

Gracious God may these words be pleasing. Amen

We've been doing a bit of reminiscing – there's been lots of smiles, a few tears, and lots of laughter. It would be good to share all of the laughter but I was told that my sense of humour isn't always shared by everyone else. I was reminded about this when I sang the office at Ripon Cathedral, some years back, with the visiting choir of St Marys Richmond. I accidentally turned over two pages at once and sang the wrong bit of the service. Not everyone found that funny.

I feel, however, that I have to take this final opportunity to use my children as sermon fodder. Those of you with long memories will remember the young James with his wild blonde hair who, for six months, would only come to church if he could wear his full Captain Jack Sparrow outfit. Because his trousers were on back to front whenever he swung on the communion rail he would reveal far too much. His younger brother Andrew has his moment at our annual Easter egg hunt. Having chased around our ancient churchyard he proudly reappeared clutching a handful of mini chocolate eggs in one hand. He wasn't sure what he'd picked up with his other hand, 'what is this Daddy?'. 'It's a bone and I need you to show me exactly where you found it as I need to put it back right now.' Those with particularly long memories may remember the arrival of our eldest Alastair who a few weeks ago had a (take a deep breath) 21st birthday. All three children (no longer children) are heading out into the world with this church family as being the first to encourage their Christian faith. This has been their first church that has represented the love of their Christ and you have told them to 'hold on to that which is good'. Alastair, now Helen, is a fine bell ringer and has this church to thank for her tuition and encouragement. She holds her university's organ scholarship and has a paid organist post elsewhere in the city of Liverpool based, again, on the encouragement given here through our Anglican musical tradition.

These themes of encouragement and gratitude are the headlines for this morning. Coincidentally tomorrow is St Barnabas day and our own Diocese of Leeds is launching its latest diocesan wide initiative: (*) 'Barnabas encouraging confidence.' Our reading from Acts tells of Barnabas being sent from the early church in Jerusalem to find out about the great things happening in Antioch. There he joined forces with Saul who would become Paul and together they became two keys workers not just in spreading the gospel but also wrestling through what it all meant both to them and also to us, all these year later. They did this through discussion but also through argument. At one point their argument was so severe they

went their separate ways. Yet they disagreed well, they kept in touch, they kept working for God's kingdom, they kept spreading the good news of God's love. Whereas Saint Paul seems to get many of the headlines Barnabas has gone down in history as Barnabas the encourager even when things are tough and the future is uncertain.

So, we in the Leeds Diocese are called to encourage and be encouraged in uncertain and challenging times. This is indeed uncertain and challenging times for our Anglican church family. This vision is so much bigger: The world in which we are called to serve needs encouragement in uncertain and challenging times. Our young people, facing increased issues of mental health and suicide, they need encouragement. (*) We will be encouraged to be confident in mission; encouraged to be confident in our future; encouraged to be confident in our leadership (and that's not simply Bishop Nick making a plea that we have confidence in him but also that we are encouraged into confident leadership through our worshipping communities); and we are encouraged to be confident in our witness – telling the good news of Jesus in a rapidly changing world. (If you wish longer to read the small text look at this powerpoint that was sent out by e-mail, follow the link, or simply go to the Leeds diocesan website). (*)

The headline is simple: If Saint Barnabas could be the great encourager in his uncertain and divided world then we too look to be inspired to encourage and be encouraged, to have the confidence to model Christ's love in an uncertain and divided world.

It is a world that in so many areas is attracted to division, violence and destruction. Jesus is not a magic wand that you or I can take out of a bag and waft all the bad things away in an instant. In our reading this morning he does, however, stand up against those who seek division, and then, in Jesus, we find a direction into healing. People laughed at Jesus when he healed the synagogue leader's daughter whereas the unclean woman found the confidence in faith simply to reach out and touch the cloak of the passing Christ to be brought into healing (*).

We have used this picture before here at St Marys. It is one of my favourites as it has so much energy. The foot moving with direction and resolve, the hand reaching out to take hold and merge into one in this direction into healing.

We pray to encourage and to be encouraged to reach out to Christ and join the journey towards healing even though others may pity and laugh. God loves you and God will never leave you. Years ago we put a picture besides some prayers for a Funkey church. It's still there. It simply says 'the best is yet to come'. That's to hold on to in a rapidly changing church and world but be encouraged – the best is yet to come.

My wonderful wife Gillian and I remember the pew we sat on when we first came to St Marys 23 years. It was across in front of the back pillar behind everyone else and out of sight from those coming in. This suited Gillian who was crippled by shyness, and suited me as I was damaged and broken. This church has consistently given both of us encouragement and confidence. In two weeks, Gillian is ordained as an Anglican priest and there is simply no church in the land that is more of a sending church than this church of St Marys has been to the Reverend Gillian Lunn. Likewise, this church has patiently encouraged me in a journey towards healing. It continues, as it does for others. Here I found my voice to once again sing to the Lord. When I read from the bible the words 'I will sing to the Lord as long as I live' it is with almost angry defiance. In our gratitude we wish that you remain ambitiously confident in the encouragement you can give and receive within a church family such as this to those such as ourselves who happen to arrive and wish to hide. Do not underestimate the encouragement you give simply by being here on a Sunday morning whether up front or sheltering behind a pillar or somewhere in between.

Our journeys, like Paul and Barnabas, are now to go in separate directions. Be encouraged by the thankfulness we have for you and for those whose memories we cherish. We are now called to worship and sing in different places but when we sing to the Lord we echo the music of eternal praise and we mirror our friendships eternal. The best is yet to come.

Thank you.