A sermon for the Cathedral Eucharist at Wells Cathedral, preached on Sunday 15 November by the Reverend Edward Day, Chaplain to the Bishop of Exeter and former Cathedral Curate.

May the Echo Remain

Zephaniah 1. 7, 12-end; Matthew 25. 14-30

Over the past three years, hours must have been spent by poor congregations forced to listen to the silly things I have to say in sermons. In only a few minutes, you will be completely free of that ordeal.

Looking back over my records, which are available online if you're interested, I realise that from the pulpit in the quire I have preached on board games; super glue; supermarket self-service checkouts; the mute button on remote controls; and on my fear of knocking over the glass of water kindly left in the pulpit. Then from this pulpit here in the nave, I have preached on the weather; pirates; Monty Python; Desert Island Discs; the rebranding of the spider crab as the Cornish King crab; sketchy hotels near Paddington; and our thankfulness not only for the farmers that grow our food, but also the bees that pollinate and the dentists that keep us eating.

Amongst all these strange topics, I hope that I have managed to say something memorable about God. And standing here for the last time, I wonder what, after all those words and jokes of questionable quality, might be worth remembering.

The lectionary, however, with its customary pastoral sensitivity, has given us Zephaniah's apocalyptic destruction and a parable which ends with the weeping and gnashing of teeth. Not exactly the readings one might choose for a fond farewell. But I do like a good challenge.

In the book of the Prophet Zephaniah, we hear of a people who had become complacent. So comfortable and secure in their wealth and position that they had ceased to expect anything of God. They had settled into the reassuring belief that nothing really needed to change. Yet God comes searching for Jerusalem with lamps. God searches not for those who are different, nor for

those who don't quite fir in, nor those whom respectable society finds troublesome. God searches for the complacent; those who have mistaken their own comfort for righteousness. It is a stark warning for every institution, including the Church. Our beautiful buildings, our impressive traditions, our wonderful music mean precious little if we have forgotten how to love.

Then we have this extraordinary parable in the Gospel according to St Matthew. A man entrusts enormous sums to three of his slaves. Two take risks and multiply what they have received. The third, overwhelmed by fear, buries his money. When the master returns, that third slave is condemned and cast out into the outer darkness. Then comes that haunting sentence: *'For to all those who have, more will be given […] but from those who have nothing, even what they have will be taken away.'*

Well, that seems remarkably familiar. The wealthy grow wealthier, the poor are made poorer, and those who begin with the least are so often expected to surrender the most. Surely the kingdom of God cannot be like that? We must be careful, therefore, not to turn this difficult parable into a divine endorsement of the cruelties of our capitalistic world. Christ tells us of a master described as reaping where he has not sown, and a slave cast out for being afraid. We should not complacently pretend that this is a comfortable reading.

Consider what fear does to that third slave. It persuades him that the safest thing to do is nothing at all. How often are we tempted to do the same? We bury our convictions because speaking up might be uncomfortable. We bury our compassion beneath perfectly respectable excuses. We bury our willingness to change because admitting that we were wrong might embarrass us. Sometimes, even, we bury the Gospel itself. We preserve it, protect it, defend it and guard it so carefully that nobody is ever allowed to do anything with it. However, the Gospel was never given to us simply to be kept safe. It is a love to be lived, experienced, embodied, and shared. There is a great difference between keeping the faith and keeping it buried.

Consequently, if after all these sermons there is one thing worth remembering, it is this: your life and your creation in the Image of God is a living manifestation of divine love. None of you are an embarrassment to God. None of you are a problem to be solved. You are not loved on the condition that one day you might be transformed into somebody more acceptable. You are loved now. Regardless of your sex, your gender identity, your sexuality, your wealth, your education, your accomplishments, or your failures, you are a human being of immeasurable worth.

Your dignity is not something you have earned. It is not something the Church has bestowed upon you, and it is not something the world has the authority to take away. It is inherent in your very being, for you are made in the image and likeness of God. And what a joy it is, therefore, to help one another grow into the unique people God has made us to be. Not into somebody else's idea of

who we ought to be. Not into smaller, quieter, more socially acceptable versions of ourselves. But into the fullest, most truthful expression of the person whom God already cherishes.

The love of Christ does not demand uniformity. It is not confined to the familiar, the conventional or the heteronormative. It is not reserved for those who believe the right things, vote the right way, or live the right sort of lives. It is a love that crosses boundaries, breaks down barriers, and challenges authority. It calls us to build a world in which nobody's dignity depends upon somebody else's permission. A world in which the poor are cherished, the stranger is welcomed, creation is protected, and love and justice are valued above profit and violence.

This sort of love is dangerous. It is revolutionary. And it demands something of us. It demands that we change our minds, challenge injustice, admit our mistakes, and surrender the comfort of believing that we have nothing left to learn. Truth matters enormously, but truth without love becomes merely rhetoric.

We cannot proclaim that everyone bears the Image of God and then build a Church in which some people feel compelled to hide who they truly are. That is not faithfulness. That is burying the talent.

It is worth remembering that immediately after this parable, Christ tells us that He comes to us hungry, thirsty, naked, sick, imprisoned, and as a stranger. We encounter the love of Christ among the very people whom the world is so quick to push aside. So we ought to be terribly careful about whom we consign to the outer darkness. For the Church is not called simply to stand at the door deciding who deserves to come inside. It is called to go out into the darkness, carrying the light of Christ, searching for those whom others have abandoned.

God searches Jerusalem with a lamp. Perhaps it is time that we took up that lamp ourselves.

These past years at Wells have been an extraordinary gift to me. You have allowed me to share your joys and your sorrows, your prayers and your silences. You have welcomed me, challenged me, forgiven me, and helped me to grow in love. And so thank you for helping me flourish as the person God has called me to be.,

And though my voice will soon cease from this place, I pray that somewhere, amongst these stones, something of an echo might remain. Not the terrible jokes, but a confident knowledge that you are made in the Image of God; you are loved beyond measure; and nothing can take that dignity away from you. Nor can anything take it away from your neighbour.

So do not bury this extraordinary, radical love. Spend it. Risk it. Share it. Live it. Let it change you and, through you, let it change the world. And when you find someone standing in the outer darkness, do not stand inside, in comfort,

explaining why they deserve to be there. Go out to them. Take a lamp. Take their hand. Bring them home.

May the echo of God's love be heard always within your hearts; may the reflection of God's grace shine in your eyes; may the whisper of God's praise be always on your lips; and may the Image of God, impressed upon the fabric of your being, strengthen you each day, that in every step you take and every day that dawns, you may grow more fully into the beautiful and unrepeatable person whom God has made you to be.

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