

'A feather on God's breath'

BY BISHOP JONATHAN, BISHOP OF PORTSMOUTH

IN the closing weeks of the Christian year, I have been re-reading the closing passages of St Paul's first letter to Corinth (1 Corinthians 16). The concluding chapter of the epistle is a long farewell.

It is filled with encouragements, local details, travel plans, news, and commendations. But in the midst of the farewells, I notice four vital words, offered as an aside, which I would like to share with you. They brought to mind a prayer attributed to the abbess and Christian mystic Hildegard of Bingen.

The words reflect Paul's trust in the reliability, wisdom, and faithfulness of the Christ-like God. They speak with eloquent simplicity of Paul's desire to seek God's reign above all things, his own will and preferences included.

In Hildegard's words, Paul longs to be 'a feather on God's breath.' As the concluding chapter opens, we note Paul's dynamism and purpose: giving directions (v.1); offering solutions (v.2); raising funds (v.3); seizing opportunities; and dealing with adversaries (v.9).

And yet for Paul everything is qualified by four words. Words that disclose Paul's life-posture and deepest desire. Words that reflect Paul's relationship with the One in whom he trusts. Four words: 'if the Lord permits' (v.7).

Paul's life, with its plans and proposals, inner conflicts and personality, is an offered life.

The four words, written as an aside, recall the prayer of Jesus in Gethsemane ("yet not what I want, but what you want" Mark 14:36). They are words which express Paul's desire to be led in all things by the Spirit: for Paul's will to reflect and be formed by God's will. Paul longs for the Christian community in Corinth to be like him, offered and available to God, for God's work of love and retrieval in the world.

And, as a footnote to these four words: in no sense is Paul's freedom of action, intelligence or personality bypassed or undervalued by his desire to be led by the Holy Spirit. Rather, for Paul and for us, true freedom is found in God's service.

God invites us to offer back our lives, for ourselves and with all of ourselves. In other words, like Paul and Hildegard, to offer to God our hopes and fears, our gifts and personalities, and the stories that have shaped us. For ourselves, yes. But never by ourselves alone or apart from the prompting of the Holy Spirit who fills, guides, and leads God's people. 'If the Lord permits.'

What would being 'a feather on God's breath' look like for you, today?



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UPFRONT

- 3 Faith in Focus
- 4-11 Latest news

IN DEPTH

- 12-15 Confirmations: stories from those affirming baptismal vows
- 16-19 Church buildings: the diocesan advisers who can help

PEOPLE

- 20-21 My Faith: 'I could barely look in mirror'
- 22-23: Asylum seekers: 'Hotel protests gave our children flashbacks'
- 24 The Big Issue: develop a strategy for mission
- 25 Why I love my church: Barn Church

AND FINALLY

- 26 Top 10: Christmas events

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