

# Sermons, Speeches & Addresses

Bishop Richard – Sermon

Chrism Mass (Liverpool Cathedral)

21<sup>st</sup> April 2011



Diocese of  
Liverpool

## Renewal of Vows – Maundy Thursday Chrism Mass

As we gather to renew our vows, I want to begin my sermon by saying, on behalf of Bishop James and myself, a big thank you to all our lay ministers and clergy – good and faithful servants of God and our Church - for your outstanding ministries and your deep commitment to mission and ministry in the Diocese of Liverpool. We are deeply grateful for the support that you give to us; your words of encouragement mean much. Thanks, to emails we get a more relaxed and immediate way of expressing ourselves, sometimes with an unintended candour. But the increasing number of emails can sometimes feel like a tyranny.

So I wonder if any of you have had to declare email bankruptcy? This is when you reach the point of receiving so many emails that you have to admit you can no longer answer them. Apparently you post a bankruptcy message instructing people that if they really must contact you, they must find another way of doing so.

We are living in an age of information overload – driven by means of communication which have profoundly changed the nature of our relationships. You can even have a “best friend” you have never met – and before you scoff, hit the “pause” button to reflect on how we relate to God? But however we look at it, this is the age of vicarious living – and of vicarious religion.

Many people want their religion done for them, no longer belonging but believing. This results in a sense of the irrelevance of the church. There is much spiritual hunger but why do people think that the last place they will be fed a meal is in a Church? Which begs questions like: “Can you have virtual sacraments?” “Can you do confession by phone? And “What makes authentically Christian worship?”

So what is the nature of breaking bread together? Indeed, what does it mean to be human and to be connected to other human beings?

For Christians, physicality and embodiment are important. If God communicates supremely by being flesh, then sacramental theology has to be important.

Most of us understand that old definition of a sacrament as being the outward and visible sign of an inner and invisible reality. What we have done, far too much in Western Christendom, is to concentrate on the inward and invisible.

It was, I think, Origen, who said that it was not just the death that Jesus died but the life that he lived which was pleasing to God. If we think of Our Lord’s life, we see how he used his senses for others. He saw Zacchaeus up his tree, he heard Bartimaeus at the back of the crowd, he felt the touch of the woman with an issue of blood, he smelt the decaying body of Lazarus and spoke to the man with demons. He touched the untouchables; he ate and drank with publicans, tax collectors and sinners.

Or, to put it in the words of scripture from the First Letter of John, chapter 1, verse 1: “We declare to you what was from the beginning what we have heard, what we have seen with our eyes, what we have looked at and touched with our hands.” This speaks of the sheer physical presence and impact of Jesus, the Sacrament of God himself, given for us. So we must never

underestimate how, in ministry, our physical presence is a sign of God's blessing and a sign of the Good News of Jesus Christ.

Our ministry, whether in the context of parish, school, hospital or prison is sacramental because it tells people – and reminds us – that no place, no community, no human being is truly God-forsaken. For if we are in those places, then so is God. We who minister have a very particular role in helping our congregations to make connections with the wider world so that they can see that their church can indeed be a ladder on which angels can ascend and descend. Without physical and engaged connections to our communities, we have no mission.

If there is physicality in the New Creation, then relationships must be key. We must not hide behind our busy-ness and get stuck behind our desks. Intimacy needs fostering and ministry must not lose its accessibility and humanity. Our ministry must never retreat behind computers, screens, iphones and wondrous technological gadgetry. It's not that we don't need it but we can so easily succumb to the temptation to believe it is Christ-like engagement. It does not display our undivided attention to the needs of another human being.

Have we not all had the mix of amazement and irritation as our children text away with one hand, eat with the other, watch the television and swear they are conducting a conversation with us all at the same time? When I attempt just a fraction of such multi-tasking, I am firmly told I am not paying attention.

And whilst on the subject of adult prejudices, let me remind you how we groan-ups bemoan the fact that our children watch far too much TV. On average a 16 year old watches 18 hours a week which compares to those in their 60s who watch over 37 hrs of tv in a week. The uncomfortable fact is that the older we get the longer we spend in front of our television sets. Never has Saturday night viewing been so popular thanks to The X-factor and Strictly and Britain's Got Talent.

And if we watch these programmes, we expect to participate. This is vicarious living. Life has become voyeuristic avoiding the need to make real relationships. No wonder each year doctors are handing out 31 million prescriptions for depression and identifying isolation as the cause.

But we know that the cure lies elsewhere. It is about becoming truly human, truly ourselves, truly the people God intended us to be so that we can value others for themselves. In an age when nearly everything is disposable, human relationships are understood as just another item of consumer society. We enjoy or abuse each other so long as we get something out of the relationship. Our friends, our allies and our partners are disposable and interchangeable. We treat each other as though there was no tomorrow.

Forming relationships is about being at ease with ourselves, about being authentically ourselves, knowing ourselves to be the beloved children of God our Father. In his novel *One for my Baby* Tony Parsons writes about a young man reflecting on how he has changed after his marriage to Rose: "Rose was on my side in a way nobody had ever been on my side. Apart from my parents and my grandparents. But they were sort of obliged to be on my side. Rose was a volunteer. She cared about me. And by loving me, she set me free. Free to be myself. "

Most of us have moments when we wish we were other than ourselves. Stripped of our masks and pretence and all that we have accumulated to clothe us, standing naked before God we fear that we are not a pretty sight. But God loves us and has called us, and remains faithful. Only when we return to this fact – and this fact alone, can we be agents of transformation, reconciliation and forgiveness. We can always be forgiven, re-shaped, re-moulded and transformed so that we become beautiful and re-formed as God intended.

The mission of reconciliation comes from the wounds of Christ. This is what we share at this Eucharist and at every service of Holy Communion as we gaze on the wounded, broken body of the Risen Lord. Our mission is characterised by wounded-ness; a mission to a wounded world; a mission entrusted to a wounded Church; and a mission carried out by wounded disciples. As we renew our vows, we share each other's wounds and ask each

other's forgiveness for the pain we cause and we turn to one another for help in healing the hurt we carry. The wounds of sin are our business. The wounds of Christ, even though we have caused them, are also our consolation and our strength.

The ways stories are told in the New Testament shows that God chooses people for authority precisely because they are sinners. Forgiveness of sin and commissioning go together. The Gospels portray Peter as both leader and sinner. But not just the Gospels. In his letter to the Galatians Paul presents Peter as a coward and a compromiser and claims to have to confront him with the true demands of the Gospel. But at the same time, Paul admits Peter's authority.

Divine authority can only be recognised when those who bear it are recognisably sinners. If we remember that authority goes hand in hand with sinfulness, then it helps us to deal with the problems of projection and false dependency. It is not the person who is sinless but rather the one who is sinful and forgiven who can mediate Christ's forgiveness. We need encouragement to be honest about our failings.

Success is not an attribute of God. But vulnerability is. If at first you don't succeed, take comfort from the words of the late Quentin Crisp: "Failure may be your style." Success is not an attribute of God. Vulnerability is. Surely that is what the Incarnation is all about. Isn't that what we focus on these last days of Holy Week.

Let us pay attention to our humanity, being recognisably members of human race and remaining connected to it. If you put learning theology before learning to be a human being, you will never know how to be pastoral, how to relate to people and how to be authentically the minister God has called you to be. Let's not take ourselves too seriously: we need to be thankful for satirists, novelists and the awkward squad who remind us of that. The important thing is authenticity

Authenticity in ministry is everything.

**Amen.**

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