

## Transforming Presence introduction.

On Wednesday I was at St. Paul's Cathedral for the consecration of the new Bishops of Bradwell and Winchester. Janet Collins came with me. Janet had a really good seat in the centre about half-way back which meant she could see everything. The visiting clergy were sat to one side. There were quite a lot of us. I was sat a long way back, pressed next to the wall under the Cornwallis Memorial. This meant my entire view was of a very large foot, probably about a size 24. This was of an Indian figure sitting under Cornwallis, looking very pensive, and if I glanced up, looking straight at me. However, the sound system was very good, and I did hear every word, including an excellent sermon from Bishop Stephen.

The previous Saturday I had been at The Brentwood Centre as part of one thousand Anglicans from across the Diocese. We were all there as part of a consultation process set up by the Diocese. As I came in a rather bemused man, obviously not there for our conference, spoke to me. "There are an awful lot of Vicar types here today. What is happening?" Clearly he saw this as some kind of threat, a bit like an invasion of aliens into his gym. When I explained he was still somewhat bemused. I guess the idea that there were a thousand Anglicans in Essex was a surprise him. Add to that that they were prepared to give up a whole Saturday to come for a conference must have bemused him. But there we were, from the distant shores of Harwich to the exotic climes of Stratford, to the wilds of Saffron Walden all had come to our very own Brentwood to be together. It was an invitation only event, where the invited clergy could then just bring with them two people. So Allen and René came with me. Because he is a member of Diocesan synod Mark came as well, and

Bryan Shedel was there. So, quite a group with some connection to our benefice. The questions I hope you are wondering are, what was the purpose of our being there? Did anything valuable come from the day?

The three readings this morning, all very different, all point to the uniqueness of Jesus Christ and his significance to the world. The reading from Deuteronomy in the Old Testament, thought to date from six centuries before the birth of Jesus, points to the significance of the one who will be sent from God who will speak the very words of God. The Gospel reading reminds us that one of the reasons Jesus was so striking to people was he spoke with this amazing sense of authority to those who heard him. The disciples eventually realised that he did indeed speak as God. This is why we give such significance to his teaching. The rather strange, OK very strange reading from Revelation, using graphic picture language, shows how in the birth of Jesus the Devil, cast as a dragon in John's vision, wanted to eat up the child because he knew who the child was and what impact he would have. In the next verse the child is rescued by God. We believe that Jesus was that unique revelation from God and of God, showing us how humanity should live. The church exist for the very purpose of telling this to the world, changing the world through changing individual people and then changing where we live by the way we live and our influence on others. To us the language that Bishop Stephen is encouraging us to use, to be a Transforming Presence. This is surely what the church has always been called to be, taking us back to the original vision. Think of those unknown people who lived in our community all the centuries ago and sort the wisdom and direction of God as they decided that our church building should be built. They must have felt it would make a big

difference to our community to have somewhere that believers could come together to worship God, to be strengthened in their faith, to undertake Christian activities such as weddings, baptisms and funerals. We moan sometimes about the difficulties of upkeep of an ancient building and how much we would like to do to it. But surely this is nothing in comparison to those who started with a green field and said, "I know, let's build a church here to the glory of God!" Did they have more faith and determination than us? They would certainly have had many obstacles. But they believed in the mission. They believed in the necessity of changing people's lives for good by the message of Jesus. They believed in being a transforming presence. All these centuries later, we have to believe the same. We have to believe we make a difference to our community. If not, what are we and this expensive building doing here?

The background reality that we all have to understand is that we have reached a point where it is necessary to consider what the Diocese of Chelmsford should look like in 2025. One thing is very clear; it will look different to now. 47% of our clergy are due to retire in the next ten years. We have Stuart Hull, aged just 21, beginning the process of selection for ministry. But he is a rare bird. The reality is the numbers coming through for ordination do not match those who will retire. Bishop Stephen's point is that we do not need a five year plan, but a fifteen year plan. But the re-imaging of ministry only comes as a consequence of our being a transforming presence.

As Christians we need to inhabit the world distinctively. We are called to all be equipped by God for ministry and service in the world. We have to live a distinctive life. This does not mean we

should in some way be better than other people. But there should be some distinctive reality about the way we live. Something that others see and is attractive to them. We should see God as the evangelist in our communities. It is then for us to be his hands and feet and mouth piece in order to bring the good news of what God has done and can do to others. We cannot sit back and expect people to just walk in the door. Praise God they sometimes do. But if we believe we have something truly wonderful from God, we have an obligation to reach out to others. Stephen feels evangelism, with each benefice having a trained evangelist, is something we must work towards. We should also be accountable as a Christian community for what we are doing. Above all, we must honestly ask and answer, are we a blessing to our community and how are we witnessing to God's Kingdom of justice and peace? All this, of which there will be much more detail from me in the future as we look to explore these exciting realities together, means we have to re-imagine what ministry will look like in our benefice. And wider than just us, all this envisions a growing church against the backdrop of less stipendiary clergy.

Sharing this with you today is just the start of all this process. I know that those who were at the Brentwood Centre from our benefice returned fired up by the experience of the whole day and the realities we had to face. We need to recapture the fire for the Gospel that led our ancestors in the faith to do amazing things. Above all we need to look to the fire that we see in the Bible, where so much was achieved by the guiding hand of God. After ten and a half years here I do believe that we are a transforming presence in our community. That you all make a difference to our village and that the work of the church, the church school and all Christians regardless of denomination makes to this community. But there is much for us to

do collectively. Please don't think, "I am not going to be around in 2025 so it has nothing to do with me." Those who built our churches had vision way beyond their own lives. So should we. As we saw last week at the Brentwood Centre, there are thousands of Anglicans in Essex. There are many thousands of Christians. We are not alone. Anyway, how could we ever be alone? This is God's church, not yours or mine. Our task is to put into process ways to ensure it is here and being the focus for people to be a transforming presence long after 2025.

Amen.

© Patrick Sherring January 2012.