

## **Sermon Preached at the Northern Provincial Festival 2012**

*By his great mercy he has given us a new birth into a living home through the resurrection of Christ Jesus.*

### **1 Peter 1 v3**

Those who have listened to my preaching across the years will know that I have one abiding hope. It is that Bristol Rovers might one day win the FA Cup! Before anyone laughs too much remember that, statistically speaking, there is more chance of that happening than of anyone of us winning big time on the Lottery. And, unlike playing the lottery, my particular fantasy costs me nothing.

All of us, in one way or another, have our dreams for the future. Following the recent royal wedding a little girl told me just how much she wanted to be a princess. The hard-pressed parent who spends her last pound on a scratch card desperately hopes that this will be the win that solves her immediate financial worries. It is a hard lesson for some of us to learn. Games of chance can only truly be great fun when, from the very first, we never seriously believe that we are likely to win. You and I might hope for a better summer next year than this year's. Nothing, however, can be done about it. We just have to hope and then wait and see. Compared with such hopes for the future the subsequent fortunes of Bristol Rovers begin to look a little better every time I consider them.

We Christians, though, are called to understand hope in quite a different way. Hope, for the Bible, is not to be thought of as longing for something that might just turn up. The Bible calls us to a faith that speaks of confidence in the future. The Bible talks the language of backing an absolute certainty. Jeremiah tells us that, even where God's own people are bent on ignoring Him, those who continue to trust in the Lord will be held as securely as a tree that sends its roots ever more deeply into the ground; roots that are sure of finding the water that eventually will provide the necessary nourishment. Jeremiah's confidence that God will look after the future, even as the present is falling apart all around him might well be a feeling that many of us gathered here today recognise all too easily. Yet, even Jeremiah's confidence is as nothing when viewed in the light of Easter Day. God shows us, then, that nothing whatsoever can defeat the love Jesus has shown on Good Friday. Even death is not going to have the final word. If there is one thing above all others to underline in every preparation for Baptism or for Confirmation it is that great truth. Nothing is going to defeat God's purpose. Jesus' death and resurrection are, as it were, the seal, the rubber stamp, on God's promise never to give up on us or to let us down. The First Letter of Saint Peter, our second reading today, might even have come originally from a sermon preached to folk as they were about to be baptised and confirmed. The very first thing of which

those new Christians are reminded is that in their new birth, that is their baptism, they are going to share a *living hope*. A *living hope* is one certain that all the negativity with which you and I meet in our world will never have the last word. Ruth Etchells, that great theologian from Durham, only recently died, used to speak of her father's constant reassurance during wartime. Whenever Ruth would express her fears as to how the war might end, even in the darkest moments of such times as Dunkirk or the Blitz, her father, immediately and confidently, would reassure her that eventually Hitler would be defeated. God offers a similar reassurance to you and me. Anything that stands in the way of God's loving purpose will eventually be swept aside. If you or I should doubt it, all we have to do is turn once again to the message of Good Friday and of Easter Day.

Yes, we Catholic Anglicans do live in difficult times. Some within our church still seem determined on backing away from the promises made to us in the Nineteen-nineties. We view, with some concern, the outcome of the recent House of Bishops Meeting. We fear a retreat from the recent proposals that seemed to throw us a lifebelt even in these latter stages of the debate about the rightness or otherwise of women bishops. Many of us here today could probably offer long lists of seemingly unfair treatment we have received in the past, not to mention our fears for something even worse in the future. We Catholic Anglicans, though, are not to reconstitute ourselves into some kind of society for the promoting of despair. God is in charge. The Church is Christ's Body. Christ is the Church's head and no-one else. You and I need, perhaps, to see both ourselves, and our present situation, just a little more in proportion. God, in the words of the famous hymn, is *working His purpose out*. You and I have a *living hope*. We do not need to use up so much of our energy in worrying about final outcomes. T S Eliot wrote these famous lines: *We had the experience but we missed the meaning*. I sometimes fear that you and I are so busy seeking the meaning amongst the arguments that at present consume our church that we then lose out on the wonderful experience of what it is to live, trust and hope as a Catholic Christian in the first place.

Christ is Lord of the Church. It is His will that is going to prevail in the end. That ought to give you and me a little more confidence to live with some untidy anomalies as we wait for God's will to prevail. How strange that so many of those who wish radically to alter the Church's age long practice as to who might be ordained, claim, almost in the same breath, that anything that would allow a proper accommodation of our needs, would be a gross breach of Catholic Order. You and I can only hold to a doctrine of open reception on this issue because, ultimately, we believe, it is Christ, Lord of the Church, whose Spirit will lead us into all truth. We must now have the courage to go forward in such trust. It is not unreasonable, though, to seek the same humility in those

who see things differently from us.

The lives of many of us here today have been overshadowed, for the past forty or so years, by the wonderful work of ARCIC, the Anglican-Roman Catholic International Commission. That great work is only going to be finally brought to completion when our two churches are once again united. If ever that great day is to come, there must first, surely, be a consistent and determined group of Anglicans who hold to a Catholic understanding of the Church and are determined to win around the rest of our Church to that same viewpoint. Conviction politicians do not give up when they are losing in the polls. They seek, rather, to hold their ground and fight for a comeback. Unless, or until, the Church of England should take from us the guarantees of a true Catholic ministry, refusing us genuine bishops, we should be seeking to hold firm and to fight the battle confident in our *living hope*, Jesus Christ. And, dare I say it, even if, as we sometimes fear in our worst moments, there were eventually to be no honourable place for us within the Church of England and you and I had to go, we would do so without bitterness. We would still remain confident in Christ, our *living hope*, who would in His own time and His own way, resolve the situation.

Movements within the Church rise and fall. Even Bishops of Beverley come and go! This particular Northern Festival, for me, of course, is overshadowed by the fact that it will be the last I share with you as Bishop of Beverley. The future, though, belongs to Christ; not to any of us, no matter how important we might think ourselves to be.

When the General Synod was meeting in February a young Anglican rightly asked us to start talking about Jesus and not of such items as the ordination of women to the episcopate. How right she is; save for one thing. The Church is Christ's Body. The ministry within it is Jesus' ministry. You and I seek nothing more than to proclaim Jesus. Our passion for Catholicism stems only from the conviction that within it we find Jesus most authentically proclaimed. Here today you and I, in this Holy Mass, show the Lord's death until He comes again. Jesus, our *living hope*, is here with us. You and I are caught up, once again, in the timeless worship of heaven. Our *living hope* is now a present reality. Your concern and mine is to offer that saving experience to our world.