

## **Address to the Young Adult Gathering 15<sup>th</sup> June 1999**

I wondered in thinking about this evening whether I might talk about elections. A very topical subject but a rather painful one for us, so I have decided to leave that well alone.

Instead I am going to talk about reshuffles. The Tories have had theirs, the Lib Dems will have theirs when they have chosen their new leader and there is already speculation about ours. Reshuffles are a source of endless fascination and interest for politicians like us. The attraction is partly in the very public demonstration of who is up and who is down. Some weeks ago, in our prayer group in the House of Commons, we were talking about the prospects for the forthcoming reshuffles in our respective parties. Of course – well, we're Christians, so of course we're not really concerned about these worldly matters – but we were talking about them anyway, even though it was our prayer meeting.

I want to base my remarks about reshuffles around Matthew's Gospel. You may feel that the connection is rather tenuous. But as we were gossiping in our prayer group about reshuffles, we read from Matthew's Gospel about a request to Jesus for a kind of reshuffle of the disciples. The disciples involved – two of them – didn't actually request promotion themselves. They left it to their Mum, and personally I think they may have been onto something there. In Matthew 20 it says:

*The mother of Zebedee's sons came to Jesus with her sons and, kneeling down, asked a favour of him. "What is it you want?" he asked. She said, "Grant that one of these two sons of mine may sit at your right hand and the other at your left in your kingdom."*

In replying, Jesus said:

*"You know that the rulers of the Gentiles lord it over them, and their high officials exercise authority over them. Not so with you. Instead, whoever wants to become great among you must be your servant, and whoever wants to be first must be your slave – just as the Son of Man did not come to be served, but to serve, and to give his life a ransom for many."*

That passage sums up our theme for these few days. We know how reshuffles work. We know how things operate in the society around us – people lording it over each other when they have the chance. But our model is Jesus. He has shown us a different way. He has brought us into His kingdom where things work differently. Matthew's Gospel shows us that in this kingdom the values are different and are often opposed to the way things work around us. It's an upside down kingdom that we have been called into. Jesus shows us that kingdom and as we focus on him, his example will change our lives.

So we shouldn't behave like everybody else. Jesus did not come to be served, but rather to serve – so much so that he gave his life as a ransom for us. Jesus is the centre of our attention at this Gathering and this is a chance to reflect on what difference his example is going to make in our lives. Many at the Gathering are in the throes of choices about where we are going to work, where we are going to live, where we are going to commit ourselves for church. The choices we make as young adults shape the rest of our lives and will impact our lives for years to come. We need to be following the example of Jesus as we make them.

In Matthew's gospel, that theme of coming to serve, not to be served, is a strong one all the way through. Speaking of Jesus, Matthew quotes in chapter 12 Isaiah's prophecy; *"Here is my servant whom I have chosen, the one I love, in whom I delight; I will put my Spirit on him and he will proclaim justice to the nations. He will not quarrel or cry out; no one will hear his voice in the streets."* Jesus invites his followers to live lives of service, to be servants, not just to make occasional acts of service. We are called to give, love, lend, forgive, teach, serve and to go out and be among those in need.

Jesus himself says in Matthew 10: *"Whoever finds his life will lose it, and whoever loses his life for my sake will find it"* and again in chapter 16, *"whoever wants to save his life will lose it"*. In Chapter 18, Jesus says *"unless you change and become like little children, you will never enter the kingdom of heaven. Therefore, whoever humbles himself like this child is the greatest in the kingdom of heaven."* Chapter 23: *"The greatest among you will be your servant"*, and so it continues.

So in the light of all that, what attitude do we take to reshuffles? Can somebody in a professional career hope to engage with ambition, and the cut and thrust of careers, while being faithful to the vision of servant-hood which we find in Jesus? Reading some of this, some people's reaction would I think be: it just can't be done. You can't be faithful, they would say, to Jesus' calling to his followers if the whole time you are engaged in plotting and scheming in smoke filled rooms and all the other things that politicians get up to. Actually, I think that view is wrong, but I can understand very well why people would take that view.

This is not simply a question for politicians. All of us, whatever we end up doing, come up against issues of ambition, my interests versus other people's interests, who and what comes first in our lives? Is involvement in all of that out for those who are committed to following Jesus?

Well, I think the answer of the Bible is: no it isn't out. We are not told to opt out of what is going on around us. Rather, we are told to stay in. But to be there on a different basis. To be there first of all as servants, as children, pursuing the interests of others rather than our own, following Jesus.

When I was a young adult, I moved to East London. There was a group of Christians in the same sort of position who moved in to Newham borough at the same time and I've been able to watch what has happened to them. I don't think they were exceptional people in anything other than their desire to follow Jesus and, 20 years later, many of them are still there. It has often not been easy for some. Some very practical things have been very difficult to come to terms with. One of the hardest things has always been when the young adults become young parents, and they face up to the prospect of their children spending their whole school lives in Newham schools which at one time were uniformly poor. That leads them to face a very hard choice. Some have left the area as a result of that, but others have tackled the issue in different ways and stayed on.

I can mention a Christian GP, a contemporary of mine, who has been worn down by years of really grinding hard work in one of our local practices. He had to take extended time off recently through sheer unrelenting exhaustion, though he's back now and providing conscientious care for people who don't get to see very much of that. I can think of a married couple who are both fine teachers. He is continuing to work as an English language support teacher, she is preparing for ordination for the United Reformed Church in order to serve in a new church planted recently. Both are heavily involved in English language classes provided through their church, targeted mainly at people from South America who have

sought asylum in East London. A number of those people have become Christians as a result of that work.

One friend started out to be a chartered accountant but now spends half his time working as a local authority town planner and the other half as a church leader. One a local optician, others who commute in to central London to work. A friend who was a local authority youth worker, now a full time church worker. One who was a church minister, now a community worker and researcher. And all of those people making a difference, consistently over 20 years, having an influence for Jesus and making our community a better place.

Their choices mean they are involved in the local community. Their obedience has made them vulnerable, but able to share people's lives in a way that makes a difference. They and innumerable others worldwide are following the example of Jesus and helping to bring about his kingdom, with the vision of serving which Jesus puts before us.

But isn't an easy ride. One person who was at the Gathering last year and who is an inner city teacher wrote after the Gathering that she found the work demoralising and that *"I often try to get God's perspective on it but my spirituality is deadened by my anger, frustration and tiredness"*. It sometimes gets like that. There is a cost to what we are being asked to do and we need to reckon with that. Sometimes it will look to outsiders straightforwardly as if we have just failed. There is no assurance that we will achieve what people generally would regard as success. We might do but equally we might not. Jesus talks about the foolishness of the farmer who builds a tower without realising the cost and the king preparing for battle who miscalculates his opponent's strength. In choosing the life based on following Jesus' example, we should embark on it with no illusions about the cross we will carry.

Our calling, though, is to get involved - not to walk away, not to ignore the hurt around us but with others following Jesus to reach out to communities without hope and people with no future. Figures published this week about teenage pregnancies and the levels of divorce point to a malaise which Government alone cannot solve. Our calling is not to escape from what is happening around us but to serve within it.

I think it is great that Christians are engaging more and more with what is going on in their communities in a way that I don't think we have seen for a long time. Part of the problem, one of the things which has gone wrong in our country over a very long period, has been that the Christians have pulled out. For too long Christians have not been supported as they step out and have been discouraged from taking bigger steps. Now its time to get stuck back in - as politicians, as business people, as workers, as teachers, as artists -in the lives of our communities, through service and through initiatives based in our churches. We can make a difference.

There will be a lot of hard things involved in following Jesus. So do we pack it in? No, because, as Peter said when Jesus asked him that question, *"To whom would we go? You have the words that give eternal life"*. We have nowhere else to go. We are not going to find the truth anywhere else.

In looking at the life we are being called upon to live, we can count on God keeping his promises. In Matthew's Gospel there are commitments that give us assurance about what we are going to come up against.

There are the commitments of security and support. In Chapter 11, Jesus says:

*Come to me, all you who are weary and burdened, and I will give you rest. Take my yoke upon you and learn from me, for I am gentle and humble in heart, and you will find rest for your souls. For my yoke is easy and my burden is light.*

We are not going to be pushed further than we can cope with. We are going to find rest.

He is committed to guiding us. In sending out his followers, Jesus promised them that when they were up against it, they would be given the words to speak. There is the commitment of his presence. We are not going to be abandoned. The last of Jesus' words recorded in Matthew's gospel. *"And surely I am with you always, to the very end of the age."*

What we want to say in these few days is that those promises are true. That has been our experience. They are true in the bad times as well as in the good times. We can be confident in setting out to build our lives on the basis Jesus has set out that it isn't all going to collapse, even if it sometimes feels that it might. God's promises are true. Our calling is to be faithful.

My reshuffle experiences so far have been entirely positive. I've been involved in two of them. On the first occasion, last July, I was summoned completely out of the blue across to Downing Street – with no prior hint at all that an appointment was on the cards. I was in a complete state of ecstatic reverie at the time – to the extent that I seemed to be incapable of stringing a coherent sentence together. The Prime Minister said he wanted to invite me to join the Government. I said: "Oh, thank you very much". The Prime Minister said he was appointing me a Minister at the Department of Social Security. I said "Oh, thank you very much". I think the Prime Minister must have wondered how he had come to appoint to his Government a complete social inadequate. But for me it was a wonderful moment.

But it won't always be like that. There are wonderful highs in politics but there are deep lows as well and we all get them. Being sacked. Losing elections. It happens to us all and it is painful. I was the Leader of the Council in Newham for four years and for a long time that felt like one utter disaster after another. It was exhausting and grueling and there seemed precious little to show for it all. But the point I want to emphasise this evening is that the promises and the reality of Jesus were true in both situations, in good times and in bad.

So what about reshuffles? Can we engage with reshuffles? Can we talk about them without feeling guilty at our prayer meetings? Can we get interested and excited about the changing events around us? Yes we can – and with our whole heart – but our starting point is a different one. The foundation is a very different one, but it is a foundation for engaging from, not for disengaging. It is right that we should truly understand what is happening around us, the forces which are shaping our society, the good and the bad.

Jesus told his disciples when he sent them out in Matthew 10 that they should be as shrewd as snakes. This is not a call to a sloppy, wishy-washy free wheeling. Jesus demands our intellects – that we should be shrewd. We should be engaging with the big issues and forming judgments about them in dialogue with others. Our values, the upside down values of the kingdom we have discovered in Jesus, are for sharing. Jesus says in Matthew 5 that we are like salt for all mankind -

that we are like light for the whole world. The values of God's kingdom need to be shared in our communities, among those we work with, throughout our society.

But those values are different and it is they which we are called to make the characteristic of our lives. Its a tough calling but it is not an impossible one. I can see that in the lives of the people I know in East London and I can see it in the parliamentary lives of colleagues in our group as well. Our example is Jesus. In the things that we say and the way that we set about our work, the priorities that we set among our colleagues, the activities that we take part in in our communities – we are to follow the example of Jesus.

I started by reading what Jesus said in reply when he was asked for a reshuffle. Let me close with that too:

*"You know that the rulers of the Gentiles lord it over them, and their high officials exercise authority over them. Not so with you. Instead, whoever wants to become great among you must be your servant, and whoever wants to be first must be your slave – just as the Son of Man did not come to be served, but to serve, and to give his life a ransom for many."*