

# Sermon at the 2017 National Assembly of Forward in Faith

by the Revd Philip Barnes

One of the games we sometimes like to play is ‘What might have happened’. It’s a game you can play historically: ‘What might have happen if this particular monarch had survived a bit longer, or if that general had used a different tactic?’ It’s a game you can play personally: ‘What might have happened if you and I hadn’t gone to the same school – might we never have met? What if I hadn’t gone to take that particular job?’ And I dare say that as we look back over 25 years of Forward in Faith it’s the kind of game that we could play over life in the Church of England too: ‘What if that particular synod debate had gone in a different direction, or if we’d carried more support from that group?’

One of the things this sort of speculation does is to remind us that events unfold not as a series of foregone conclusions, but that there are all sorts of unexpected and diverse factors that make things go *this* way, rather than *that*.

And that’s how it’s always been for God’s people.

The scriptures record how people respond to the God who is always patiently trying to make his purposes clear to them. At times they ‘get it’ and that purpose is fulfilled and lived out, but in the mix there’s also human self-will, bewilderment and misunderstanding, and above all the sense that God’s people are not to get too settled.

Abraham is uprooted from his own home and sent on a long and complicated journey somewhere else. It turns out that his future is not to be the settled existence that he might have expected, but instead he’s called to live *out of a future that he cannot yet see* – and so one of the first experiences of our ancestors is of exile, stepping beyond the familiar into uncharted territory.

That’s why Abraham can stand as a role model for us. Twenty-five years ago for many of us the familiar territory of the Church of England shifted: how we understood ourselves as a church, how we related to the larger Body of Christ, how we found authority for the ground on which we stood were shaken, and we found ourselves in a strange land.

But alongside the call to live out of the future Abraham knows that the one factor that never changes in the circumstances he’ll find himself in is God. If God has called him from Mesopotamia, then he’s also waiting for him in the unfamiliar hills of Palestine to meet him there.

And as that story of disruption and exile unfolds through the pages of Scripture it is God’s presence with his people that is the one secure constant – until at last, in the light of the birth, life, passion, resurrection and glorification of Jesus Christ, St Paul can confidently proclaim, ‘The God who calls you is faithful’.

So part of what we celebrate today is *the sheer faithfulness of God* in the journey upon which we have set out. For if we found ourselves uncomfortably navigating a new way of life within the Church of England, we have also known ourselves living by the action of the faithful God who in the power of the Holy Spirit is with us and before us.

We have known God's faithfulness in his gift to us of men and women who have helped create those structures for us to flourish in the Church of England. We have known God's faithfulness in grace-filled conversations with those with whom we disagree yet whom we recognise as sisters and brothers who are responding to him too. We have known God's faithfulness in the disciplined rounds of prayer and holiness which is the hallmark of Anglo-Catholic life, and the encounter with him in Word and Sacrament. We have known God's faithfulness in the service of our parishes to some of the most poor and needy communities in our land, and in the call and response from many to vocations to the priesthood and ministries in the Church.

In those, and countless other ways, we've relied on that truth that St Paul celebrated in the letter to the Thessalonians: that we are held in existence and maintained in truth not merely by our own will and effort, *but because of God's promise*. In Jesus God has shown his faithfulness to the whole of creation, and he has given us the Holy Spirit to give us the gifts we need to respond to *his* faithfulness to *us* with *our* own joy-filled commitment to *him*. Jesus says to us, today, here and now, to each one of us 'I am yours, I give myself to you', so that we can receive and in our turn respond, 'I am yours'. In the changes and chances of our journey together that is the one secure constant, the one thing that can never and will never change.

And so when we hear him speak of himself filled with the Holy Spirit we know that the same Spirit which came upon him and anointed him is the same Spirit which came upon us and anointed us at our baptisms and confirmations.

In a reflection on one of the psalms St Augustine writes about this anointing, and he says 'We are the Body of Christ because we are all anointed and in him are "*christs*", that is "anointed ones".' And why are we anointed? So that we can be bearers of hope.

'The Spirit of the Lord is upon us, because he has anointed us to preach good news to the poor. He has sent us to proclaim release to the captives and recovery of sight to the blind, to let the oppressed go free and to proclaim the year of the Lord's favour.'

So as those going forward in faith, those who are living out of the future, how will we live out this call for which we are anointed?

We are to **preach and proclaim**, to be those who speak of the God who is love. Over the last few years our attention has been rightly drawn to the nature of catholic mission, of the distinctive witness we make in the world.

Our proclaiming is *rooted* in our understanding of the Church as the divine institution that continues the incarnate presence of Christ; it is *empowered* through sacramental

worship in which we encounter the living God and through which we are transformed for holiness; it is *lived* in the communities in whose lives we share with our commitment to hospitality, mutual love, togetherness, and our service of the common good –and particularly the poor and vulnerable; it *accompanies* pilgrims in the way of faith as we make that life-long journey of continued conversion and renewal with all those whom the Lord is drawing to himself.

We are anointed to witness to **freedom** – release for captives and freedom for the oppressed. What is this freedom to which we witness? In a culture that views the Church (and a Church of England where many see us) as those who are intolerant, prejudiced and unable to think for ourselves what right have we to speak of being free?

Earlier in the summer I was watching my godson learn how to swim. At first as he dived into the pool there was a lot of thrashing about and a sense of panic. But then he learned to be held by the water, to enjoy its flow, to delight in the current. That's a bit what real freedom is like, a freedom to find strength and joy in what's actually there. God wants us to be free not by letting us pick our own reality ('this is *my* truth so it's fine'), but in the discovery that we are held by strong currents of grace.

It's the liberation from the constant need (in Church and society) for reinvention (which is not the same as renewal) and speculation (which is not the same as seeking). It's the freedom to be held by something that is deep and lasting.

And we are anointed to give **vision**. Jesus proclaims recovery of sight to the blind, and we exist to be a corrective lens through which to view the Church and the world. Anglo-Catholics have always had an expansive vision, vision which proclaims 'There is more than this'. That's true in our understanding of sacramental life, which views the material world as capable of conveying more than we could have imagined – we come away from them with a vision of life enlarged, recognising there's more about us and the world than we could have first thought. And that's true, also, of our understanding of the Church – which pushes our vision outwards beyond the local and national institutional life of the Church of England to recognise our connection and responsibilities to the Church Catholic – the wider Christian family of East and West.

So give thanks today for our journey, with all its twists and turns, and for God's faithfulness within it. Give thanks that his faithfulness creates the space for our own response, and give thanks for our anointing for the task to which we're called, as we grow up in all things in Christ, by his amazing grace and his transforming love.