

## Sermon at Jesus College

I'm delighted to be here, and I hope you heard Rose, last week – if she didn't tell you the story about prison and role models, ask me afterwards. I want to talk about care in the community – not, I hasten to add, about social work, about which I know nothing, but, fundamentally, about how we love and care for one another.

I work as a headhunter, specialising in the charities sector, recruiting senior leaders and especially members of trustee boards for charities. What we aim to do is help create teams that are more than the sum of their parts, particularly by increasing the diversity of people and thought around the table.

As part of this, it is my huge privilege (and one of the bits of the job I most enjoy) to interview people, including those who have given and achieved much in their professional lives. There are two questions I always ask, which I want to bring you today. The first is that I listen for the point at which people talk about purpose, values motivation and a sense of service, and ask 'where does that come from, for you?' And invariably the answer is deeply rooted in their past – their experiences as children and young adults, the example of their parents and teachers, what they saw, how they were raised, and often they talk about their own faith, or their parents' faith.

So the conversation about service, starts early in people's lives. This series is about faith and public life, and that's a journey that's already started for you. Public service can sound like what the great and the good do, in the corridors of power, maybe resulting in a seat in the House of Lords. But it's about you - how you behave, how you step through the world. The causes you support, the marches you go on, the jobs you do, the friendships that last and those that fall away, how you interact with the world. How you use your economic muscle – if you believe it's important to pay your taxes and treat people decently you'll spend your money with companies that do that. Bit by bit, these choices build up the community around you.

Our readings give us two aspects of how to live your life, and how you are within your community. The story of the Good Samaritan is so familiar perhaps we barely hear it – someone, 'one of us', has been attacked on a journey – mugged and beaten up. Religious leaders hurry by, too busy and too bothered by the thought of getting their hands dirty, literally and figuratively. The person who stops to help is from someone regarded by Jesus's audience as an enemy and a pariah. To get a sense of how deeply entrenched the hatred between the communities was, think of, the same part of the world now, and you'll get the general idea.

It's dramatic and moving, the powerful story of an act of decency in the face of prejudice, religious snobbery and tribal identity, an intervention, meeting a presenting need. Not a big structural solution, just a person equipped with what the situation needs - some compassion and some cash to throw at a problem. (In contrast to those who walk by, who are equipped to deliver first and foremost a theology lecture.)

The story of the Good Samaritan answers the question ‘who is my neighbour?’ with a clear ‘everyone’. It’s one of our founding myths, not just for Christians but for our whole society, though perhaps we forget that the hero is not ‘one of us’ but ‘one of them’. We give ourselves an inner pat on the back, confident that we would never walk by someone in need. But in these days of divisions in our society, are there people we don’t want to be associated with, don’t sympathise with, wouldn’t stop for? What about the homeless people in our streets?

Our Old Testament character, the ‘Virtuous Woman’, is much less famous. I went to a girls’ school with a strong sense of ambition and civic duty (as well as a great line in female Jewish role models) and we heard this read at the end of every term. So she’s shaped my sense of what good looks like (to coin a terrible phrase) for faith and public life. But she might even be new to you. It’s a picture of ordinary life in community – a vignette of a woman running a business, staying and playing over the long haul, taking care of the welfare of those who depend on her (including her husband), recognised for her good judgement and good sense. It depicts a more conventional, traditional situation than the Good Samaritan, though one that perhaps resonates more with our day-to-day experience (certainly, globally, many women’s experience) of work, domestic care and concern, the satisfaction of spinning a lot of plates and ensuring everyone is taken care of.

Both characters are important to us, and they’re not alternatives – if you have strongly ingrained habits of caring for those around you, you will respond with compassion to an emergency. And they give us two different pictures of our responsibility – we need to stay open to the wider world, especially to those we’d rather not deal with – but our relationships need to be authentic, and two-way. We cannot simply be humanitarian heroes, dispensing money and aid and leaving, because the world will not change that way. And there is a central message of faith here – being a Christian is something you don’t do in isolation. God is about love, and you can’t love in a vacuum. So it’s not just that we have an obligation to serve the world, we can’t be ourselves without others.

And we need our neighbours in order to be the best we can be. Where I work we have a strong focus on diversity, widening the pool of people that we put in front of the charities we work with. Partly because it’s the Right Thing, and it’s about fairness and equality. More importantly, because the more diverse a team is the better it works, and the evidence of impact supports this. The more diverse the thinking, the more challenge, more curiosity, comes from everyone – we become more ourselves, better versions of ourselves, with people not like us.

A community is somewhere where people miss you if you don’t show up. Local and wider, the ripples spread across the water, starting with you. In the communities you are part of, in this college and in this university, how do you find a place for yourself? Particularly for those who have recently arrived, from school life with friends you’ve maybe known most of your life, how do you build stability for yourself? How do you commit?, especially if there’s a little voice at the back of your head saying ‘I could always leave?’ How do you find a community that will support you, challenge you, keep you looking outward rather than becoming an echo-chamber? That will let you bring all of yourself?

Of the charities I work with, the organisations that move me most are the place-based, the co-creators, who work locally to solve local problems. Whether it's street drinking or loneliness, what works will be different in Luton from Bolton, because the people are different. And I love the ones that use assets-based approaches – who see the person in front of them not as a homeless person, or a drug addict, defined in terms of what they lack, but in terms of what they bring – their experiences, their strengths. They never stop seeing a human being who's hit a point of crisis.

That instinct to care is the heart of any community, whether it's a drop-in centre for refugees or an Oxford college. And with love, and caring, and seeing people as individuals, comes vulnerability – opening ourselves up to pain, hurt and anxiety, to letting ourselves and our hopes be visible, to the potential of failure and being misunderstood, what Francis Spufford in his book about the emotional power of Christianity memorably (almost) calls the Human Propensity to Muck Things Up. In our psalm is the vividest, most visceral image of the experience of day-to-day anxiety – 'my soul is continually in my hand' in the KJV. To me that really resonates - how do we manage in the face of these anxieties, how do we keep moving forward, avoid being overwhelmed by panic?

The other question I always ask my interviewees is 'how do you resource yourself?'. What do you do to build yourself back up, what feeds you,? It's a question about resilience, about self-knowledge, about listening to other voices. And the things people talk about are time with friends, especially those say 'seriously?' at key moments, they talk about family, nature, time alone or in contemplation, their faith. Different people, introverts and extroverts, have different answers, but there needs to be something, somewhere, and it's important to identify and make space for it.

We are made in God's image, for God and for one another. God loves us and welcomes us as we are, and our response is to love and welcome and accept in return. God will find us wherever we are, even in our moments of panic and anxiety, though we need to make a space to listen. This is a place where you can find God's presence. Could this be where you let yourself be vulnerable, be truly known? Welcome to a place to be yourself.