

ARCHDEACON'S CHARGE
at CHRIST CHURCH, TUNBRIDGE WELLS on 9 MAY, 2016
and
at ST JOHN'S CHURCH, HILDENBOROUGH on 18 MAY, 2016
(Based on Ephesians 3: 14-21)

Thank you all for coming this evening. It is very good to be with you all once more.

Thank you for all that you do in your parishes and all that you will do over the year ahead. You have an enormously important and valuable role in the life of your local churches and communities. I know that it involves a great deal of time and effort in most cases and I — and those in your parishes — are deeply grateful to you for all that you do. Thank you too to those who have already completed the Articles of Enquiry on the Survey Monkey this year. I look forward to seeing the full results when you have all completed your Replies on those Articles.

Thank you to those who have come today to support your churchwardens on this occasion. That will be greatly appreciated by them.

Thank you to our friends here at Christ Church/Hildenborough for their kindness and hospitality this evening. We are very grateful to you. Please do pass on, too, our thanks to others who may have been involved in making this evening possible.

Thank you also to our Diocesan Registrar, Owen Carew-Jones and his colleagues at the Diocesan Registry for their support for us across the year and for coming this evening.

Thank you also to those who have provided displays and staffed stalls during the period of the registration ahead of this service. Thank you also to Maria, my PA, and her predecessor, Nora, and Sal, who is Hildenborough Parish Administrator, for their help on these occasions with the registration.

April 23rd this year saw the 400th Anniversary of the death of William Shakespeare. You will be aware that a number of special events and activities are taking place to mark this commemoration.

On that day itself, my wife, Jane, and I went up to London and we saw some of the 37 displays on video screens set up on the South Bank of extracts from the 37 plays of Shakespeare. It was fascinating. I learnt a great deal. It got me thinking. It got me researching.

One of the passages I came across in my researches was an article by the late columnist, Bernard Levin, who spoke about how we all use Shakespeare's words.

Let me read you an extract:

On Quoting Shakespeare

If you cannot understand my argument, and declare "It's Greek to me", you are quoting Shakespeare; if you claim to be more sinned against than sinning, you are quoting Shakespeare; if you recall your salad days, you are quoting Shakespeare; if you act more in sorrow than in anger; if your wish is father to the thought; if your lost property has vanished into thin air, you are quoting Shakespeare; if you have ever refused to budge an inch or suffered from green-eyed jealousy, if you have played fast and loose, if you have been tongue-tied, a tower of strength, hoodwinked or in a pickle, if you have knitted your brows, made a virtue of necessity, insisted on fair play, slept not one wink, stood on ceremony, danced attendance (on your lord and master), laughed yourself into stitches, had short shrift, cold comfort or too much of a good thing, if you have seen better days or lived in

a fool's paradise -why, be that as it may, the more fool you , for it is a foregone conclusion that you are (as good luck would have it) quoting Shakespeare;[if you think it is early days and clear out bag and baggage, if you think it is high time and that that is the long and short of it, if you believe that the game is up and that truth will out even if it involves your own flesh and blood, if you lie low till the crack of doom because you suspect foul play, if you have your teeth set on edge (at one fell swoop) without rhyme or reason, then - to give the devil his due - if the truth were known (for surely you have a tongue in your head) you are quoting Shakespeare; even if you bid me good riddance and send me packing, if you wish I was dead as a door-nail, if you think I am an eyesore, a laughing stock, the devil incarnate, a stony-hearted villain, bloody-minded or a blinking idiot, then - by Jove! O Lord! Tut tut! For goodness' sake! What the dickens! But me no buts! - it is all one to me, for you are quoting Shakespeare.]

Bernard Levin

Shakespeare is part of our English vocabulary. So, too, of course, is the Bible. One could echo Bernard Levin and write something such as this.

“If you ever speak of a labour of love, a multitude of sins, a nest of vipers, a two-edged sword or a thorn in the flesh, you are quoting the Bible. If you counsel that a person is known by the company he keeps or that a soft answer turns away wrath, or the need to make a peace offering or that it is better to give than to receive, you are quoting the Bible. If you say “let him who is without sin cast the first stone” or “let not the sun go down on your wrath” or you invite someone to “go the extra mile” you are using the words of Scripture.

If, to reinforce your point, you describe someone as old as the hills or as old as Methuselah, or you speak of something as being as white as snow, you are drawing on the imagery of Scripture, just as much as when you speak of the fat of the land, feet of clay, or the patience of Job or the wisdom of Solomon.”

“If, as a churchwarden, you seek to be all things to all men and sometimes feel that you are rather a lamb to the slaughter, that you have a cross to bear and that you are a voice crying in the wilderness, you are using words from the Bible. If you feel that many are called, but somehow only a few are chosen and you are one of the few, then you are drawing upon words from the New Testament. In such circumstances, perhaps, you are encouraged by others to fight the good fight, to have faith which will move mountains, to love thy neighbour as thyself and to recall that man does not live by bread alone, then the origins of these words are found in the Holy Book upon the lectern of your church or on the bookshelf or bedside table of your home.

Victor Hugo, the French 19th Century writer, said “*England has two books — the Bible and Shakespeare. England made Shakespeare, but the Bible made England*”.

Hopefully, in our ministry as Christian churches we can help people to become as aware of the Bible as naturally part of their heritage as any efforts to commemorate Shakespeare’s 400th Anniversary.

However, I would like to pick up the names of some of Shakespeare’s plays to reflect on some aspects of our Church life at the moment and give you some thoughts to take away

For example, is yours a “*Winter’s Tale*” church?

In the replies to the Survey Monkey Articles of Enquiry, many of you said that you have found particular encouragement this last year through Church attendances at Christmas time. It is a “*Winter’s Tale*”. People come in very great numbers at that stage. We rejoice in that, but how are we best able to move forward from those occasions into *the spring and summer seasons* which follow? Who are these people? Do we recognise them? Do we have some contact for them? What connections can be followed up and what connections can you make *where they are*, not just when they come into your church?

Is your church an “*As You Like It*” church?

From my days in Yorkshire, I remember somebody once saying:

“We know what we like and we like what we know.”

You don't have to be a Yorkshireman to feel like that. In some ways, it was a saying which could be applied to the choice of music in church. People like to sing the familiar things.

The familiar, of course, is very important, especially for older people. If you have had a chance to explore something of the dementia chaplain ministry which Julia Burton-Jones is encouraging in our Diocese at present — and see the front page of *The Link* this month about that, if you wish — you will know that, in helping the spirituality of older people and those suffering from degrees of dementia, familiar elements of Church life, liturgy, hymns and the like, can be enormously helpful to them. In part, we are giving to people in the *earlier* decades of their lives resources to help them in the *latter* decades.

One of the challenges, of course, in an *“As You Like It”* church is that different people like different things. Therefore, can your church find ways to offer, and even sustain, a variety of opportunities for worship, for Christian learning and for outreach, which connect with different types of people?

We have been used to having in our churches more than one congregation, who are still part of the entire one-church family. For example, the 8 o'clock Book of Common Prayer Communion congregation, the mid-morning congregation, the once-a-month all-age or family worship congregation. Can we see others who meet beyond Sunday and beyond the walls of our church as part of our one-church family? For example, the midweek Messy Church gathering.

I have some questions about us going too far down the *“As You Like It”* church route. We live in a very consumerist society and, in part, in a fairly consumerist part of our country. Sometimes, we have to work *not* with what *we ourselves* like, but with what *God wants*, or indeed what *God warrants*, with what others need, or with what helps others and not just with what they, or indeed, we, like.

Is your church a *“Hamlet”* church?

That is not a church where the preacher's sermon is always the occasion *“to sleep, perchance to dream”*!

I suppose the most famous speech from *Hamlet* is the one which begins *“To be, or not to be, that is the question”*.

Hardly any of our churches are in that particular situation. Do they continue to exist or not? Church closure is certainly not a policy. However, *church starting*, in different ways, can be.

The 46,000 people who are expected to move into Ebbsfleet over the coming years, with the massive house-building programme there, will require enormous challenges of us. How do we respond to those communities arriving where no church building awaits them?

One re-working of the *Hamlet* question is to ask ourselves, *“what sort of Church do we seek to be?”*

For Church of England churches, part of that answer must surely be that we are a church for *the whole of our community*. Our priests have the Cure of Souls — the care for all in the community, not just for the regular congregation. What can we do to help our church better be seen by others as their parish church, as well as that of those of us who worship there most regularly? *Where and who* are the people of our community to whom we need to go out, for otherwise we have no contact with them?

Sometimes, churches feel they are “*Much Ado About Nothing*” churches, or “*Love’s Labours Lost*” churches.

Much effort goes in, but nothing particularly seems to come back. The Treasurer or the PCC get worried about the effort and expenditure involved and the lack of income being received.

We all understand the challenges. However, we should not be afraid of giving and seeing no reward. One of those quotations from the New Testament — indeed, from Jesus — which we heard earlier was “*it is more blessed to give than to receive*”. Jesus has some other words which could be summed up as “*measure for measure*”. “*Give and it will be given to you. Good measure, pressed down, shaken together and running over, will be put into your lap. For by the measure you use, it will be measured to you in return*”. (Luke 6: 38) Therefore, we give with a generous heart. We give without expectation of reward. We give for the sake of the receiver and to the glory of God.

Therefore, share the faith with the school in your parish whose youngsters live beyond your parish. — They will go some day into the future, as all of your own youngsters will. Let them take the faith you have given them into their future. - Share the faith with the visitor to your church, the tourist, the person who sees your website, your Facebook entry postings. Give your faith joyfully. You may never know where it goes, — though sometimes, you will have the privilege to discover what happens.

Love’s labour is not lost in the economy of God.

Are your churches “*Romeo and Juliet*” churches?

You are probably wondering what I am going to say about that. I’m not particularly thinking of romantic matchmaking churches, but, go back a few decades and many places saw the couples who came and sat in church at the back at Evensong, holding hands together, because there was no privacy in the front rooms of their parents’ homes. Perhaps that generation and that culture have passed, but how do we help our young people from our Christian homes to meet up with other young people from other Christian homes? Are there things we can do in their younger years to put them in touch with youngsters from other, possibly larger, churches and make connections for them for the future. How do we help those, who are now students from our parish families and communities, when they return for holidays, to feel connected again and, perhaps, even to meet up within the welcoming hospitality of a local church?

Romeo and Juliet, of course, involved the coming together of two people from very different backgrounds. How can any of our churches be those which bring together and hold together those whose starting stories are, perhaps, very different from another?

Is your church a *Henry V* church?

I do not mean by that that it is a church which is going to war, but rather a church where people are helped to become what they are intended to be and to do what they are intended to do.

Henry V understands his people and has the capacity to inspire them to become the soldiers they are needed to be for the purposes of the battle that lies before them. *They respond to his call* and go forth to their task.

Is your church where the calling of God is offered and recognised and heard? Is it where people, sometimes unlikely people, are given the understanding, the support, and even the challenge to respond to God’s call? Is your church where God calls people to ordained Christian ministry or, indeed, to a deliberate Christian service in the secular workplace?

I hope that, in a small way, all our churches are “*All’s Well That Ends Well*” churches.

The Christian faith is full of confidence. The Christian faith is full of hope. The Christian faith is founded on one who came and suffered and died and rose again and ascended to glory and who lives eternally. The Christian faith is about a God whose love stretches out to each of us, whether us personally, or those around us.

Amidst all the challenges that we face individually or as churches, or as a society, or as a generation, we believe that God's good purposes continue to be worked out.

Can we speak of our own faith with the joy and confidence found in John of Gaunt in Shakespeare's Richard II, with his declaration about England, - which he calls "*this land of such dear souls, this dear, dear land*"?

*"This royal throne of kings, this scepter'd isle,
This earth of majesty, this seat of Mars,
This other Eden, demi-paradise,
This fortress built by Nature for herself
Against infection and the hand of war,
This happy breed of men, this little world,
This precious stone set in the silver sea,
Which serves it in the office of a wall,
Or as a moat defensive to a house,
Against the envy of less happier lands,
This blessed plot, this earth, this realm, this England...."*

Of course, those are wonderful resounding phrases and we may not be able to speak with the same vocabulary and rhythm that Shakespeare can provide, but can we speak of our faith in words which inspire, which reflect our delight, which make it something which catches the attention of others and draws them to seek to share it too?"

Amidst all the challenges and opportunities of the year which now lies before you in your office as churchwardens, I do hope that you will hold on to the fact that you belong to an "*All's Well That Ends Well*" church, that Christ is at the heart of your faith and that the service which you give is for him and to his glory and to the benefit of others. I hope and pray that you will find yourself nourished by the words of Scripture — and maybe, even, by the words of Shakespeare.

So, "*once more unto the breach dear friends, once more*": Go forth. Fulfil your Christian calling. Go with my thanks. Go with my prayers. Go with the thanks and prayers of those who surround you in your churches. Go with God who can do far more than we ever ask or think.

May God bless you in this year which lies before you.