

Homily for People and Parishes...

Bishop Cam Venables – Sunday, 25th February 2024, Lent 2

Readings: **Genesis 17:1-7, 15-16**
Romans 4:13-25

Psalms 22:24-32
Mark 8:31-38

In February each year the bishops gather for a few days with Anglican school principals in what has become known as 'The Heads Retreat'. It is a wonderful time of shared prayer and conversation in which each participant can be encouraged and challenged in life, faith, and leadership. Four sessions of small-group discussion unpack a book that has been read before we arrive, and I found this year's book filled with insight for both schools and parishes.

The book is titled, *'Flourishing Together: A Christian vision for students, educators and schools.'* It was jointly written by Andy Wolfe, who is the Executive Director for Education in the Church of England, and Dr Lynn E. Swaner, who is the Chief Strategy and Innovation Officer for the Association of Christian Schools International.

Early in the book the writers suggest that schools and individuals can be 'called', 'connected', and 'committed' and each of these terms are unpacked with a constant reference to human 'flourishing'. The affirmation that we are each called by God to flourish I found provocative because 'calling' for me, evokes Jesus calling fishermen on a beach to follow him and make disciples. Jesus is not remembered saying, 'Follow me... and flourish!' The invitation from Jesus to follow is described in each of the Gospels (Mark 1:16-20; Matthew 4:18-22; Luke 5:1-11; and John 1:35-42) and I think God continues to call all of humanity to follow. But why do we 'follow' and what does it involve?

In the Gospel this week Jesus suggested to his disciples that some measure of sacrifice was necessary if they wanted to follow him! In the text he explained that he would undergo suffering and be rejected, by the elders - the chief priests, and the scribes, and then be killed... before rising three days later. It looks like Peter didn't listen well because instead of asking what Jesus meant about rising after three days, he challenged the necessity of rejection, suffering, and death. I love Peter, and think he possibly speaks for many of us when we have asked God in our own life contexts – 'Does it have to be this hard?' Or, when we are exhausted have prayed, 'I can't do this anymore!'

However, Jesus rebuked Peter in the strongest possible terms ('...get behind me Satan!') and then called all present, to come closer and listen well. He said, *'If any want to become my followers let them deny themselves, take up their cross, and follow me.'* No short cuts! No

quick fixes! But, rather a lifelong pilgrimage of faith which will require sustained effort and sacrifice: called, connected, and committed.

In our worship – both Morning Prayer and Holy Communion, we are not often reminded of the uncomfortable call to deny ourselves and take up our cross. Generally, we gather and meet as friends; we sing and pray; confess and learn; break bread and pray for blessing; before being sent out – our faith encouraged and renewed.

However, at the end of a Confirmation service the bishop spells it out clearly with the following affirmation:

“All who have been baptised and confirmed are called to study the Bible,
to take part in the life of the Church,
to share in the Holy Communion,
and to pray faithfully and regularly.

We are called to share with others,
by word and example,
the love of Christ and his gospel of reconciliation and hope.

We are called to love our neighbours as ourselves,
to honour all people and to pray and work for peace and justice.”

I think this is one way of unpacking and making clear the direction to, ‘Deny yourself, take up your cross, and follow me...’ Having made that affirmation, the bishop then invites ALL present to renew their commitment to this calling. Not just those who have been confirmed – but the whole congregation - and the response is, ‘We will gladly do so, in the strength of the Holy Spirit.’

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It’s a shame that we only hear this affirmation and invitation at Confirmation Services. I think we could helpfully use it more often. Certainly, on this second Sunday of Lent, as we seek to be drawn deeper into relationship with God and with each other, it seems appropriate to unpack and think about so, let me read it again:

All who have been baptised and confirmed are called to study the Bible,
to take part in the life of the Church,
to share in the Holy Communion,
and to pray faithfully and regularly.

Not just the clergy, and the LA’s who wear white robes in church – we are each called to study the Bible, to take part in the life of the Church, and to pray regularly.

We are called to share with others,
by word and example,
the love of Christ and his gospel of reconciliation and hope.

*Not just the clergy, and the LA's who wear white robes in church – we are each called
to share with others the love of Christ and the Gospel of reconciliation and hope.*

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to love our neighbours, honour all people, and work for peace and justice.*

In God's grace... let us 'gladly do so, in the strength of the Holy Spirit.'

Would you please join me as I close in prayer:

Gracious God, we give thanks for the gift of our lives and the gift of your love. We give thanks for your call to deny our selfishness, take up our cross, and follow Christ each day. Through your Spirit help us to study, and pray, and love, even when it's hard; even when it brings us to our knees. We pray in the name of the one who calls, Jesus Christ our Lord. Amen.