

Harnham Parish Churches

Lent Talk 2020 ‘A Journey’ with Robert Key

Lent gives Christians an annual opportunity to really think about their faith and about what Jesus was teaching us. When St. John in his Gospel (Ch.21, v 19) writes that Jesus told us to feed his sheep, he said it three times, using slightly different words in the Greek version. Something was lost in translation into English. I believe he was teaching us to do much, much more than feed the hungry.

Isaiah Ch. 61 vv1&2 is an instruction reflected in the teaching of Jesus. It is highly political. We should preach the word of God, nurse the sick, promote the practice of medicine, reform the prison system, fight for justice prisoners and live by a moral compass. People who say we should keep religion out of politics just don't get it! Christianity is the most political religion of them all. But not Party political.

Growing up in a traditional Christian family in Salisbury (and with Dad being a Bishop!) I knew that Jesus had a lot to say about the poor. It was not until I was reading Economics at Cambridge that I really began to think about what he meant by telling us to feed his sheep. The Economics Faculty was led by and dominated by Marxists. They were very worthy academics of international renown. Whether they were pure Communists, Marxist Socialists or Christian Socialists, I knew I took a contrary view of how to feed Jesus' sheep. Economics is about the use and abuse of resource allocation in the world. For me, the easy bit was spending other people's money and 'squeezing the rich until they squeaked'. The difficult bit was creating wealth before you could tax it and spend it. The challenging bit was political leadership that found the right balance between the two extremes.

That was to be my journey - speaking out against injustice and unfairness that trod people down, held Christ's people back, denied them achievement, and instead gave them comfort and empowered them. To do that required political leadership, to grasp the levers of power and make things happen. I would render to Caesar the things that were Caesar's and try to be a Christian in politics.

For 150 years since Disraeli invented modern political parties, British politics has been a tribal affair. Whoever stands in a 'safe seat' will be elected. Votes are weighed, not counted. They might be rich toffs, or activists red in tooth and claw. The direction of leadership and policies is decided by a handful of marginal swing seats. As it was then, it still is now - and it shouldn't be. We need, urgently, to reform the way we do democratic politics- but that is another story.

In my first few years in Parliament I learnt a lot about poverty. I discovered real, absolute poverty in the Welsh Valleys. In the House, I challenged a fiery Welsh Labour MP who expected us to believe that in his constituency children ran around in the streets with no shoes on. She challenged me to go and see. I did. She was right. I demanded to see the Secretary of State for Wales, a charming urbane

Conservative, and told him that if my constituents in Salisbury were to see what I had seen, they'd never vote Conservative again.

My eyes were opening. I saw absolute poverty in Africa. Politically manipulated poverty in Latin America. Educational poverty almost everywhere. Domination by alpha males and denigration of women was everywhere.

In 1990 Margaret Thatcher appointed me Minister of Housing, Inner Cities and Local Government Finance. I was the Minister for the Poll Tax! I found poverty of ideas in government and in local government that led to neglected, decaying housing, generating its own cycle of deprivation, poverty, drugs, prostitution, gang warfare over drugs and power with manipulation of whole neighbourhoods for political ends.

We had to take on the Barons who controlled the manors. In too many places they were allegedly democratically elected, controlling their rotten boroughs for decade after decade. The squalor in the Bangladeshi housing in Tower Hamlets was Dickensian. The treatment of the women and children in some parts of Birmingham where they were denied education and freedom of movement outside their own houses was primitive and very disturbing. The City Council was powerless. That was a religious problem. I founded the Inner Cities Religious Council. We listened to the voices of the faiths and how they had been neglected by government, local and national. They listened to us and we to them.

In one city in the North-East, there was a very long list for for their thousands of council flats. I discovered that the Council did not know who was living in one quarter of their properties. Worse, you could buy a key to one of their Council flats in Lagos, Nigeria!

I came home at weekends to glorious Wiltshire and my lovely family, angry and exhausted. I worshipped in our Cathedral with my wife and children and longed to tell people of my other life - as a Minister of the Crown in alternative Britain, unknown and unrecognisable to most of the good people of Salisbury. The North/South Divide was real.

We needed reform, urgently. John Major found a leader in Michael Heseltine who had the vision and the political clout to win over the Cabinet. I was his enthusiastic assistant, along with Michael Portillo. First we reformed local government taxation. The Poll Tax became the Council Tax. I took the legislation through the Commons. It took a full three months.

In most of these abandoned communities there were men and women (usually women) with the courage to stand up and be counted. We went to see them and to listen to them. We empowered them. No longer did top-down council decisions impose housing, schools, shops, GP practices. No community consultation and agreement meant no government money. If the city next door got the message and you didn't - they got your millions to spend with private sector developers. Now, that's what I call feeding the sheep.

My parents brought me to Salisbury in 1947 when I was two years old. It was a very different place. Rather shabby like so much of England after an exhausting war. Much more a market town than it is now. Town and villages felt closer than they are now, too. Then as now, people by and large were content and happy.

In 1983 I had been elected to this vast constituency with 106 villages outside Salisbury - more than half the electorate. People in Cholderton never met or spoke to people in Tollard Royal. The good people of Tilshead knew no-one in Nomansland or West Grimstead. No-one on Bemerton Heath knew anyone in West Harnham - let alone The Close. But as their MP I did! So did the Bishops and Archdeacons. And in every parish and benefice there is a Priest who knows her flock.

It was a huge privilege. My journey was winding. Often the road was forked, occasionally bumpy.

I realised, too that in 21st Century England, poverty is about so much more than hay. I am deeply ashamed that we live in Foodbank Britain. In my time as a Trustee of the Trussell Trust I visited Food Banks from Newcastle to Dundee and Perth as well as Salisbury. I am appalled that in such a rich country, 20% of households live below the official poverty line and that 4 million children live in poverty. In 2020! I also learnt that poverty takes many forms.

Poverty of money, of course, and food and energy. Now politicians, policy geeks - all of us - need to be aware of what we call access poverty. Access to healthcare, education, technological and computer literacy, transport, culture, entertainment and sport. It exists in all our villages and all our towns and cities too.

In the way we live, Christians should remember Isaiah and we should think about what Jesus really meant when he said, "Feed my sheep". We should speak out and call out. And we should speak truth to power, adding that to lead is not about "me" - it is about inspiring and empowering others.

The End