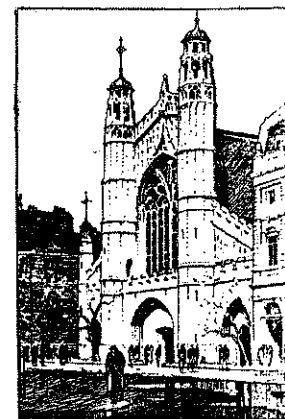


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SELECTED SERMONS
AT
HOLY TRINITY
SLOANE SQUARE



14 OCTOBER 2007

FINAL SERMON AS RECTOR OF
HOLY TRINITY

BISHOP MICHAEL MARSHALL

A Sermon for the
Nineteenth Sunday After Trinity

14 October 2007

Bishop Michael Marshall

Final Sermon as Rector of
Holy Trinity Sloane Square

Perfecter of a true faith in God. Then and then only will the contentious issues fall into place in the multi-dimensional jigsaw puzzle of God's purposes – not immediately perhaps but ultimately and in God's good time. There really is a great thirst out there for the genuine thing, but not for decaffeinated Christianity the sort that promises not to keep you awake at night! I only wish I were ten years younger because I really believe this is paradoxically a time and season of great opportunity to talk about the things of God and to connect with the real questions and agonies of a civilization already on the ethical slippery slope of decline and self-destruction.

Yet as St Paul in his Epistle looks both ways – back with gratitude and joy for our partnership in the gospel, but also looking to the unknown future at the end of his ministry with hope and commitment; so, may I, and I hope together with you also, in our different ways may we move from the comfort zone of the known past to the risky deep waters of faith in the future so that he who has begun a good work in us will perfect it unto the day of our Lord Jesus Christ.

Bishop Hugh Montefiore wrote his autobiography at the end of his days entitled: 'Oh God, What Next?' Each chapter ends with that same question: 'Oh God, what next, but never expressed as a throw of the hand in despair or just with a sense of fate. No! No Hugh's God as Paul's God and as your God and mine is a God of surprises, a God of the unexpected who I believe has already got something prepared for all of us so long as we are prepared to walk by faith and trust in His way who is the true Way to fullness of life.

So 'Oh God, what next?' Well, only God knows, and I for one am rather pleased it's that way and hope it always will be – for all of you, as well as for me.

Make no mistake about it: I love the Church of God: it is the mother of my faith, by which I came to know the Lord Jesus as my Saviour. But I love the Church most when it talks least about itself and mostly about Him – Jesus who is Lord of the Church. I really believe that it is blasphemous especially at the present time whenever and wherever the Church persists in ecclesiastical squabbles and that obsession with ecclesiastical naval-gazing. Who is for this issue and who against that issue? No! 'Fix your eyes upon Jesus;' as that old revivalist hymn tells us to do or as it says in the Epistle to the Hebrews: 'Looking to Jesus the Author and perfecter of our Faith.' The trouble is we've taken our eyes off the ball of the gospel – the good news – and reverted to a religion of the rulebook. As you've heard me say many times: Christianity is not another ideology competing among other ideologies; nor is Christianity a philosophy confined to any one political party; nor even a religion in the usual sense of the word. No Christianity is not anything; **Christianity is SomeBODY. It is Jesus and the Resurrection and Christians are a resurrection people perennially witnessing to new life out of death with alleluia as our song.**

If we here at Holy Trinity can persist in an age (as the Bishop of London said this past week) – in an age of both promise and peril. If we can persist by word and deed and in the way we live together in pointing to Jesus and lifting him up to our world and culture in every possible way then, as he himself promised, he will draw all men and women to himself. And then we shall not need to worry about the Church attendance. The authentic Jesus as opposed to that caricature of him so often portrayed by the church, is at the last irresistible.

So many people today – I really believe – are saying in effect what those Greeks you remember said to the weary disciples of Jesus: 'Sirs, we would see Jesus' or as the NEB translation puts it: 'Sirs it's Jesus we want to see' - not General Synod or even the Lambeth Conference - but Jesus, the Author and

TEXT: As a boy cycling through the flat countryside of Lincolnshire where I was brought up, I would frequently come across railway crossings with those wobbly, oversized gates opening and closing for passing trains. A big warning sign in huge, bold letters read: STOP: LOOK BOTH WAYS!

STOP LOOK BOTH WAYS! – and that is precisely what I shall attempt to do this morning. And to help me to do that, I've taken as my text, words from St. Paul's letter to the Philippians. ***'I thank my God upon every remembrance of you all for our partnership in the Gospel from the first day until now.'*** But at the outset, just two facts about this particular letter written to the Church in Philippi:

FIRST this is Paul's last known letter written at the very end of his ministry...

BUT SECONDLY, and perhaps more pertinent for us this morning, the letter to the Philippians was written from prison while Paul was awaiting trial, when he would be subsequently condemned to death **AND YET** – paradoxically and significantly – it is Paul's most joyful and heartfelt letter. Indeed the word 'joy' occurs more times in this one short letter than in all his others put together. Furthermore it is clearly a joy that springs from thanksgiving, - a thankfulness for the past, as Paul looks back on his missionary work in Philippi, matched only by real faith and hope for the future – a faith and hope rooted and grounded in the assurance of God's continuing faithfulness. So like Paul, let us this morning, stop and look both ways with the same thankfulness and a quiet confidence.

I find so much comfort in the particular letter of Paul, this morning, as I together with you step out from the known past to the unknown future, stopping and looking both ways: to the known past with profound thanksgiving and to the unknown future with faith and hope. **BUT** a faith and hope **NOT** in what

you or I can do at this point, but rather in what God has done in the past and will faithfully continue to do for both of us in the surprises of an unknown future. And all this because I need to know and so do you that this is not my church or your church. No: it is God's church and that is the rock on which all else is founded or otherwise will flounder.

So can I say this morning in the words of St Paul to the church at Philippi as I stop and look back. ***'I thank my God upon every remembrance of you all for our partnership in the Gospel from the first day until now.'***

Yes, indeed I do – thankfulness, yes thankfulness, but please a thankfulness for our **PARTNERSHIP IN THE GOSPEL** – a partnership with each other and supremely with God – for that is what authentic ministry is all about. It must not be a soloist performance – not even a piano concerto but nothing less than a symphonic chorus with everyone playing a part; with Jesus as the leader and all under the baton of the Holy Spirit. I want you to know that I have been blessed in this place by so many of you here today as well as by my clergy colleagues who have banded together with me, as by God's grace the Church of God has been built up in this place into a shrine and Holy place, where lives are touched and healed and where prayer is validated.

So thankfulness – yes, profound thankfulness. It was W. H. Auden who said: 'Let your last thinks be thanks!' I like that!

And so by God's grace Holy Trinity is today a church open all day and everyday for everybody – and not, certainly a religious ghetto or clique nor even a religious club opening at club hours for club members only. The difference between a group or a clique is defined by which way peoples' bottoms are facing! In a clique or ghetto "it's bottoms outwards" – **inward looking, obsessed with in-house concerns.** Whereas, with an outward looking group which is what the

Church should be, it's the very reverse – bottoms facing inwards and everyone looking outwards in awareness at the concerns of the world around them. But believe me, turning a closed clique into an open group, demands nothing less than a major reshuffle – breaking hands to turn around through ninety degrees in what the Bible calls conversion. The baptismal question: 'Do you turn to Christ?' marks that turning point and moment, literally turning the Church inside out in order to let the outsider in.

So then I look back this morning with deep gratitude to you for all our partnership in the gospel from that very first day – May 18th 1997. And so began the last but also the happiest chapter in my whole ministry of nearly half a century.

Well, so much for the past, but what about the future. Of course we shall all pray earnestly and daily I hope for the guidance of the Holy Spirit upon those responsible for the choice of my successor. But at the end of the day, it really is God's Church so that the institutional Church as such should not be our **prime** concern. No – our prime concern from first to last must be the Kingdom – God's Kingdom: building up the Church – yes of course – but in order (and this is the point of it all) but in order to forward God's Kingdom of love and joy and beauty and peace in a world darkened by ugliness, despair, greed and violence. To plant, as Father Nadim has taught us in the Awareness Course of the Trinity Foundation – to plant (No!) – to embody as the Body of Christ at all times and in all places the culture of God in the many different cultures of this great world City.

But, for God's sake literally, the Church today must be ready to take risks to cast out into the deep with a passion for truth and exploration. I once heard faith defined as a four letter word spelled R.I.S.K. After all, true mission is all about love and love is the riskiest business of all – and the God of love knows all about that and so must his church.