

Passing on the Baton of Faith ...

... Jesus calls us to be a light to all Nations

A sermon given on Fourth Sunday Before Advent, 31st October 2021, by the Associate Vicar, the Revd Wendy Wale, in Beverley Minster

Luke 24:36-49

I have to confess that as I was presiding at the 08:00 service this morning, I was somewhat delighted that the clocks were going back, although I still woke up super early, but at least I could snuggle back in the warmth for a whole sort of extra hour, if that makes sense. But of course it's soon going to be that time when we wake up in the dark and we leave work or school in the dark and we have to turn the lights on to get dressed or to make our dinner at night. And of course, as it's Halloween today, there are likely to be a lot of children running around in the dark later, hoping for lights to appear in houses along with sweet treats. A light switching on in the darkness generally makes everything better. I love the fact that as I'm thinking about lights this morning, they've been flashing on and off as if in some kind of visual illustration. When the lights are on, it's less frightening and everything is more possible. Light is a powerful symbol of hope and has been so since the earliest of times.

The Olympic torch originates from the first Olympic Games in ancient Greece, where a sacred fire was burnt on the order of Hestia recognising the belief that fire was divine light stolen from the gods. Now that symbol of divine light is placed in a baton, a precious flame and carried from country to country, place to place, with utter pride and that sense of being part of both ancient history and present reality. And I find the image of the carrying of a flame, the passing on of light through time and space, a powerful one to reflect on, as we consider our themes for today because as mentioned previously, today is All Saints Sunday when we remember and celebrate all those who have gone before us, those who passed on the baton of faith to us and to others during their lifetime and are now shining in the glory and presence of God.

Last week we particularly remembered St. John of Beverley, whose lifetime of prayer and witness led to the first Church building here 1300 years ago (Eddie told me this morning that that was when he first started coming). Of course, John was simply

passing on the faith and the hope that had been passed on to him both by his parents and by St. Hilda of Whitby, in whose monastery he was educated.

And I'm sure each of us will be calling to mind family, friends and significant people in our lives who during their time here on Earth, demonstrated the love of Jesus, encouraged us to grow in our faith and inspired us to be carriers of the flame.

Just this last year as a Church community, we have celebrated the lives of a number of saints and trusted that they have joined the great cloud of witnesses. David Wilson and Susan Moss are, of course, the most recent, but you will be able to name others in your hearts.

And our readings today help us to reflect not just on that baton of faith that was passed to us, but on the core truth of our faith that we are called to pass that flame on to others, especially those beyond these walls, those who have not yet encountered the good news of Jesus, his forgiveness, love and power to change lives.

The Prophet Isaiah speaks to the Israelites God's chosen people, the first to hear and carry his message: 'I will give you as a light to the nations that my Salvation may reach the ends of the Earth.' Right from the beginning God's plan of Salvation was for the whole world, for all people in all places at all times. The earliest recorded scriptures contain the DNA of passing the truths of God, from the Garden of Eden, to the people of Israel, to the ends of the Earth.

And our gospel reading describes a scene where the disciples are standing around talking about the crucifixion and what on earth has happened. They're pondering on the rumours that people have seen Jesus alive, but they are utterly bewildered, when the resurrected Jesus walks into the room. And you have this wonderful scene where they think they've seen a ghost (very appropriate for a Halloween reading), but he says, *"I'm really, really not. See my hands, my feet. Watch me eat some fish."* He truly is risen and alive. And then he reminds them of the ancient truths, *"Everything written about me in the law of Moses, the prophets and the Psalms must be fulfilled. The Messiah is to suffer and to rise from the dead on the third day and that repentance and forgiveness of sins is to be proclaimed in His name to all the nations. Beginning from Jerusalem."* Jesus goes on to promise his disciples the power of the Holy Spirit, his presence with them after he is returned to the Father,

the power that will enable them to be his witnesses to continue to pass on the baton of truths that they have experienced, and the Kingdom message that he has taught them.

And this is why after becoming more Christlike, the second ambition of our vision statement is: Reaching people we currently don't.

The passing of the light of Christ, the torch of faith, didn't stop with the Israelites or the first disciples. It is a timeless activity that joins with all the saints who dwell with God; to all of us, the saints who live and breathe around the world. Individually and collectively, we are called to continue to share God's love with everyone, which is quite a huge task. But thankfully we are all made as unique individuals with differing skills, passions, talents and personalities. The challenge to reach people we currently don't is one that can happen in so many different ways, and I am going to name just a few.

We are incredibly fortunate that this building itself is a beacon that shines across the East Riding and draws people in from around the world. We're already blessed with a wonderful team of welcomers and volunteers to make sure that when people enter, they experience a warm welcome and a glimpse of the community that worships here. If people attend services, they're often overwhelmed by the beautiful music, the singing, and the fact that we are now delighted we can offer them a cup of tea or coffee again. But our vision is to do more to point people to the reason the building is here, to link our heritage with the living love of God, the present sanctuary that can be found in knowing Him, and the healing that comes from his forgiveness and peace, continuing the legacy of John of Beverley.

We're looking at how people can find out how to get involved through improving our communication and signage. Thanks to Mervyn, we have a wonderful website. There are plenty more spaces and things to do.

We're also looking at providing a broader range of services that will help people explore and grow in their faith. We're hoping the Taize will resume after Christmas for those who love the simplicity and beauty of repetition and of course, worshipping in the presence of candlelight

About a year ago, we started a service called 'The Crossing', which was initially to support our families and others who were unable to attend services during lockdown

(you can imagine having a three year old here when nobody was able to leave their seats at all). We are now meeting in the Secret Garden at 16:00 every Sunday, and we offer a highly interactive way of exploring faith with music and craft and opportunities to engage with nature and reflection on themes such as stillness, wonder, and awe. This afternoon weather dependent, we are holding a 'light party' with hot dogs and toasted marshmallows. We're open to all, but we're especially suited to families with younger children and those of us who are younger at heart.

In January, we will be starting a new morning service with contemporary worship music, using the piano and solo instruments and aiming to grow a new congregation that complements all that we currently do, and perhaps reaching those we currently don't.

But there are many people in Beverley and beyond who would not feel able to enter this building for all sorts of reasons. We have to take the baton of faith outside these walls. We hope to build on the partnerships that we already have both locally and around the world, to build relationships and offer support to people just where they are. (And if you don't know about our global partners, please do take a look at our website where they are beautifully illustrated).

Alongside 'Biscuit', which is Beverley Schools' Christian Trust, we're hoping to work with secondary schools and support them in their many challenges at this time. We wish to continue to support the Food Bank and the Cherry Tree Centre in their work of relieving people in poverty, and looking at opportunities for helping with housing and practical needs.

We're involved with 'Open Doors' in Hull, which provides wraparound support for refugees who have no access to other funding or resources, and we work alongside churches together in Beverley, united in the vision of God's Shalom, wholeness for people and planet.

The baton of faith is passed hand to hand, heart to heart, cup of tea to chat, to biscuit, to gentle nudge, to sharing the hope we have. We need to live and show the transforming love of God alongside people where they are, as well as singing, teaching and explaining it here in our buildings.

We're delighted that so many people are reading and discussing and praying through our Vision document. And may I invite you if you haven't already seen it, to

do the same - we have many copies here. And if you're hearing this from afar and I know many are watching from different places and countries, may I encourage you to pass on the baton or faith in your context, to receive again from Jesus the call to be a light to all nations.

Shall we pause now to pray the prayer for our Vision statement? A prayer for all who follow Christ. Let us pray:

*Anoint us with your Spirit Lord God,
that our Church may hear the voice of Jesus
and be transformed
to become more like Him.
To reach those we currently don't
to grow with
the growth that comes from you
and to fling wide the gates of your Kingdom
through Jesus Christ, our Lord.
Amen.*

Reading Text

Luke 24:36-49

³⁶ While they were talking about this, Jesus himself stood among them and said to them, "Peace be with you." ³⁷ They were startled and terrified, and thought that they were seeing a ghost. ³⁸ He said to them, "Why are you frightened, and why do doubts arise in your hearts?" ³⁹ Look at my hands and my feet; see that it is I myself. Touch me and see; for a ghost does not have flesh and bones as you see that I have." ⁴⁰ And when he had said this, he showed them his hands and his feet. ⁴¹ While in their joy they were disbelieving and still wondering, he said to them, "Have you anything here to eat?" ⁴² They gave him a piece of broiled fish, ⁴³ and he took it and ate in their presence. ⁴⁴ Then he said to them, "These are my words that I spoke to you while I was still with you—that everything written about me in the law of Moses, the prophets, and the psalms must be fulfilled." ⁴⁵ Then he opened their minds to understand the scriptures, ⁴⁶ and he said to them, "Thus it is written, that the Messiah is to suffer and to rise from the dead on the third day, ⁴⁷ and that repentance and forgiveness of sins is to be proclaimed in his name to all nations, beginning from Jerusalem. ⁴⁸ You are witnesses of these things. ⁴⁹ And see, I am sending upon you what my Father promised; so stay here in the city until you have been clothed with power from on high."