

**SERMON FOR THE COMMISSIONING OF DR COLIN PODMORE
AS DIRECTOR OF FORWARD IN FAITH**

**by the Rt Revd Jonathan Baker, Bishop of Fulham
(Chairman of Forward in Faith)**

**Church of S. Alban the Martyr, Holborn
15 April 2013**

‘The content of the Tradition is one and the same,’ wrote S. Irenaeus, Bishop of Lyon, at the turn of the third century, ‘for the churches which have been planted in Germany do not believe or hand down anything different, nor do those of the Iberians, nor those of the Celts, nor those in the East or Libya or Egypt, nor those established at the centre of the world.’ Perhaps a German-speaking Cornishman might especially appreciate this vision of the universality and catholicity of the Church, of the many languages and peoples of the earth united in the common truth revealed to us by Jesus Christ. And now our friend Colin Podmore comes to Gordon Square – surely established very near the centre of the world – to direct the work of Forward in Faith, and to further its vision, our vision, for unity and truth. Colin, we pray for you in this new work, and we anticipate with relish and with joy the good fruit which your appointment will bear, not just for Forward in Faith but for the whole of the Church of England and indeed the Church Catholic of which she is a part.

It should not surprise us that Colin has selected texts for this Mass – from the Common Worship ‘Ministry’ readings – of such theological richness and subtlety, which illuminate deeply the mystery of the Church. The Apostle, writing to the faithful in Ephesus (that city of magicians) weaves together three great themes: the unity of the one Church in the one Spirit; the identity of the One who now sits in the heavenly places, filling all things with Himself, with the Christ who came down to earth; and the intimate connection between this

same Christ, descended and ascended again, with the Church which is His Body. That part of Ephesians 4 read for the Epistle this evening opens with that Irenaean note: amidst the many languages, cultures, and nations of the world, there is but one faith, received from the one Lord, transmitted by one baptism, all people having one God and Father. And Christ, *Christ that Morning Star who came back from the dead*, as we sing at the Great Vigil of the Passover of the Lord, has ascended in his humanity to the heavenly places that he might distribute gifts: gifts for the strengthening of the Body of which He is Head. The gifts are many and diverse, but they are given for the sake of unity, they are given that the Church might indeed be a people brought into unity: one Body, one Spirit, one God and Father of all. Paramount among the gifts given to the Body is that of the means whereby the Lord's own teaching may be continued and handed on: the apostolic ministry, the first note in the great symphony of Ephesians 4. The apostolic teaching and the apostolic ministry are alike pastoral in intent: they are given to guard Christ's faithful from every breeze of teaching and the craftiness of men. But still more importantly, they are given that the Body may display all the more abundantly the highest gift of all, the gift of charity. They are given for the increase and abounding of Love.

In tonight's reading from the Gospel of S. John, the evangelist draws us more deeply still into the relationship between Christ, the Church and the gift and virtue of charity. Jesus speaks of the intimate union between Him and those who seek to follow Him. "*Abide in me and I in you...I am the vine, you are the branches.*" There exists a mysterious and real communion between the vine which is the Lord and the branches which are the disciples, the branches which we are: and that unity, that communion, is Love: the love which unites Father and Son in the interior life of the Godhead. And for S. John as for S. Paul, these intimate relationships of communion in love, Father with Son and Son with

disciples, do not produce a closed system, a steady state, but rather serve to enable the outpouring of grace and love over all creation: *go and bear fruit, fruit that will last.*

So as we step back and survey the heights of the mystical ecclesiology of the apostle and the evangelist, without becoming too dizzy and losing our heads, we find a receiving – the receiving of gifts; an entrusting – with teaching and ministry; and a sending out, to bear fruit in love. All of this knits together very well (to borrow the Pauline metaphor) at this Mass when we celebrate a **commissioning**: a word which has roots in the Latin *committere*, to entrust – we are trusting our new Director with a gift to be received and a work to be done – but which itself relates of course to the verb *mittere*, to send, from which we get our word ‘mission.’ Entrusted with gifts, we are sent to bear fruit: that is the basic pattern of Christian service: and it applies as well to a new Director as to any other ministry among the baptised.

So – and he’s coming to it at last, you might be thinking – what is the gift with which our new Director is to be entrusted, and what is the work he is to be sent to do? How will we know whether it has borne fruit? What might the fruit taste like? *Forward in Faith*, which I have described before as the Marmite among ecclesiastical organisations, loved and loathed in equal measure, is still a fledgling society, barely twenty years old, and yet one which has achieved so much in a short time across so many fronts (and here again we must acknowledge the immense contribution of Colin’s predecessor Stephen Parkinson.) It necessarily inhabits a space which is paradoxical, even contradictory; the paradox is not hard to spot. The officers of *Forward in Faith*, the Council, clerical and lay, and, I trust, every single member share the vision –

dare I say it – which we have found in Epistle and Gospel tonight: the unity of the Church, the transmission of the Lord’s own teaching by means of the apostolic ministry, the absolute inescapability of the importance of communion, with the Lord and with one another, in the Christian life. So why Marmite, rather than apple pie? Who could disagree with any of this? Well, of course, because alongside these spiritual and ecclesiological ambitions, *Forward in Faith* is perceived to be a pressure group, and, in the eyes of many, a pressure group with a negative and backward-looking agenda. It is surely a tragedy, and an astonishing one at that, given a moment’s thought, that we – and here I mean all of us in the Church of England – should have come to this: that faithful Anglicans who are inspired by convictions which the whole of our Church still affirms in her title deeds and carries in her DNA should be perceived by some as disloyal, a fifth column perhaps. No doubt blame – like gifts – can be distributed across the whole Body.

Forward in Faith, under our new Director, will continue to speak the truth in love about those issues which exercise us, because of their impact, as we see it, on the unity and apostolicity of the Church: we ask to be heard with an equal love; we further ask that, difficult as our message is for some – including some whose presence we are so delighted by here this evening – we are judged by the best motives and intentions which can be construed from our understanding of the common faith which unites us all in Christ and which we are all called together to proclaim. If that is by way of appeal to brothers and sisters in Christ who will not agree with us about everything, then let me conclude with another appeal to officers and members of *Forward in Faith*, which now begins a new phase in its young life. Let us never give anyone the excuse to suggest that we are simply another churchy pressure group. If that is how we present ourselves, then the world will take no notice of us and our

brothers and sisters in Christ will not listen. At every turn, we must abide in love. ‘You did not choose me, but I chose you.’ The Lord of the Church speaks these words to every disciple, not just those with whom we happen to agree. Can we live by that, as we seek, guided by our new Director, to prosper the work of Forward in Faith for a new generation?

This packed church – and how grateful we are to Fr Smith for his hospitality – reveals this evening an awesome spectacle: the People of God of every age, women and men, priests and people, led in worship by the Bishops of our even newer Society, with which Forward in Faith has already pledged itself to work very closely. It does not feel, if I may be so bold, like the meeting of a pressure group, but rather the joyful – and remember S. John’s promise of *joy* given in tonight’s Gospel – assembly of the saints of God; or at least those on their way to be saints. (Some have further to travel than others.) The questions which I, the Vice-Chairman, Fr Darren Smith, and brother bishops, will put to Colin in a few moments point to the most positive programme for our life together. I will not rehearse them now, nor amplify the work to which they point, but listen carefully when the time comes, and take to heart all that is spoken.

I spoke a moment ago of the paradox of where Forward in Faith sits in the life of the Church: deeply committed to the widest, most inclusive vision of unity and catholicity, that the world may believe and all come to Christ; yet having to defend what is – on ‘home territory’ at least – a minority position and even perceived as sectarian. It is then a huge challenge to Colin and to all of us to keep going, to keep going joyfully, and to keep on in love. The path is rocky, the stones are sharp. Toes are stubbed and feet bleed. Yet in the Scriptures we

have heard tonight, there is the promise that all for which we long, hope and pray, has already come to pass: there *is* one body, one Spirit, one faith, one baptism, one God and Father of us all. The apostle does not use the conditional but the indicative. God grant each one of us, and the whole Church, grace to work to uncover and reveal, and never to distort and obscure, that glorious truth which God Himself has given us in Christ.

Amen.

THE COMMISSIONING

The Bishop of Gibraltar in Europe says

Colin, will you uphold the catholic faith as the Church of England has received it and with us proclaim it afresh in this generation?

Director With the help of God, I will.

The Bishop of Edmonton says

Will you pray and work for the unity of the one, holy, catholic and apostolic Church of Christ and for its mission in the world?

Director With the help of God, I will.

The Bishop of Fulham, Chairman of Forward in Faith, says

Will you support, advise and defend the members of Forward in Faith, as we celebrate the sacraments of the new covenant, share the good news of Jesus Christ, and make his love known in our parishes?

Director With the help of God, I will.

The Bishop of Burnley says

Will you provide support to the bishops of the Society, as we seek to offer guidance and pastoral care to those who look to us for episcopal ministry?

Director With the help of God, I will.

Fr Darren Smith, General Secretary of the Additional Curates Society, says

Will you work closely with the officers and members of the catholic societies of the Church of England, and support them in their work of evangelization and spiritual enrichment?

Director With the help of God, I will.

Dr Lindsay Newcombe, Vice-Chairman of Forward in Faith, says

Will you promote unity, peace and love in the Church and in the world and especially among those whom you serve?

Director With the help of God, I will.

The Bishop of Fulham says

Colin, I commission you as Director of Forward in Faith.

May God,

who has given you the will to undertake all these things,

give you also the strength to perform them,

and may the blessing of God almighty,

the Father, the Son, and the Holy Ghost,

be upon you, and remain with you for ever.

All **Amen.**