

**Sermon preached at the Chrism Mass on Maundy Thursday, 5 April 2012
in Portsmouth Cathedral**

My guess is that some of you groaned when the alarm went off this morning. There is lots to do; its quite busy in church over the next four days! Nevertheless we all know that many don't think that. 'It's your busy season, Vicar' is rarely what people say this week. In my experience this is a week when people seem to clear their desks and desktops into others in-trays and inbox, when our head and heart tells us we want to be together this morning with other Readers, lay people, and clergy, but a voice tells us we haven't time to spend in the cathedral with the bishop.

So, first, thank you for being here, for the solidarity and commitment we offer to God, to Jesus, and to each other this morning. As we gather we remember those who cannot be with us today. We miss them, we pray for them and all prevented from being here through sickness or ill health, themselves or of a loved one.

They in particular feel the vulnerability and fragility about which St Paul wrote. "We have this treasure in clay jars." We all identify with his profound and realistic words. Everyone of us feels unworthy – lay, ordained, young, old, self-supporting or stipendiary – and sometimes we feel frustrated, and more, about our incompetence and apparent inability to deliver the outcomes we reckon are expected of us as a person, a deacon, a Reader, an archdeacon, a priest or a bishop.

In this wonderful Eucharist on this unique day our calling to discipleship – and for some to a licensed ministry – is seen not in an earthly, human context but in the richer, deeper, divine perspective of the kingdom. Yes, we have feet of clay sometimes, but we have treasure in these clay jars. It is not that we should not lose heart, nor that we must not, but "since it is by God's mercy that we are engaged in this ministry, we *do* not lose heart."

I have been so heartened as I have got to know you over the last year in parishes and chaplaincies, in village and town communities, at the Carlton Hotel in Sandown with Readers, and at the Diocesan Conference at High Leigh for instance, by your dedication and commitment but most of all by your qualities. We have treasure, albeit in clay pots. We do not lose heart. Thank you for the support, both encouragement and challenge, we offer each other. Thank you for your support of my senior colleagues and of Sally and me.

Afflicted but not crushed, perplexed but not despairing, persecuted but not forsaken, struck down but not destroyed. St Paul's words reflect the experience of Jesus this week, but he is writing about you and me "always carrying in the body the death of Jesus, so that the life of Jesus may also be made visible." The Christian privilege is to follow, to live that Christ like life and to know it not as a burden but as freedom. We may appear a motley crew – clay jars, afflicted, perplexed, and all the rest – but because of Jesus' passion and resurrection we have treasure to offer so that more may know the glorious liberty of following Jesus.

Liberty it is, freedom, that we enjoy and share. I have sometimes been a little anxious about the word commitment in this service order. Our renewal of commitment is, of course, subsidiary to celebrating the Eucharist together on the day when it was instituted, to consecrating and receiving the holy oils as signs of grace and renewal, but still significant. Yet commitment can sound heavy, and feel it, like being invited to grit our teeth, flex our muscles and try harder. I am worried not about us working hard and co-operatively but the possible implied delusion that the mission of the gospel and the so called 'success' of the church depends on us alone. We dare not personalise ministry, guarding it and holding it like a possession, nor domesticate it, nor allow our vision to be blinkered. We want the church to flourish, our Ministry for God's Mission to be attractive, energetic and engaged because our vision is that the kingdom grows and comes. I wonder if our frequent description of the church as a family reveals the limited, cosy scale of our vision. We seek not to be a growing family but the kingdom in embryo.

I believe that the church grows, spiritually and numerically, not because church growth is our aim, goal, or ambition, but when we worship faithfully and devoutly and as we witness to God's love in Jesus Christ. In worship and witness we live and proclaim the kingdom of God.

Not so long ago in the lectionary we read one of the accounts of the miraculous draught of fish. The disciples returned to shore after a long and entirely unsuccessful night's fishing. Exhausted and disappointed at their own failure, no doubt, all too aware of being empty vessels, Jesus invited them to put out their nets at his bidding. The miraculously huge catch speaks powerfully of how even broken, tired clay vessels can release the treasure with which we are entrusted.

A few of you will be surprised how disciplined I have been this morning in avoiding the temptation offered me by 2 Corinthians 4: 6. "Let light shine out of darkness" is in the Authorised Version translation the motto of a city and its football club. Let light shine out of darkness might this year be our hope for Pompey near the bottom of the Championship but the perspective is even worse from bottom place in the premiership and the text appallingly appropriate for Wolverhampton, again!

We are to let God's light shine in the darkness of troubled lives, the shadow of dashed hopes, the twilight of a life, the gloom of anxious and fearful communities. We are to allow the light to shine not to make it shine, or presume that we have to create the light. Ours is the liberty to let it shine, or to prevent it, never to be the light or to create it.

This morning, gathered around the altar, attentive to God's word, we know we are clay vessels, from oldest to youngest, most junior to senior, and bishop as well. We recapture the excitement and confidence of discipleship. The written word comes alive among us, in bread and wine Christ is present, in clay jars we have treasure.

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