

The Ninth Bishop of Birmingham's Inaugural Sermon

Birmingham Cathedral

November 17th 2006

Texts read were: Isaiah 58:6-12; 2Corinthians 4:5-7; Luke 24:45-49

'We have this treasure in clay jars' 2Cor4:7

Thank you for coming to pray with me and the people of Birmingham and the surrounding region. Thank you to those who have prepared the service, especially Bishop's Croft staff and all at St Philip's Cathedral. Thank you to all those who have travelled from afar, not least my piper Ewen Wotherspoon.

I am sure that if you haven't visited the Second City for some time you will have noticed the enormous improvements that have been made. I am grateful for those of you who have dragged yourselves away from the shops to come into church.

Being called to serve in the Diocese of Birmingham is most exciting for me and I look forward to many years of constructive participation together.

I trust that, although it is a day when my name and biography might be worn out with over use, we can celebrate, after St Paul, not a preaching of myself but of 'Jesus Christ as Lord' 2Cor4:5.

The clay jar with its contents described in the second reading is a symbol of a proper relationship between human endeavour and Christian truth with its challenging reminder that 'we have treasure in clay jars' 2Cor4:7

Container of Treasure-City & Region

The image of an earthen vessel, such as the jars from Malawi, is a fitting reminder to pompous prelates and self-reliant/satisfied humans everywhere, of the fragility of our world and our contribution to it.

(The clay in the hands of the potter also reminds us that we did not make ourselves .)

At this point in preparation I asked the Canons for the appropriate liturgical item. But in the end had to go to Wilco's and buy it myself.

(The Bishop showed the congregation a wooden mallet which he then used to break the large clay jar.)

This reality is not a final destruction but an opportunity for re-creation. A far greater one than us not only created an amazing world with amazing people but remakes what is broken and fills it with treasure.

The prophecies of Isaiah know all about the fragility of human endeavour and yet hope for a better future.

The raw material of broken walls and streets could be rebuilt as the people turned back to God.

'You shall be called the repairer of the breach, the restorer of streets to dwell in' 58:12

This phrase, which I first heard way back in my BP days, and which has inspired me ever since 1976, is written in Mandarin, Lugandan and Hebrew on my cope (designed by Yvonne Bell). I am glad that we are in a city of over 70 languages.

I expect to be part of a Church that wants Birmingham and region to continue to be made and remade, with infrastructures that give us a high quality of environment, transport, employment, health, education, social care, order and everything that goes to make up sustainable development.

Treasure in the Jar-Community

So much for the jar, however fragile its structure (more of that another time) but what about the precious contents?

I hope we will be a venue of first choice for visitors whether for conferences, cultural creativity and of course in the case of Chinese athletes the 2012 Olympic preparations?

Because we already have high expectations of community life across class, race and religion where we can appreciate our differences and our strengths and weaknesses (whether in gangs

which are peaceful, football clubs which compete with respect, a variety of places of worship, concert halls and night clubs, allotments and social centres, pubs and golf courses) with streets where all can dwell and flourish, so that we can be known as a leading international 21st C city and region.

My job is to remind us that both the container (the place) and the treasure (the people) are in trust from a just, merciful and loving God on whom all things depend.

Treasure in the Jar-Priorities

This big picture of course needs a strategic approach. It is easy to catch the headlines, but the Good News is that the Church and I are here on the ground with ordinary people for the long term.

Jesus' wisdom for the first Christians, given after his resurrection, was 'wait in the city until you have been clothed with power from on high' Luke 24:49

We cannot take for granted this extraordinary power for strategic principle and action; we have to recognise it, discern it and gain it from God. The Holy Spirit shows us what God has in mind for us to be and do.

Let me illustrate this with a few examples to which we are committed.

One top priority is the nurture of faith and values amongst young people. Members of the Bishop's Youth Council will be leading our intercessions later. Please note Theo/Josh and Ruth's smart church wear. I'm looking forward to receiving my new top at the major city centre youth event 'Re-united' at St Martin's in the Bull Ring this Saturday night.

Our collection today is for Young Homeless people in Birmingham and will be given to the ST BASIL'S Resettlement Centre.

[Andrew Gorham, the Bishop's Chaplain is sleeping out on 24/11 for St Basil's]

Further priorities are Bringing Hope, a joint-church movement working amongst gangs in some of our most challenging districts, and Love Life-Live Lent, helping people to help others leading up to Good Friday and Easter.

Another strategic priority is communication, especially with enquirers into faith and with those who do not know Jesus as Lord.

Today I am glad to inaugurate our new diocesan website which is specially designed to give access to newcomers to the Christian life.

[The Bishop then switched on the new diocesan website at www.birmingham.anglican.org]

There are many other themes that I will be taking up with colleagues both within and outside the Church in the years ahead to build spiritual and social capital.

So, we have treasure in God's world with His priorities and then also in our personal lives.

Container-Yourself Treasure-Jesus

There is a new movement of awareness of the spiritual. For many opinion-makers, not least in the West, this seems to be surprising, even offensive.

Yet the longing for meaning, identity, love and forgiveness is as strong in the human heart as ever.

In a moment you will receive a small clay jar also made in Malawi, Central Africa (with which the Diocese of Birmingham has been linked closely for over 40 years.)

We will sing together an African prayer of commitment as they are distributed

The extraordinary power of Jesus Christ is given even to our fragile selves. The power to recreate that which is broken, to fill that which is empty, to light that which is dark, to forgive that which is sin.

As you hold the jar, and take it home with you,

I trust you will be willing to

Pray

for the people of Birmingham and Region

for the Church and its leaders

for yourself

that you may recognise and receive the ultimate treasure of the life, death and resurrection of Jesus and, like many here, stand up and acknowledge him as Lord.

(Each member of the congregation is given a small pot containing a candle and a reminder to pray.)