

**Festival of St. John of Beverley**

**Beverley Minster**

**Sunday, 10 May 2015; 5.30pm**

**Sermon preached by**

**the Very Revd John Dobson, the Dean of Ripon.**

**Texts: 1 Samuel 16:1-13; John 21:15-19;**

**Ven. Bede's Ecclesiastical History 5:2.**

Thank you Jeremy for your invitation and your welcome; it's a privilege to be here with you good people of Beverley – both people of the Minster and of the town - on this festal day. I bring with me greetings from the Chapter and Community of Ripon Cathedral; another ancient house of prayer with its foundation going back to the missionary zeal of someone born in the seventh century, St. Wilfrid. Needless to say, we do well to be inspired by and take lessons from the

confidence and leadership of people like John of Beverley and Wilfrid of Ripon. We think we live in changing times, they certainly did.

Now, there is nothing like an anti-climax to make you stop and think. Think about the end of the reading from the Venerable Bede's Ecclesiastical History; the account of the youth being healed by St. John of Beverley:

“So rejoicing in his new found health...” what? He went and conquered the world? Or he went and established another six monasteries? Or he spent his life ministering to the poor and sick? That's the sort of thing we might have expected Bede to tell us.

Bede, the Venerable Bede, was ordained by John of Beverley. And Bede tells this wonderful story of John transforming for the better the life of this young chap who to begin with was ugly, destitute and without speech. John transforms him to one who had a clear complexion, ready speech, and beautiful curly hair. Wonderful! And then? “So rejoicing in his new found health... he returned home!” What an anti-climax! Is that the best he could do? Couldn't there have been a great commission: go and do good deeds. Even, go and say your prayers and thank God; as Jesus was known to say to some people he healed.

But then, why should more be expected of those who have received help and been healed? What about those who have never needed healing? Shouldn't good works and service of others be expected of those people? If God has blessed us

with good health and strength, shouldn't we be using them for the common good? Rather than just going home and being concerned only for ourselves? Of course, those of you who hold public office are certainly not falling into that trap. And the community for whose benefit you work should be grateful to you for it.

The 2015 general election and local elections have been interesting to say the very least. One thing that concerned me, during the campaign, was how cynical and negative the general public can be about those who stand for public office. Well, it is always easy to criticise from an armchair. We would do well to be more grateful to those who give of themselves in public, political service. Quite genuinely, if we think we can do better, we should offer to stand for election. Think about St. John of Beverley. He took initiative that led

to the spread of the gospel in this region, the establishing of a monastery and the birth of this wonderful town. He didn't simply sit back complaining and waiting for someone else to take action.

I guess that John knew that he was trying to serve God's will and that he could only do so in God's strength. Our first lesson took us back to about a thousand years before Christ. They were choosing leaders in those days as well. There's nothing new under the sun, is there? The Israelites, settled in their God-given land, had realised that all the peoples round about them had an advantage: a king who could lead them in battle. When they approached their religious leader, Samuel, to ask for the same, there was uncertainty and even displeasure. Israel already had a king; God. But, after a bit of, shall we call it 'political negotiation', it was agreed that

God's chosen people could indeed have an earthly king. This was on the understanding that it was clearly understood that the king was there to serve God's will and ensure that the people remained faithful to God's calling of the whole people. (You might call it a sort of balanced devolution. We'll give you local leadership and more powers (to raise an army, say) but remember who's really in charge.) And so, the first earthly king of the Israelites, Saul, failed. Broadly speaking, he thought he knew better than God; that he could serve the people's best interests in his own strength. And, basically, he didn't need to bother saying his prayers. God got rid of him. In his stead God chose the youngest and most unlikely son of the smallest and most unlikely tribe to serve him as king. Needless to say David wasn't perfect - he was capable of spectacular unfaithfulness - but he knew his need of God. He was the leader whom Israel would remember

fondly for years to come and to whom they looked back as the great example of leadership.

St. John of Beverley was clearly a great leader. With a sense of God's calling and a sense of being dependent upon God, he took initiative, drew people to faith in God, and cared for those who were disadvantaged. We hear from Bede about a number of his healing miracles: he wanted fullness of life for all. And doesn't that same aspiration inspire us in 2015?

What miracles would need to be performed today to ensure that the people of this town and region could enjoy life in its fullness? And before we conclude that such things are beyond possibility, are we absolutely sure that with God's guidance and help such miracles might not be possible and such fullness of life become a reality: through the good deeds of

people just like you? David, remember, was a most improbable leader (I'm talking about King David. Don't get the wrong idea, this is not about any other leader who happens to be called David!). But by God's grace King David became the regal gold standard for centuries to come.

Today, celebrating St. John of Beverley, we give thanks for the life of this community. We praise God for the example of John back in the late seventh and eighth centuries; but surely we also thank God for those who now, in this age, give of themselves in the service of others and so strengthen community life and the common good. For some this will be through a public office; for others through their paid employment – perhaps head teachers, or medics and nurses, or bank managers, or social workers and so on. And for others it will be by caring for family, friends and neighbours.



When people use their God-given time and skills in the service of others in 2015, it is no less a life-enhancing miracle than St. John's healing of that ugly, destitute and dumb urchin.

Yes, when we try to help others we may sometimes fail.

There will be a number of former MPs who will wonder where they went wrong after trying hard to serve the common good. Peter's conversation with the risen Christ in our second reading is a reminder that our failings are never the end of the story when it comes to God. He who uses the weak to do his mighty work also uses the failures who are willing to give it another go, and the sinners who repent.

“So, rejoicing in his new found health, he returned home.”

Well, perhaps he did. But let us hope that with the advantage

of his clear complexion, ready speech and beautiful curly hair, he never forgot his need of God's saving grace; and that he used his new found health in the service of others.