

St Barnabas' Patronal 2022 [Job 29.11-16; Acts 11.19-30; John 15.12-17]

The week before last, I took part in a pilgrimage to Oberammergau to witness the Passion Play, which is performed in that village once every ten years. Some of you may have witnessed this remarkable event yourselves in past decades. One of the things that struck me about the play was the astonishing way in which the narrative seemed to draw all of us together into one – not simply in the sense that most of the people in the village took part – but also in the way that people of such diverse traditions and perspectives were formed into one congregation: Catholic, Lutheran, Anglican, Reformed; people of faith and of no faith; enthralled by the depiction of the story of triumph and betrayal, of confrontation and humiliation, of agonising death and resurrection. And we drank in the spectacle of the series of *tableaux vivant* from the Old Testament, which pointed to glimpses of Christ in all that had gone before: things that gave us much to think about, as we encountered the new Moses who teaches with such authority; the new Adam who cancels sin and triumphs over death by his obedience; the new Joshua who leads his people into new life. And at the end of the play, as we heard Mary Magdalene echo Job's words 'I know that my redeemer lives,' we observed the lighting of many candles that represented the light of Christ being conveyed from one generation to another, connecting all that we had seen, even to the time in which we live.

I drew great *encouragement* from the pilgrimage, from witnessing the Passion Play in the midst of such diversity; and I wanted to try to convey to you something of the enthusiasm and encouragement that I had received; to bring it home with me, to share with you. But of course, you can't really do that authentically, can you – I can only give you the most general impression of what it felt like. And yet, in speaking to you today, at this celebration of the College's Patronal Festival, I have been asked to reflect on two questions, precisely about *encouragement*: what does *encouragement* look like **for** those retired from Christian ministry; and what does encouragement look like **from** those retired from Christian ministry? And I decided that I would begin, on this occasion, not so much with the encouragement of Barnabas but with the patience of Job.

You may recall the scene in Henry IV part two, in which Sir John Falstaff tells the Lord Chief Justice: 'I am as poor as Job, my lord, – but not so patient.' Remember, the comic effect of Falstaff's line depends on the *proverbial* status of Job's *patience*. Indeed, in today's lectionary reading from the book of Job, Job reflects on his past blessings, despite his present woes. His friends Eliphaz, Bildad and Zophar have intended to bring him comfort, but only end up undermining his sense of equanimity. They have suggested that his present troubles must be punishments for unacknowledged sins. And yet, for all this, Job *patiently* acknowledges his past complacency: 'I thought "I shall die in my nest, and I shall multiply my days like the phoenix."' 'And now they mock me in song; I have become a byword to them.' He contrasts the present and the past with rigour and prayerful reflection.

As we celebrate the ministry of Barnabas the Apostle, after whom this college is named, the wisdom of Job's experience accompanies our picture of a great encourager. ('The blessings of the wretched came upon me, and I caused the widow's heart to sing for joy. I put on righteousness and it clothed me.') After all, we are told that when Barnabas came to Antioch and he 'saw the grace of God, he rejoiced, and he exhorted them all to remain faithful to the Lord with steadfast devotion; for he was a good man, full of the Holy Spirit and of faith.' And how those words resonate with us, as we look back on our own lives and ministries – and we call to mind the diverse situations and opportunities that have been given to us! Like many of you, I recall Christians of an older generation, who did much to encourage me in the faith. Some, I lost touch with – and they never knew the extent of the contribution they made to my formation. Others I have had occasion to encourage, often with little chance of seeing the extent of Christ at work in their lives. That, you might say, is for God to know and for me to find out.

In ministry, I live by the precept 'once a priest, always a priest' – and I feel confident that I speak as one among many in that respect. But I also recognise that all the assumptions that I make about other people, including those in Holy Orders, are subject to challenge. Life is full of surprises. Not all

Christian ministries follow the same pattern. For the last ten years, it has been my privilege to serve as the chaplain of Whittington College – another Christian house with which many of you are familiar. And it has been an experience that has challenged a number of assumptions that I had previously made, without realising it. To begin with, in recent years, Whittington has been open to all people of the Christian faith – and to people of no faith at all. Naturally, the composition of the College has changed gradually during the time that I have been there. But the first thing I have discovered is that people select for themselves and make unexpected choices: they read the runes, as it were. Therefore, it remains the case that a high proportion of applicants to Whittington are Christians. Those who are not active Christians tend to be what you might call friends of Christianity: people who draw comfort from belonging to a Christian community. But that is only part of it. What is more interesting, from my perspective, is the diversity of denominations which the college attracts, who demonstrate a willingness to come together in unapologetically Anglican worship and make their life together in a community which seems to transcend denominational background. I would never have expected to find myself ministering to a mixed congregation of Methodists, Baptists, Roman Catholics, and members of the URC, alongside Anglicans. And I have learned a great deal from the encounters which this affords. What is it that enables us, as we grow older, to set aside our prejudices – our preferences you might say – and explore a new way of being together in Christian pilgrimage? Is it something like the sense of togetherness in diversity that we found in Oberammergau, or is it something deeper, longer-lasting, more profound?

I have been asked, not unreasonably, whether this rather mixed congregation somehow leads to a dilution of the Anglican character of Whittington College? I think not. How is it then that we can achieve this new sense of togetherness? For it certainly is not, in the strict sense, a form of ecumenism. The clue has nothing to do either with denomination or with churchmanship. I think that the answer lies in *spirituality*. We *encourage* one another. Like Job, we learn, as we grow older, that patience leads to a new form of encouragement. And we are brought together in *shared discovery*. So, to return to the first

question that I was given, we find encouragement in exploring together and finding similarity in diversity. Furthermore, Whittington College is *outward looking* – it is a resource for the wider community. Members of the college participate in a number of Christian activities for the benefit of others: working for the Food Bank, for Care, for Street Pastors, and in supporting Crawley Open House.

Whittington College is not a foundation for retired clergy, but it does, from time to time, include retired Christian ministers, sometimes from a Non-Conformist background, who bring to the community a serenity borne of dedication, transformed into an acceptance of change. And this is in accord with our Lord's commandment 'that you love one another as I have loved you.' Sometimes it is our turn to encourage *others*; and sometimes it is our turn *to be encouraged* by others. For He declared that 'I have called you friends, because I have made known to you everything that I have heard from my Father.' And in this, I believe that the College of St Barnabas has much in common with Whittington College. We give and we receive: we find a refuge for ourselves and provide a resource for others. And we accomplish this with, you might say, the patience of Job – and the encouragement of Barnabas! Amen.