

FORWARD IN FAITH 2014 NATIONAL ASSEMBLY

SERMON AT THE SOLEMN EUCHARIST

by Fr Philip North

Gospel Reading: Luke 13: 22-34

My niece is an extraordinary girl. She is only 12, but she seems to be completely devoid of fear, with consequences that can be slightly alarming. This summer, along with her mother and brother, we were cycling through the hills of the Yorkshire Dales. Three of us were rolling along happily, enjoying the view and the fresh air. But not Naomi. Naomi cycles not for aesthetic pleasure, but for thrills. All she is interested in is speed and danger, and of course that makes her mother very nervous indeed.

We were right at the top of a very steep descent. I told my sister to hold back and promised faithfully to see the children down the hill safely and not go too fast. We set off. We gained speed. Naomi was on top of her handle bars, head down to cut air resistance, pedalling furiously. Suddenly the ground fell away more than ever. I shouted at Naomi to apply her brakes. She took no notice at all. Her front wheel clipped her brother's back wheel, and she flew off into the air and slammed hard into a drystone wall, yards from her bike, a mass of twisted arms and legs.

My first thought was that I'd killed her. But there was movement. Next I thought she'd broken her arm as she seemed unable to grip. What to do? We were in the middle of nowhere, miles from a hospital, no phone signal. And worst of all my sister was about to come over the hill to see that her fears had all been realised. Then suddenly Naomi looked up. 'I can feel my arm again', she said. Well, at once she hopped back on the bike and pedalled just as fast all the way down. She spent the rest of the week showing off her bruises to anyone who would look and later recalled the fall as the high spot of her whole holiday. She is crazy. But she doesn't half enjoy being alive.

All I want to do in this homily is invite you to imitate my niece in that same spirit of fearlessness. I want to invite you to take an enormous risk. As the Catholic movement in the Church of England, at this particular moment in history there is a great deal that we can quite legitimately fear. Within the Church we are about to see the promulgation of the canon that allows women to be ordained Bishop. Whilst of course the successful passage of this legislation will bring a huge amount of joy to many in the Church, for us it is a moment of crisis. It tears the fabric of communion. It raises complex issues around order and apostolic succession. It seems to defer into the distant future any possibility of realising our ultimate dream which is communion with the Universal Catholic Church. And whilst the arrangements for provision appear to offer enough, this is a time of transition with all the uncertainty that brings. Can we make it work? Will promises be kept? Are the Five Principles just spin? Does anyone mean what they have said?

And if there is plenty to fear within the Church, there is even more as we look outside and examine the world into which we are sent as Christ's ambassadors and evangelists. The pace of secularisation increases exponentially. There is now a radical disconnection between the Church and the institutions of the State, as was witnessed by the recent and frighteningly speedy debate about same-sex marriage. Moreover, a culture which is obsessed by

consumption and acquisition, and which can see well-being only in economic terms, seems profoundly removed from a Gospel of self-sacrificial love. Where on earth do we start in the task of winning a nation back for Christ? What does a sacramental evangelism have to offer a culture that has altogether forgotten the language and symbols of faith?

In my youth group in Camden there is a boy who has a very particular way of dealing with fear. He doesn't cry, he doesn't complain. He simply runs away and hides and presumes that when he emerges everything will magically have sorted itself out again. As a strategy it has some scriptural precedent. It's what the disciples did when they fled to the upper room. Hiding is understandable. Our instinct when afraid is to create a safe space for ourselves where we can barricade off the cause of our fear. And that may be our temptation as a movement today. To gather round each other, to ignore the world and its needs in a warm, safe cocoon. To respond to fear by running away.

That is sorely tempting. But first, let's listen to the words of Jesus. 'Do not be afraid, little flock, for it is your Father's good pleasure to give you the Kingdom.' Most of this twelfth Chapter of Luke is about fear and how as Christians we should master it. Jesus addresses fear of persecution. He deals with fear of insecurity, a fear that leads us to unhealthy addiction to possessions and the material. Then finally he sums it up with that sentence. 'It is your Father's good pleasure to give you the Kingdom.'

It is a wonderfully simple argument. Why on earth could there be possibly be any need for fear when Christ has already won the victory and given us the Kingdom? That is what Jesus is asking. Fear is over. It is pointless. Our lives are no longer ruled by chaotic chance. We are not randomly generated animals, under the control of nature or fate or greed. Christ is in control of our lives. His rule is already established. So when as Christians we say to each other, 'Don't be afraid,' this is not some groundless reassurance, nor is it based on some ludicrous or irrational optimism. As Christians we literally have nothing to fear because God's promises are even now being fulfilled in us. We already have the words of eternal life. The Son has already gone to prepare a place for us in his many-roomed mansion. The gift of eternal life, the pearl without price, is already ours and there is no power in all this created universe that can take it from us.

So never mind an uncertain ecclesiastical future. Never mind a culture which spurns the things of faith. Never mind whatever vicissitudes or trials or suffering may come our way. The Kingdom is ours. Christ reigns in glory now, and we are his for ever. So we can conquer fear. And when we conquer fear, then we are set free to be the people Christ wants us to be.

Let us be fearless. Let us first be fearless in grabbing hold of the invitation the Church has given us to flourish. For far too long we have felt ourselves to be powerless victims of the decisions of others, slaves to the electronic voting machines of the General Synod. Today, on paper, we have the means to regain some control. A Bishop's Declaration. A Society. The five principles that assure us that we remain within the spectrum of the teaching and tradition of the Anglican Communion. Now we need to inhabit it boldly and fearlessly. Now we need the imagination and the courage to make it work.

And that matters, because as Fr Houlding constantly reminds us, provision is about mission. Provision is about the space we need to proclaim the saving news of God in Jesus Christ. So once we have freed ourselves of fear with regard to our ecclesial future, we can be fearless in being God's people in the world.

Let us be fearless in proclamation. We need to go on raising up and finding ways of forming a new generation of clergy whose interest is not in preserving the last vestiges of the past but who have a fresh boldness in evangelisation. Priests who can experiment, who can take risks, who can bring revival where there is death and plant new Eucharistic communities. And we need to equip our laypeople so that they have the fearlessness to give reason for the hope that is within them and speak up for their faith in their daily lives.

Let us be fearless in service. As Pope Francis has shown so spectacularly, the church only has credibility today when it is seen to stand alongside the poor. People listen to us when we take up the towel and wash the feet of the neglected and the browbeaten and the forgotten. This is our lifeblood as Anglo-Catholics. This is the charism of our movement. We are present in the places and the parishes that the respectable and the ambitious shun. So let us renew ourselves in our love of service and our passion for justice.

And the renewal of our movement won't start from the top. This cannot be about Bishops or Synods or Committees. Renewal can only come from the local. It can only come from Parishes hearing their call afresh and realising the dignity of the ministry that is theirs. At a conference I was at recently, Bill Hybels said almost in passing, 'You all know, of course, that the local church is the hope of the world.' Fearless ministry from the local church is not just our only hope. It is the world's only hope. That is how much you matter.

All things are yours, Paul says to the Corinthians, as he upbraids them over a division in the Church. Paul, Apollo, Cephas, world, life, death, things present, things to come, all things are yours. For you are Christ's and Christ is God's. There is no need for us to be afraid, little flock as we are, for the Father has given us the Kingdom. All things are ours. So let us be done with fear. And let us hear afresh our call to bring a nation back to the Christ whom we now meet at this altar, the Christ who holds all eternity in his hands and yet who stoops to raise us up to the majesty of heaven. 'Do not be afraid, little flock, for it is your Father's good pleasure to give you the Kingdom.' Amen.