**CHRISM EUCHARIST, Maundy Thursday 2018**

I stand here again on Maundy Thursday with pride and affection, thanking God for you and those closest to you, wanting to honour you for your service, gifts and ministry, but most of all for who you are. It is my privilege to count you as my colleagues, fellow ministers in Christ, and partners in the Gospel. To say that as your Bishop, having read the account of David’s call, moves me. David’s own reaction and response isn’t recorded when Samuel discerned that he was called by God to authority and responsibility. But I imagine him saying, Who? Me? We certainly get the impression that other people were astonished and wondered why him, the youngest of the sons, just keeping the sheep.

I’m sure there are times when you wonder what God had in mind when he called and sent me here. I’m sure there are times when you wonder what God had in mind when he called you. Who? Me? are questions for all of us when faced by the enormity of the work which we are given. Aware as we are of our vulnerability and failings it isn’t always helpful that the church speaks often of our giftings and high calibre, and puts licensed ministers through a selection process. Of course I recognise great qualities, skills and experience as I look around, knowing how you serve in such a wide variety of ways and bear much fruit for the kingdom of God. Most of the Church Times adverts to which many of you responded suggest implicitly that only the Lord Jesus himself would really be up to the job. And, whatever our role in the Church, whatever our form of ministry, we can all at times find ourselves daunted by the sheer weight of expectation. I, and I imagine you too, would have sympathy with David thinking, Who? Me? because like him it is not our personal gifts or our capacity to get it always right, that’s the reason we are here.

Our shoulders bear expectations, placed there by others and by ourselves, so that we are often painfully aware of the discrepancy between who were are and who we want and need to be. Such expectations are often right; we do need to strive to do things well, and we are all acutely aware of places where we must do better. But to speak of those expectations – even by way of praise and affirmation – without also speaking of God and the Gospel, is ultimately to reintroduce the burden that Jesus carries from us. It is, to quote John of Scetis, the 4th Century Desert Father, to replace the easy burden of self-accusation, and be weighed down by the heavy burden of self-justification.

John’s words sound shocking to us today. How can we speak of self-accusation, let alone as a good thing, as an ‘easy burden’? But what I think John is trying to say is this. Self-justification weighs us down by constantly holding before us a standard which we can never meet, and every step of our path we have to find a new way to prop up and protect our sense of self, to convince ourselves and those around us that we are up to the job. And while we know from Paul that we are justified by the faith of Christ and not works of the law, self-justification lurks in the back of our mind, tempting us to play the role of the ‘good guy’, and burdening us with the constant self-defence of the ego that will eventually wear us down. It will exhaust us with continually having to present our best face to God and the world.

It’s funny that we do that. Not that we shouldn’t try to do things as best as we can, but that we do often present our best face to God in worship through the quality of what we offer. Why wouldn’t we? We want to do our best for God, but perhaps also we’re tempted to do our best for ourselves, with that desire lurking in the back of our minds to look good before God and each other.

Although the Prayer Book is somewhat unfashionable these days, it seems to do the opposite; perhaps that’s why it isn’t popular. But what it does, or at least what I think it tries to do, is to encourage us into a space where we can present our worst face to God, to create a moment in which we can be drawn into deep honesty before God about who we are, even in our own inner darkness, our fantasies, and failures. Just think, for instance, of the cumulative impact of those lengthy breast beating general confessions. But crucially even in the abject rawness of our honesty, the mercy and hope of God in Christ are proclaimed to us. However honest we find ourselves able to be, God meets that honesty with a greater love and compassion; however painful our self-recognition may be, it is held within the promise that God will meet it with grace, mercy, and goodness.

Whether or not self-accusation is a helpful term (and I can see the possible problems), I think that is what John is trying to get at. It is a light burden only because there is a God who is infinitely merciful and good, and because the burden of our justification is shouldered by Christ, once and for all at the cross. John’s point is not that we should adopt an inhumane self-hatred, but rather that we can be honest about the truth of ourselves with God because we can be confident in God’s willingness to forgive and to heal.

The call of David echoes our call, because it is not the calling of one competent to lead or to serve. One by one, the likely candidates are passed by until the least, the youngest, the last is called. And, in the end, none of us is here because we’re the ones who made the cut, because we lived up to all those expectations. We’re here because we’re here, because Jesus said ‘grab a shovel’ and we said yes, even if we didn’t know one end of a shovel from the other. And that is enough to mean that there is rejoicing in heaven.

So while there is much to be praised, I’m not going to do that, at least not today. But I am going to thank you, to thank you for being here, for joining me in this strange thing we call discipleship, in following Jesus. I am going to give thanks with you that we have been met by a Saviour who breaks bread with us no matter how broken or lost we are. I am going to weep with you in recalling these days in which even the brightest and best of us fall short in following Christ to Calvary. And I am going to rejoice with you in remembering from the depths of the passion narrative, that the one who was crucified for the sin of the world was raised on the third day, and that in Christ, is life.