Anne Curtis 4/2/18

Matt 5:1-12 and Psalm 41:1, 7-13

## Introduction

On 30th September last year I went to hear the Right Rev Stephen Croft, the new Bishop of Oxford at a diocesan morning at the primary school in Woodstock. There were about 200 clergy, ministers, churchwardens and church people there to hear him speak about his vision for the diocese. He asked us to bring back his thoughts to our churches and so this morning’s sermon will be based upon the content of his message.

He had by then been in the job for one year. During that year he had been Listening: he had met clergy, schools, Licensed lay ministers, lay people, seen community projects and been to evening meetings. And together he says we are the church, a network of more than 1000 congregations, chaplaincies and schools. Together we work with God’s mission. He saw many strengths, many challenges, many opportunities and much excellence and expertise. He noted that often people are overbusy, older and less diverse than our communities, not great at teaching the faith to thise who want to learn it, and with our resources not always aligned with the need. But he says we are called to see visions and dream dreams of what could be. He wants us over the next year to pause and listen and think and discern God’s will for us again, about what kind of a church we are called to be?, and what therefore we should do together?

As a bishop he has seen many attempts at change in church life, and he said that real changes don’t begin with human analysis nor with bright ideas from Bishops, but when we catch a fresh vision of Jesus Christ. Describing the story of our demise is no good, setting unrealistic targets and demanding more of our clergy does not generate life and hope. But seeing Christ anew, returning to our life and our source and learning to speak as a church of joy and hope and love, these things, he said, bring life and energy.

So, our new Bishop Stephen said, that is what we are going to do. We are going to focus on Jesus. A very simple ambition, that we become more Christian, set Christ at the centre, try to be like him, and see him formed again in us as individuals, as churches and as communities.

Therefore he is asking the church in this diocese to dwell for this year on the Beatitudes in Matthew. Developing and longing to be a more Christ like church – contemplative, compassionate, courageous.

## Contemplative

Every beatitude begins with the word blessed, happy, peace. Words of God’s abundance not of scarcity.

We remember Jesus’s own life of prayer, his dependence on God his Father, him teaching the disciples to pray, the mountain of transfiguration and the prayer of Gethsemane.

When we think of what it means to be a human person, how to live well and live an abundant life, we reflect that the most abundant life is not rich, we need to live abundantly ourselves and to tell the story, that the richest treasures come from living humbly and thankfully.

And so as a church to spend time with God, a church whose life flows from worship, coming together for prayer, stillness, reflection; learning again what it means to love God with all our heart, soul, mind and strength. Being poor in spirit, meek, humble, pure in heart that we may truly see God.

## Compassionate

We remember Jesus feeding the hungry, weeping at the grave of Lazarus, humble and riding on a donkey, rebuking the religious leaders but showing mercy to sinners like Zacchaeus the tax collector. His whole purpose is peacemaking, by his death on the cross bringing reconciliation to the whole world.

As individuals you are therefore to weep for the world, not building internal walls to shut it out. You are to see your own place with humility and meekness, you are not to turn away from what is wrong but to fight it, you are not to be perfect, not swallow the lie, but to be merciful to yourself, you are not to be trapped by anxiety fear or guilt, but to keep your heart pure and take flight, you are not to spend your life angry and bitter and disappointed with life but to find peace and harmony with our creator, with creation and all around you.

So we are not to be an anxious church, easily distracted and too busy to listen, we are not to be self protective, holding to the past. Neither are we the society for the preservation of ancient buildings. Yet we can too easily become a group of do-gooders if there is not God at the heart of everything we do. Our life together is love and peace and tenderness and bearing with one another. It is not full of accusations, gossip, complaining or taking sides but it is about helping others up with a helping hand. We are called to bear witness to what it means to live abundantly, to love our neighbours as ourselves, called to be merciful, to mourn together.

## Courageous

And all the beatitudes describe Jesus himself, as we think of him being pure in heart, his authenticity and truthfulness, ‘I am the truth”, his call for inner purity and secret disciplines, his own bearing of hardship, his own taking up of his cross and following.

In the same way we are called to be courageous.

To be courageous is to live with heart, literally it means to put the heart back into them. You are to live with passion and conviction and play the game for all its worth, to leave everything out there on the field. You are not to bend with every pressure as a consumer but to make your mark on the world, to be resilient and strong and to carry the cost of your convictions. You are to be courageous in living against the grain of our culture and bear the cost of that whatever that may be.

As a church our highest calling is to do God really well again and not to apologise for who we are. We are to go where no one else will go. We are to dream big dreams and see big visions.

And courage will only come from a restored heart.

And compassion will only come from a restored heart.

And a restored heart comes only from contemplation.

So within the Beatitudes we find what Jesus is like, we find what it is to be human and we find what the church is called to be.

## Summary and Application

So, the Right Reverend Stephen Croft asked the clergy and attendees at the diocesan day to be the bearers of this vision. He wants our homegroups, our PCC, our church meetings and our congregation members to dwell in the beatitudes and catch this vision of Jesus, of humans and of church, in all the ways in which it can be explored and pondered and applied to our lives.

Will you take this passage into your life, consider it and ruminate on it, over the course of this year, as our Bishop asks us to? Contemplative: seeking and seeing Jesus afresh. Compassionate: serving and loving others as ourselves. Courageous: to do God really well again.

We were each given a card to help us remember and ponder this message, I use mine as a bookmark; would you like one and then we can pray the prayer on the back of the card together.

Then we will take some time to discuss this in our pews and then we will come together again to discover what Bishop Colin had to say.

Questions

Your immediate reactions…

what excites you?

What do you find challenging?

What questions does this raise for you?

Talk in your pews or small groups of five or six for five minutes. be ready to come back together after that.

Collect one or two immediate responses from groups.

Bishop Colin of Dorchester’s thoughts

In 2000, who was involved with a Food Bank? And now? What about Messy Church? Or a Prayer Space in a local school? Who had a loo in their church? Age Uk has been around a while but Late Spring started in 2012. Livability is a social isolation and loneliness charity established in 2007. We can get familiar but actually we live in a time of rapid change and growth.

Where has he spotted us being more contemplative? Prayer spaces now called BeSpace in schools. Pilgrimages such as Thames Pilgrim way. Discovering prayer such as ‘Thy Kingdom Come’ initiative. We don’t underestimate God, he will be well ahead of us in these things.

Compassionate? Foodbanks, Christians against poverty, Livability and similar with social isolation and loneliness, involvement in responses to dementia, there is Late Spring following up the bereaved, and money found to keep children’s centres open.

Courageous? He starts with loos in churches, churchwardens and PCCs making their buildings more accessible and usable buildings for the community. He mentions new opportunities in schools, both primary and secondary. School governors is an important and big job. Work with Age uk. Welcoming new house owners as they arrive.

To do a few things well is much more important. Its not to go away and say Bishop says we must do x, y, z and get depressed. Why do we do things? Its about loving God and loving our neighbour.

Last question: looking ahead to 2025 what do you think we would be seeing if we were more contemplative, compassionate and courageous? As a local church? In the local community?

One to take away and talk about later, perhaps.