say anything to those who walk along it.'

'The Wizard of Oz' is a classic film – my Christmas wouldn't be the same without it. Frank Baum's children's classic, brought to life back in 1939 just as the world was plunged into the most horrendous war and the holocaust of the Jews and of other minorities, communists, gays, gypsies, turbulent priests, became an icon of another world. And it did it not just through the acting and singing of Judy Garland but also the amazing use of a new technique called 'Technicolour'. None of us who've seen it can forget that moment when Dorothy, clutching her dog Toto to her, steps from the house that's landed on the witch, from the black and white world of Kansas into the multi-colour world of Oz. It was a magical moment.

And in the film Dorothy and her companions arrive at a crossroads. They are to follow the yellow brick road, but which way? And they make their choice. It was all a metaphor for a new world. But the crossroads keep on coming and we have to navigate them – and priests and people have to navigate them – that's the vocation of the church.

There's a crossroad moment in the gospels. St Luke tells us in Luke 9.51

'When the days drew near for him to be taken up, he set his face to go to Jerusalem.'

It was after the Transfiguration, that pivotal moment in the gospels when the focus of the story moves away from Galilee. But for Jesus it was a decision. Which way should he choose? As in the agony in the garden when he must choose whether the path to the cross was the right way to go, so here he must also choose – itinerant preacher and miracle worker in sleepy Galilee or, well, messiah, victim, offering, saviour – choose your word. Moses and Elijah appear. Both have been travellers – Moses through the wilderness, Elijah escaping the wrath of the political leadership of his day. But both, with the voice of the Father, encourage Jesus. His disciples are not happy – take another road, choose another option – they want to suggest. But Jesus won't – this is the path, not the easy road, not the 'comfortable path' of McCullum's poem, but the right path that will lead from death to life.

The journey and the road is a powerful motif in the scriptures. Most of Jesus' ministry if you think about it is exercised on the road. That's where many of the miracles take place, meeting people along the road – Zacchaeus up his tree, blind Bartimaeus, the women with haemorrhages, the centurion with the sick slave, Jairus the synagogue leader – and many more besides – they were on the option path, the road he'd chosen to walk.

But after the resurrection Luke takes us to another road, the road to Emmaus. No one knows quite where the village of Emmaus was – there are a few contenders for the title in the Holy Land. But what we do know is that it was just a days journey from Jerusalem – so like in a Phil and Kirsty 'Location, location, location' search we can draw a circle around the area it would've been.

Two of the disciples, Cleopas and the unnamed person – but may it have been Mary, the wife of Clopas mentioned at the crucifixion - are escaping the madness of Jerusalem and heading back along the road to their own home and village. Then a stranger joins them and walks with them. They come to a junction

'As they came near the village to which they were going, he walked ahead as if he were going on. But they urged him strongly, saying, 'Stay with us, because it is almost evening and the day is now nearly over.' So he went in to stay with them.'

It was Jesus who was the companion on the road, who made himself known at their table in the breaking of the bread, Jesus who'd walked with them until the decision had to be made, this way or that?

Let me remind you of what John Robinson said

'on that way the Christian must be found if he is to say anything to those who walk along it.'

Jesus was the companion on the road, opening the scriptures, making the connections for these two travellers, who were lost, not in the sense that they didn't know where they were going, but lost in the sense that their world had lost all points of reference. Jesus, the way finder had gone. They were lost.

Later on Christians would first be called people 'of the Way'. We're people on the road constantly negotiating the crossroads and that's where priests need to be, and not just priests but all of us, whatever our calling, whatever our discipleships. It's a world of options. Those two guys put on their Marie Antoinette wigs because they wanted to and they could do and because they had pride in their sexuality. People all around us are making choices which have left old High Streets in tatters and the new High Streets on line blossoming and

thriving. The old choices are old choices but that doesn't mean navigating the crossroads is any easier – in fact it's more difficult.

So should we simply stand at the crossroads, at the junctions and call people on to the right path? But what is the 'right path'? When people are talking about sexuality and gender and rights and politics and money and borders and ethnicity and threat and what is passing and what is permanent and their hopes and their fears and everything else, where should we be?

Well, I would say, walking with them, being Jesus on the way, being Jesus on the road. Not shouting and waving to tell them that they have chosen the wrong path – because as Stevie Smith reminded us waving and drowning can be confused, but having the guts to be their companions, even if we think it's not the right road.

The seventeenth century poet Henry Vaughn lived and wrote in turbulent times. It was the era of Cromwell and the Commonwealth. All around seemed to be in flux and nothing was as it was once known. But he kept faith with God, as his much admired friend, George Herbert did at the same time. Vaughn wrote this in a poem called 'I walk'd the other day'.

*O Thou! whose spirit did at first inflame
And warm the dead,
And by a sacred incubation fed
With life this frame,
Which once had neither being, form, nor name;
Grant I may so
Thy steps track here below,*

*That in these masques and shadows I may see
Thy sacred way;
And by those hid ascents climb to that day,
Which breaks from Thee,
Who art in all things, though invisibly!
Shew me thy peace,
Thy mercy, love, and ease.*

The old saying was that 'All roads lead to Rome' but my grandma used to subvert that and tell us all roads lead to Jerusalem. That's what Jesus found as he set his face and took the path with his companions. I think we have to trust the same whatever and wherever the crossroads is on which we now stand.

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