

Fr Max's 1st Mass – Text of Archdeacon Jonathan's sermon

Just over 3.5 million years ago something extraordinary happened somewhere on this planet earth....a simple life form emerged. A living cell which could extract some combination of the energy of the sun and the carbon in air and water to sustain itself, to divide and so to replicate.

In time more complex forms of life emerged.

They did so because as these living cells divided and reproduced the ones which were more able to take the available resources for themselves were the ones that survived, and the ones that survived were the ones that were able to reproduce.

And so the extraordinary story of evolution which has endowed our planet with such dazzling diversity, complexity and beauty began. And from the beginning, competition, the survival of the fittest, is at the heart of this story.

This competitive quest for the resources of life is still one way of thinking about the whole human story. One to which we are very prone. We find it in the belief that the world is there to be exploited, that other people are there to be used, that we should always be on the lookout for what we can get out of other people.

But just about two thousand years ago, in an upper room, in Jerusalem something no less momentous than the emergence of that first life form occurred. Jesus had a meal with his friends and he changed that human story...or maybe it would be better to say that he completed it.

He took bread, broke it and gave it to his disciples and said....this is my body, given for you. And then he took the cup of wine and said, this is my blood which is shed for you. At its simplest Jesus rewrites those evolutionary rules. He gives himself for us, to feed us. And that giving of himself to his disciples...indeed for the whole world....was put into effect in the most complete and brutal way imaginable the following day

when his body was indeed broken on the cross and his blood was indeed shed.

Jesus gave himself fully to the world, sharing, shouldering all the pain, anger, darkness, and hatred and appearing at first to be defeated by them. But on the third day when some women went to the tomb to anoint his body, they found that it was empty, and they were told that he had been raised.

There are many ways of understanding what the cross and resurrection of Jesus might mean and surely in speaking of it we are in presence of mystery, ultimately the mystery of love, self-giving love.....why should creatures like ourselves shaped, by this competitive process of the quest for resources, why should we love and be ready to die for one another.

But the more I think about this self-giving love of Jesus against the background of what we know is a competitive, world shaped by the survival of the fittest....which has produced such vitality and creativity and yet which is destined to destroy

itself under the drive of its own contradictions, the more I see the life and death and resurrection of Jesus as the transformation point of that creation.

Because with the coming into our world of pure, self-giving love, a love so generous, so total, that it could only be the love of God, though made present for us in a human being, with that everything changes.

Competitive, broken, bitter, jealous men and women tried to destroy this self-giving love as we always do....but in this case they could not because this is the love of God, whose resources of love and forgiveness and joy and hope are inexhaustible. That is why the tomb was empty because nothing is stronger than God's self-giving love.

This is what we mean by the high priesthood of Christ, giving himself for us, reaching out to feed and nourish us and enabling us all to live in power of God.

It is not only those ordained to be priests in the church – as Fr Max was here yesterday – who are called to live in this way, all Christians are called to share in this priesthood, this self-giving to build others up, to reach out. We should never make the mistake of thinking that we can subcontract the calling of all Christians to our ordained priests. But ordained priests have a special responsibility to be the ones who constantly call us and form us and remind us all of our calling to live and love to the full.

Ordained priests do that in many ways, they are specially trained and authorised to teach and preach about this way of life, they are called to be leaders of their communities of faith, organising and enabling the mission in the places they serve. They have a special responsibility for pastoring and caring for the people of God. But the thing that they uniquely do is to preside at the Eucharist.

As I have suggested in Jesus, God is renewing, remaking, the world, re-writing the most basic rules of creation. And the beating heart of that

remaking is the death and resurrection of Jesus which is the turning point in our world, and the Eucharist is given to us so that we may forever be renewed and remade and live in the power of that turning.

The Eucharist is not to be an escape from ordinary life, it is to be where we engage most completely with ordinary life because here our lives are being remade. We are learning to live not out of our own strength but out of God's, we are learning to live not for ourselves but for and with others, we are learning not that we are unworthy but that we are loved and honoured and beautiful in God's sight.

I first got to know Max and in due course Hannah when I was struggling to find actors for a play we had commissioned at the church where I was until recently Rector about the life of St George for our festival. It was then that I first heard that famous Max phrase... 'it'll be alright'.

We had no actors, no costumes, no props, and almost no time but one conversation with Max

and his 'can-do' approach convinced me that it would all be possible. And so it proved....and not just possible it was a triumph with Hannah playing the part of the beautiful young princess!

There were certainly times later when Max came to work for us at St George's as pastoral assistant when I might have preferred a bit of anxiety-driven activity in place of that famous 'it'll be alright!' But Max is not wrong to believe that it will be alright. Because it is rooted in his faith in the love of God, and it has seen him through some challenging times in his younger life, and seen him grow into the priest we are proud to be celebrating with this evening.

And in spite of his Methodist upbringing at the very same village chapel in which I was formed in the Christian faith just a few years before him.....Max has developed as I think you can see a very high doctrine of the ordained priesthood. And he is not wrong about that either because he knows that we priests are not there to serve ourselves but to call the whole community of believers together so that together we can be

transformed by that self-giving love of the cross and the resurrection which is made present for us again whenever we break bread and share a cup of wine as Jesus commanded us. And that community can then be equipped and nourished to be the Body of Christ in love and service for the world, so that not just the church but the whole world can be caught up in the transforming power of God's love.

I still remember a story I heard as a boy in that small chapel which captures something of this for me. An inquisitive child was shown a vision of heaven and hell. In hell he was surprised to see a great and lavish banquet was spread out....and the residents being shown into the feast. There was just one catch, they were only provided with a single long spoon with which to eat. And try as they might, their spoons were just too long to get any food into their mouths. So when the end of the meal was announced they departed, snarling, angry and even hungrier than before.

The child was surprised on being taken to heaven to see the same lavish banquet prepared, and at

the appointed time, in came the residents to sit at the same tables with the same long spoons. But unlike the residents of hell, they had learned in their lives that the only way to be fed was to feed one another. And so at once they were all using their long spoons to pass the delicious food on their plates to their neighbours and in turn enjoying the food that their neighbours passed to them.

My friends, as we pray this evening especially for Fr Max as he begins this new chapter in his response to God's love, let us pray that he may always live out of the power and strength of that self-giving love which is God's love, and that his ministry may be richly blest and lead many others to know and become part of that self-giving love, and let us pray that we ourselves may always live out of the self-giving love of God.