

Haberdashers Golden Lecture

Living Faith in the 21st Century

What does it truly mean to have a living faith in today's world?

The recent debates that have had the church distracted and self-absorbed has really got nothing to do with living faith in the 21st century. It has frankly left me feeling bewildered and wondering what this faith is that we're arguing about. When I shut out the noise and the hype, set aside the emails and the letters, when I bin the organisational letters advising how one should canvas their bishop, instructing how to withhold or separate finances etc. When all that noise of trying to prove who really holds the levers of power is silenced, I realise that all of that has nothing to do with a living faith.

I find myself feeling excited once more at the realisation that living faith in the 21st century – is not and has never been about sex, women priests or women bishops. It is not about being evangelical or Conservative evangelical, or Anglo-Catholic, liberal Catholic or any of the other labels, boxes or camps that we chain ourselves to for dear life. It is not about our pretend religiosity – where we tick the box regarding how many times we sing Hail Mary, how many times we worship, read the bible, genuflect, fast or pray. It is not about whether our ordination or consecration is allegedly pure because we have been untainted by not having a woman participating or someone else who does not share the same so-called fundamentalist beliefs as you do!

I believe living faith in the 21st century is to be found in the summary of the law by Jesus: **“Love the Lord your God with all your heart, soul, mind and strength and love your neighbour as yourself.”**

The prophet Micah perhaps puts it more succinctly – “What does the Lord require of you?” In this question the prophet dares to connect our faith with our actual actions – in other words our so-called religious walk with God, means nothing unless it is linked with how

we relate to those in need. So, what does the Lord require of you and me **to live faith in the 21st century** but ‘to do justice, and to love [mercy] kindness, and to walk humbly with our God.’

Our faith must reflect our love for God and that love ought to be expressed in our interaction with God’s creation. It is in 1 John that we read, “***How can we say we love God whom we cannot see and yet we do not love our brothers (and sisters) that we can see?***” {1 Jn.4:20} and this is not about some touchy feely thing that leaves us saying ‘I feel like I love you.’ Feelings come and go and long after we ‘don’t feel like’ we love another, we are still being, challenged, commanded, to ensure that our love is seen practically in action! If faith means anything at all it has to be alive, lived. Faith cannot be contained purely within our buildings or within the rituals we engage with. Living out our faith has its roots in both sacramental and biblical origins.

In the eucharistic service, the last prayer we say together is: “***...send us out in the power of your Spirit, to live and work to your praise and glory.***” We have not done our faith until we have taken it out and lived it in the communities of which we are privileged to be a part of.

And this is further signalled at the end of our worship, “***Go in peace to love and serve the Lord.***” By serving others we are serving God.

I have often been struck by the Matthew 25 passage of the last judgement. We do not get a description of a list of sins described in the kind of image and the kind of language that we are hearing today; language that is pushing the case for differentiation. Instead, this is what we read: “***I was hungry and you gave me no food; I was thirsty and you gave me nothing to drink; I was a stranger and you never welcomed me, naked and you never clothed me sick and in prison and you never visited me.....When did we see you.....? In as much as you did not do it to one of the least of these...you did not do it to me.***” (Matthew 25:41 -46)

Reflecting on the origins of the golden lecture, it becomes clear that at the heart of its origin lies an active sense of seeking to make a difference in the lives of the those whom the gathered community is called to serve. I am sometime concerned that the trajectory of the present noise within the church has failed to grasp this in their self-absorbed attention seeking glee at pointing fingers at those who we presumed has sinned – but I thought “all had sinned and fallen short of the glory of God.”

The thousands of children educated by Haberdashers, the homes for the elderly managed by them, tells the story of the intention, the priority given to those most vulnerable. I want to believe that back then, if they were starting out in today’s context that the plight of refugees and asylum seekers would have featured high on their agenda.

Living faith in the 21st century today should have certain characteristics:

At its core should be a faithfulness in prayer, studying of scripture, generosity and Evangelism (being ready to tell and show others something of God’s Good News). With these four forming the fundamental basis of lived faith, we begin to see that we have a good spring board from which to address some of the contemporary issues of our day. The need for foodbanks, supplementing even working professionals, tells its own story. The increasing efforts to attend to the reality of child poverty; the abuse of women within our society (I have lost track of the statistics indicating the number of women who are killed annually). The great numbers of people who are on the move around the world: migrating to be with family, migrating due to war and unrest or famine – not to mention the millions living in refugee camps. The war in Ukraine means that we cannot dismiss it as “Oh this is what happens in other countries beyond Europe.” We cannot afford to have our capacity for Compassion waning.

We have got to engage the next generation with these topics and you are well placed to take a lead in doing so. I was asked while serving as a Chaplain in Parliament, “Why are you involved in as a Parliamentary chaplain? Faith and politics should not mix.” Each time this was said to me, my reply was the same, “I do not know what bible you are reading because the God we serve is very much interested in the lives of ordinary people.” We see this in both the Old Testament and the New Testament.

And in all this we are reminded that our faith is all in vain until we have taken it out and lived it! This is not only about a constant stream of activity. We need to inhabit this sacramentally. What we do must come from a deep place – of having been in the presence of God.

“In as much as you have not done it to one of these the least of my brethren, you have not done it to me.”

‘What does the law require ‘to do justice, and to love [mercy] kindness, and to walk humbly with our God.’