Cuddesdon

I’m delighted and honoured to be with you – thank you to Martyn for inviting me. It is 36 years since I set out from here towards Belfast in what proved to be the relatively early years of the Troubles. One of our friends sent us on our way with the vocationally-focused question, ‘But what will you do without Sainsburys?’ To come back – noting that my return is from Scotland and not from Ireland - is to have the chance of a dialogue with my former self and to ponder much that has happened . Or, to put it more vocationally, what God has done with me in the meantime.

One phrase from our readings this evening always hits me – ‘Not so among you’ It is Jesus’ answer to those who want to find solid ground or, as the mother of James and John wanted, solid seats to left and right in the kingdom. Jesus’ words ‘Not so among you’ – and the call to servant life which follows – seem to me to encapsulate many of the dilemmas of ministry in our times.

Servant ministry in its purest form seems to risk reducing us to a vanishing point of insignificance. So we struggle. I’ve spent the past few days attempting to respond both to the strident and intemperate words of my ecumenical partner Cardinal O’Brien – referring to the concept of gay marriage as grotesque – and also to my predecessor as Primus, Richard Holloway, who has just published his autobiography and describes himself variously as a God-botherer and as a ‘recovering Christian.’ Both it seems to me are trying to find their place on that spectrum.

Maybe something in the middle perhaps – so we grab at fads and false certainties, fundamentalisms liberal and conservative. We allow faith to be seduced by political and cultural movements to give us the sectarianism which is the plague of both Ireland and Scotland. We embrace new fashions and initiatives in ministry as if each might on its own be the complete answer to the complexities of the society which we seek to serve. Anything to give us solid ground

‘The whole place was alive with him. His look, his voice, his
gaiety, his beauty, his charm, his holiness, filled it and
possessed it.’

Those words were used to describe Bishop Edward King, Bishop of Lincoln and former Principal of this College, the anniversary of whose death falls today. The words speak of an intensity of living and being which draw attention not to the person but to his holiness. And they remind us that the world which we seek to serve is not very interested in religious packages and products and it suspects that certainties may be illusory – but it may just be interested in a vital holiness.

You probably don’t know very much about the Scottish Episcopal Church. Small certainly but I hope not insignificant – although Sir Walter Scott said that it had been reduced to ‘the shadow of a shade’. For all churches there is a kind of dialogue with insignificance on the one hand and dynamic servanthood on the other. I spend my life among small congregations – we were delighted to welcome Martyn among our clergy. Some of our congregations believe that they are about to go over the edge finally – but they don’t. At their best, they exhibit what I heard described in America as a ‘death defying joy’ – a kind of baptismal spring in the step which belies small size and lack of resources.

And if I was to fasten on one thing which I have learnt in the 36 years since I left here – it is about what that makes possible. When you are young and fit and strong – reasonably confident that you know a few things – you don’t actually need miracles of grace. The Scottish Episcopal Church has taught me a lot about sitting down on the grass and letting Jesus work miracles with loaves and fish. And it has also taught me about casting the net on the other side of the boat. Too long we keep on faithfully doing what we have always done to the point of personal and institutional exhaustion. But the miracle of grace waits only on the obedience of faithful servants.

‘Not so among you’ – four words which for me sum up the counter-cultural and counter- intuitive life of the church. Words which tell us not to yearn too easily for solid ground on which to stand. Words which tell us not to be afraid that servanthood will lead us to vanish. Words which remind us that the function of obedient servants is to make space for God to work.