

**SERVICE OF THANKSGIVING FOR THE LIFE & MINISTRY OF
BISHOP JOHN AUSTIN**

St Philip's Cathedral Birmingham - 4 November 2007

Sometimes, we are told, we entertain angels unawares. We meet someone. They spend time with us. At the time nothing strikes us as extraordinary. But afterwards we realise that our visitor was a messenger from God. It can be the same with saints. Someone lives among us. They seem quite normal. We notice nothing out the ordinary. But then the Lord takes them to himself. We look back, and we realise that the Lord has given us a saint, one of his holy ones.

While he was with us, we knew Bishop John as a dear brother, friend and companion. Now we see more. We see that he was one of God's saints. That is why it is so good and appropriate that we are meeting today, at the very time of year when the Church gives thanks to God for all his saints.

We have just heard the Gospel for All Saints Day. "Blessed are the poor in spirit, for theirs is the kingdom of heaven... Blessed are those who hunger and thirst for righteousness... Blessed are the peacemakers..." and so on. John was one of those. He was one of the saints, not only in the sense in which all the baptized, all who bear the name of Christian, are called to be holy. John was also a saint in this sense: he was one of those people so possessed by the Spirit of God that in him we could see the marks of the character of Christ – in his words and actions, and even in his physical appearance, in the way he smiled.

There is a wonderful passage towards the end of Dante's *Paradiso*, where the poet sees the whole company of saints spread out in a great circle, like a golden rose with the glory of God at its centre. Each particular saint is one of the petals of the rose. They are sitting in rows, tier upon tier, with some of the seats still empty, waiting for those who are still to join them. Well, I see John as one of those golden petals newly arrived in his place, smiling and giving glory to God with all his brothers and sisters in glory.

Charles Wesley wrote a hymn to remind us that the communion of saints is one company of prayer and praise, both those who still remain on earth and those who have crossed the Jordan before us:

Let saints on earth in concert sing
With those whose work is done.

And then:

Part of his host has crossed the flood
And part is crossing now.

In this communion of praise and prayer, we share each other's joys and we bear each other's burdens, and Christ bears us all. So, for those who believe in the communion of saints, it is natural that in our prayers we should remember those who have died, and that we commend them to the mercy of God.

Yet John was one of those of people who, when they have died, leave us with a far stronger sense that they are praying for us than of any need that they may have for us to go on praying for them any more. One of John's friends, who knew him at a deep level, wrote to me saying that, when he heard of John's death, "I grieved for Rosemary and his family. But strangely not for him." That was, I think, a recognition that John was truly one of God's own.

"Blessed are the poor in spirit, for theirs is the kingdom of heaven." Those words came vividly into my mind after my last visit to John, a fortnight before he died. He was visibly frail. I had the sense that his feet were already on the journey, like Bunyan's Pilgrim, "from this world to that which is to come." As we were leaving, a memory came into my mind, the memory of someone else who, when she was facing her death, had to work hard at the task of letting go. So I asked Rosemary, "How is John coping?" She replied, "John has never needed to be in control."

As I reflected on Rosemary's words, they struck me as a new beatitude: "Blessed are those who do not need to be in control, for theirs is the kingdom of heaven." And I thought of that time when the disciples asked Jesus, "Who is the greatest in the

kingdom of heaven?” and Jesus called a child, set it in front of them and said, “Truly I tell you: unless you turn round and become like children, you will never enter the kingdom of heaven. Whoever humbles himself and becomes like this child will be the greatest in the kingdom of heaven.”

John had no need to be the greatest; he did not need to be in control. He was one of those of whom the Lord was speaking when he said, “Blessed are the poor in spirit, for theirs is the kingdom of heaven.”

Jesus tells us to beware of wealth and possessions. We can so easily be possessed by them. They are attractive because they help us to feel that we are in control. It is the same with power. Wealth and power give us the means to protect ourselves from other people and to exercise control over them. That is why Jesus tells us to be rid of them, and to put our trust in our Father in heaven. It is hard for a rich man, he says, to enter the kingdom of heaven. So “blessed are the poor in spirit, for theirs is the kingdom of heaven.”

Yet wealth and power are part of the fabric of the world. It is not only unrealistic, it is morally frivolous to pretend that we can do without them. Power and authority are needed for the protection of the poor and the weak from the abuse of power by the rich and the strong. Without the proper use of power, a society will slide into anarchy, and in a state of anarchy it is always the poor who suffer the worst.

The question then is this. If for the defence of the poor and the safety of us all, the exercise of power and authority in the world is necessary, to whom can it be safely entrusted? The answer surely is this. Only to those who have no personal need to be in charge or control. Only to those whose personal ego is not at stake in the exercise of power over other people. John was one of those rare people to whom authority could be safely entrusted. He had no need to be in control.

John was a wonderful bishop, as we all know, a true shepherd after the example of the Good Shepherd. I sometimes think that if I got one thing right as Bishop of Birmingham, it was in inviting John to come and work with me here. But it is a sobering thought that in our modernising, secularising church, John might well never

have become a bishop. His name was on none of the lists. He never sought the office of bishop, nor would he ever have done so. He was astonished when I asked his permission to put his name forward. He belonged to the old world of the prophet Isaiah, “Here am I, send me,” not to the new world of “Here am I, send me an application form.” Jesus did not invite applications for the post of apostle.

Because his own ego was not at stake, I felt quite safe with him. He was never going to chip away at the authority that was properly mine. At the same time, because his own ego was not at stake, he was able to exercise the authority that he had been given with a quite remarkable freedom. He was afraid of nobody. Like his Lord, he was gentle, but being gentle did not exclude being tough when toughness was needed. He could express clear judgements and ask hard questions, but never so as to demean or belittle those with whom he was dealing.

So, to take one example, on his visits to China on behalf of the Archbishop of Canterbury he showed his ability to raise difficult questions without offending his hosts. Here in Birmingham and England, his security in himself, his openness to other people and his respect for their integrity enabled him to build relationships of mutual trust with people of other faiths without compromise to his own Christian integrity.

He had no need to impose his own agenda onto other people. This made him a very good listener, both with individuals and with groups. He noticed what was going on. He helped the voiceless to speak. Once in Shanghai there was a meeting with the leadership of the China Christian Council. Two local pastors were also present. They were expected to keep quiet. But John was able to get them to speak very openly about some of the issues facing them, much to the consternation of the national leaders who were there. On his next visit, three years later, no local leaders were invited!

His freedom from the lust for control also made him a very good chairman, for instance as Chair of St Basil’s here in Birmingham. As chairman he did not interfere in management; he let them get on with the job. At the same time, he was very supportive, while not shrinking from asking critical questions.

Then here is another example of his inner freedom. Once in the early nineties, when he was Chair of the Birmingham City Challenge Company working on the regeneration of Newtown and South Aston, something went seriously wrong as the result of a particular Board decision, no more John's fault as chairman than that of any number of other people. But John took responsibility and said he was sorry. I quote from someone who was closely involved: "The reaction in the room was remarkable. Hardened politicians and senior businessmen... were simply not used to people admitting a mistake and saying sorry... And it worked. People realised that they could put this matter behind them, and move forward in good order." Reflecting on that story, I have been struck by the number of people in the city, many of them not John's natural allies in questions of politics or social policy, who have expressed to me their great respect for him. They respected him as a free man.

John was gentle, but also passionate. So some of the other beatitudes come to mind. "Blessed are those who mourn." John grieved deeply over the plight of the poor and disadvantaged. "Blessed are the merciful." John was merciful in his judgements. "Blessed are the peacemakers." John was not a fudger, but he was a peacemaker. And "blessed are those who hunger and thirst for righteousness." John was passionate for justice, especially justice for the poor. He put this passion for justice into action, together with some notable colleagues, in the foundation of *Church Action on Poverty* in the early eighties. He followed it through in his various commitments throughout his time in Birmingham.

But John could not be dismissed as one of those social gossellers who had forgotten transcendence or who had translated the Gospel of Jesus Christ into a programme of social action and nothing more. John was indeed passionate for justice. He was also passionate for God. For him the two were inseparable. One of those who worked with John in the early days of *Church Action on Poverty*, and who wrote to me about him, quoted the Venerable Bede, one of the old saints of England. This is what he wrote: "In his abbreviated Psalter, the Venerable Bede condensed Psalm 9 to three lines:

I will be glad and rejoice in you;

I will sing to your name, Most High.

Arise, Lord God, lift up your hand; do not forget the poor.

I'm left now seeing that prayer on John's face."

That same friend, now a Member of Parliament, also wrote: "I last bumped into Bishop John a few months back on Westminster Bridge as I was walking across to the House of Commons. He was coming the other way on his own, head slightly down and a smile on his face – and I remember greeting him with, "There's a man lost in wondering contemplation!"

John was truly a man of God, a man of deep prayer. He carried with him a sense of the presence of God. To be present in a chapel where John was praying was to find oneself drawn into prayer. There was no separation between his love for God and his sheer delight in God's good world. Other people and their quirks, his family, the beauty of the world around him, poetry and music, good food and drink – he enjoyed them all. You may remember the place in the Gospel where Jesus says:

John the Baptist came, neither eating bread nor drinking wine, and you say, "He is possessed." The Son of Man came, eating and drinking, and you say, "Look at him! A glutton and a drinker, a friend of tax-collectors and sinners!"

Well, in this respect at least, we John was surely less of a follower of his namesake John the Baptist than of Jesus himself. For him the things of God's good creation were a wonderful gift, and he enjoyed them.

John loved God and he loved people. He attended to God and he attended to people. He was clear-eyed in the regard he gave to other people, because his attention was not distorted by self-regard or self-interest. This capacity for disinterested attention made him a wonderful friend and colleague and pastor. In this world none of us is entirely pure in heart, but John came as near as I expect ever to meet in this life to that other beatitude, "Blessed are the pure in heart, for they shall see God." John was, so to speak, transparent to God. As one of his friends wrote to me, "John was one of those people...whose outer self and inner self were all one."

He was a living demonstration of the normality of holiness. In him holiness was an enhancement, not a diminution, of his humanity. In this he was a true follower of Jesus Christ, the Son of God who for our sake took our humanity. In Jesus Christ humanity itself is transparent to God. And it is the same with his saints. They are all of a piece. It is their humanity itself that is transfigured, and transfigured in its entirety. John was a good priest because he was a good human being. His priesthood, like that of his Lord, was rooted in his humanity.

Let us go back to the Gospel. “You are the salt of the earth,” says Jesus. John was one of those who give taste to the world and help to keep it wholesome.

“You are the light of the world,” says Jesus. He goes on to say that we are to let the light, which is the light of Christ himself in us, so shine in the world that people may see our good works and so come to give glory to our Father in heaven. John was one of those in who we have seen the light of Christ. We saw it in his face. We saw his good works. He was one of God’s saints, one of those in whom we have seen something of the life of heaven on earth. And so we are here today to give thanks and glory to our Father in heaven; to whom with the Son and the Holy Spirit we give praise and glory in the communion of saints now and to eternity. Amen.

+Mark Santer