

A Dean's Retiring Reflections **Very Revd. Keith Jones, O.Carm.**

On Sunday 29th April 2012 Very Reverend Keith Jones preached his final sermons as Dean of York in the northern English city's magnificent Minster (cathedral). After Evensong he was presented with 'Letters of Fraternity' by the Carmelite Order, granting him honorary membership of the Carmelites in recognition of his great friendship to 'Carmel', his promotion of Carmelite spirituality, and his ecumenical collaboration with Christians of many different traditions. This was the first time such recognition was given by the Order to someone not a member of the Roman Catholic Church. We publish here the Dean's final two sermons.



Keith Jones (centre) receiving his 'Letters of Fraternity' from fellow members of the Carmelite Family.

Sermon at Sunday Eucharist

Jesus Christ of Nazareth: There is no salvation through anyone else; in all the world no other name has been granted to mankind by which we can be saved. (Acts 4 v. 12)

This being the last occasion for me to preach from this august pulpit, and to celebrate at this altar at the heart of this great cathedral, puts me at any rate in the mood for a summing up. Not that it necessarily takes very long to do that. As the years go on, it is the grand simplicities of the Christian faith that rise into the light, like the Lakeland mountains as we row away from the nearness of the shore.

And one such simple conviction is expressed in these words from the *Book of the Acts of the Apostles*: "There is no salvation through anyone else than Jesus Christ"; "there is no other name granted to mankind by which we can be saved." In that sentence we catch the immediate, vigorous, impatient spirit of the apostles. Whatever truth might be, whatever meaning there is in living, it was what they had found in Jesus Christ: his teaching, his life, his wisdom, his example, his achievement, his victory.

The words are so uncompromising as to be unsettling. I've known people reject Christianity because some Christians use these words to deny truth to other faiths and beliefs that are not Christian but otherwise appear noble and wise. I've even known people who insist that to be the *only* meaning of these words, and thank God for saving them from a largely doomed world. Now it

will not surprise you to know that I both believe these words to be true, and yet express the purposes of a loving and saving God. I believe that human life is such that it is fulfilled and laudable only insofar as it takes on the pattern of the life, death and resurrection of the Lord Jesus. And yet the Holy Spirit of God moves in many cultures as it moves in the evolving processes of nature. Faiths and philosophies of many kinds foreshadow the ultimate truth which God has revealed to us in Jesus Christ, and which the Church grasps and affirms in the Catholic Creeds and sufficiently clearly expresses in (for nearest example) the formularies of the Church of England.

But in faith we do more than admire the broken fragments of truth here and there. We must seize and hold truth as closely as we can, and live it with all our might. What is more, it is a privilege given to us to live in this country with Sikhs, and Muslims, Hindus, Jains and Taoists (among others) as our fellow citizens, in whose experience and insight there is a world of wisdom for us; but not as lofty and impartial samplers of ideas. We do so as those who speak of what we ourselves have found life-giving in Jesus Christ: and only on such terms, terms that are confident and yet humble, are we qualified to speak. To do otherwise is to betray the very Jesus Christ whom we pretend to champion. But we believe God sees Christ in many who do not know Christ, but yet show him; and judges and saves on that basis. Christianity that is clearer about what it opposes than what it has found to be true is a travesty.

We have also the greatest privilege in this place and time in having the freedom to set out publicly and with whatever clarity we can, our realization that what has, as a historical fact, constituted Jesus Christ as a person is that in him what is divine and what is human have lived together, have shared the world, and have gone through all of human life and death together in peace. That is the thing most worth knowing of all things that we can know. That idea has always captivated me and set me free; an idea utterly convincing as a means of understanding what is going on in the world. To unpack it takes not only a whole lifetime, but even when we see God face to face we shall not come to the end of it. This is the truth God has “granted to mankind”, to help us in our dealings with life and its sufferings and its joys. It turns out to be not merely an idea but a person who shares life with us and works with us to turn our clay to gold, our flesh into spirit, our mortality into immortality.

We proclaim that to be holy and to be human are not incompatible. Christ has joined them and they shall never be parted. All that is good in human culture, its language, its music and its art, its brilliance and its ingenuity, can be the means whereby God embraces, enhances, and completes our possibilities. Jesus has shown us what is possible for us. The world and its good things may not, of course serve such a fine purpose. They may merely tickle our senses, and give us what godless people insist aggressively is enough, which is a degree of fun according to the degree our tastes require. We won't have that. We believe culture should deepen, explore, and widen our awareness of other lives and what is around us and make us more loving and generous as Christ is. We believe that how we live and what we delight in should transform us, and transform the world around us, not by the mere plundering of the world's wealth for our pleasure, but making a quality of life from our living together so that earth and heaven sing together. To grow souls, to build Jerusalem, by which we mean making human life filled with the Spirit of Christ: that is our aim, our motive and our vocation. It also requires our vigilance, our discipline, our patience and our prayer.

But it is possible. And Jesus Christ is the key, the one that best turns the lock to this riddle that we are. Among all the insights of philosophers and dreamers, he is the cornerstone. This is not a time when we should water down our glowing conviction about him, and think that the world will save itself without faith. This is not a time when we should stand by and see our civilisation fall apart from the instruments of the wrath of God which are greed, waste and economic irresponsibility. The problem of our world turns out to be lack of faith, by a world that has allowed its sense of meaning, of truth, of vision, to weaken too far. In my lifetime it's not the political visions that have

been lacking: we have had them from every angle. It is the human attitude, the trashiness, the emptiness of soul, that keeps making all programmes fail. Faith in the union of God and humanity is the only clear remedy. Mere worldly solutions will not do. And the Christ we proclaim is not one of those narrow, exclusive versions of Christianity whereby all are consigned to perdition unless they can parrot the dogmatic passwords that give you entry to the bunker of the saved. We preach the Christ who died to save us all, and whose life gives meaning and hope to all that human life could be if only it were delivered from those sins that confine, addict, shrivel and inflame with desperate rage what could be so glorious.

Sermon at Sunday Choral Evensong

It was the mid-1960s when I was being interviewed, at the age of 22, to establish whether I was worth investing money in as a candidate for holy orders. They grilled me within days of a striking report in *The Observer*, issued from the parish of Deptford in south London, announcing that the traditional pattern of parish ministry in the inner-city was doomed to decline and failure. The most gifted and the brightest team perhaps ever assembled for a populous parish had tried everything, but had failed to win a large and steady congregation. The vicar, the Rev. Nicholas Stacey, was moving on to do social work instead. That, he clearly considered, was a more effective way to exercise his dazzling talents. I am sure he was right and he went on to have a career as a very successful administrator.

So the whole of my professional career in the Church has been defined by the decline in the success and influence of the Church of England. The numbers of worshippers has steadily fallen. Congregations have aged and not been replaced. All the statistics are downwards. Bishops are in despair about paying for clergy as parishes fail to pay their share. No wonder the thought crosses my mind that the retirement of me and my generation can only be a good thing.

That judgment would be inescapable if the problem were one of marketing. If the problem was mostly in presentation and product promotion, my theme would be of repentance and apology. But I suggest that we should regard the most profound problem as belonging not to the Church and its marketing (though some blame should be laid there too), but in the nature of our society, and the quality of our culture. It is the tone, the way society is now, and how it has been all my life, and how it has been becoming for much longer than my life. Those of us who believe in God, and specifically who believe that we best know God through Jesus, have got fewer, grown rarer, less understood, more suspect.

This is a major risk for our nation and indeed our whole culture. There is a threat to our whole way of life, and presents a risk to us and our children as great as global warming or economic collapse (which are indeed related to the problem). And so what Christians bear witness to, and what this place stands for is, we find, at odds with the fashions of our age. We call on faculties of mind and imagination that have become very difficult to great numbers of our contemporaries. That is why this is not a problem only for the Church of England. All the main Christian denominations have declined.

The decline of faith is an aspect of a decline in shared vision, which always needs faith to give it energy. A shared vision kept alive the political and social life and movements of previous generations, from great philanthropists to trade unions, from Tory magnates who built churches to municipal bodies who remodelled Victorian cities. Of course, we have derived from their effort many good things. The undoubted progress in technology and medicine, and the inheritance of

wealth from those industries that have for two hundred years been devouring the earth's resources at suicidal speed, have made our generation in our part of the world very comfortable. But our way of life has made too many people comparatively deaf and blind to the presence of God, unable to fathom the motivations of those who in previous ages regarded life itself as a religious matter. In certain crucial ways the people who built such a cathedral as this, living short and suffering lives in many ways, knew many things we have become almost unable to access. We know what are the fruits of that oblivion from our daily papers: unbridled greed, the corruption that mere wealth always causes, desperate wastefulness, and an all encompassing emptiness of soul. The danger is increasing.

And in all this, the creation and sustaining of Christian communities has not ceased, and has never been more important and inspiring. We Christians build them tirelessly and in many forms. These often frail and fragmentary witnesses stand against the ruin of our time and its rising fear. Here, and in such places as this, the priority of the knowledge and love of God and the love of neighbour are acknowledged. I am thrilled to see among us today friends from the local Carmelite Order, for example – and you are indeed warmly welcome here where we have joined in our prayers during these last years! The witness of the religious orders has surely never been more needed and valued than now. And in places such as York Minster, we also maintain a rhythm of life according to different seasons and hours from the frenzied and artificial pattern around us, in a language of solemnity and music. What is freely given by God has here priority. The sense of making something from love, such as spreading a feast, is at home in these places. And the best things (as clergy know) are hidden, small, shared, personal, warming the heart. Churches, even small and residual ones, remain the best things to cherish. They nurture the soul in a dangerous time. To be a priest, whether to work in parishes or to serve cathedrals, seems to me still the most sublime of vocations.

In 1965 I knew I disagreed with Nicholas Stacey's view. Not because I thought his discovery unduly pessimistic for the Church, but because, having studied English Literature (which is really the study of the nature of literacy and imagination) I was already a profound pessimist about the way we live now. Having learnt from my parish church and from my parents that there was no good that was not a general good, I concluded that what the Church declared about Jesus Christ was a far better way to sustain the human soul than mere affluence or hedonism however refined or superficially exciting. And I can add that a lifetime of worship and life in the churches has convinced me still more strongly that this is so. And the dangers to our civilisation and the value of faith are still more sharply clear now than they were then. Let my last words be that I would do it all again, better if I could, but with no less eagerness.

To God our creator and sustainer be all praise and thanks for ever and ever. Amen.