

Sermon for Kings College Chapel, 19 February 2012

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As a parish priest, I cannot remember the number of times when 1 Corinthians 13 was chosen as the reading. It was probably my fault. When I met the couples early after their decision to marry, I would remind them that being clever and doing good is no compensation to being a person of love. Bob was a young man very aware of this. Two women loved him, Carol and Maria. He did not want to string them along; but he found it hard to choose. He did not go to church very often at all, but he felt so strongly that God was calling him to a decision that he went into a church to ask for God's wisdom. He did not know this, but he had walked into a very high church with many statues of The Blessed Virgin Mary and other saints. He knelt down to pray: "God, please, is it to be Carol or Maria?" He looked up and there was the statue of a lovely lady in blue holding the baby Jesus. He had his answer. At the foot of the statue there was a sign, 'Ave Maria.'

As a bachelor, I can speak about marriage with authority uncluttered by experience. As a priest I have had the privilege of preparing hundreds of couples for their marriage. Something I have always told them is that the promises are deliberately extravagant because they are made in love. More important still, they are made in good faith as lifelong commitments. People promise not primarily in words but in the offer of the rest of their life in the face of what Mr Rumsfeld beautifully called the unknown unknowns. My grandparents had an understated marriage which went very deep. It could be unnerving to be with them and my grandfather would nod and my grandmother would say, "Yes, I know" and I would be none the wiser about a conversation conducted by intuition and long experience. She did once ask him, "Do you still love me?" "Why do you ask?" "Because you haven't said so in a long while." "If I change my mind, dear, I'll let you know."

This is a rich vein in our calling as those who respond to God's call in our lives. Each of us has a vocation in the sense that God calls us to use our gifts and energy in the situations in which he places us. When I first called out across the college quad to the chaplain to say I wanted to discuss whether I should be a priest, I never foresaw that I would be here. Where I can understand marriage from the inside, I suppose, is that ordination and marriage are close together. In both you make promises in response to the deepest love you can apprehend which shape the rest of your life and every other subsequent choice you make. When I confirm people, whether teenagers or

grandparents, my exhortation to them is to wake up every day from then on wanting to change the world as an agent of Christ, making life better for others. The African-American poet, Maya Angelou, was asked if she were a Christian. She said, "Honey, I wake up every morning and try all over again." She happens to be a traditionally built lady who once addressed an audience which included other generously proportioned people. "Now be proud to be big, 'cos in the winter we're warm and in the summer we're shade." Our service is varied but the promise is constant. God calls us to be warmth and shade for others. We are only able to be this kind of person if we are people of love or charity, of hope and of faith.

Our hope is only hope because it is not completely clear to us: hope is not foreknowledge of the future but trust in how we will be held and loved in the future. So much of this is bound up in metaphors of sight. Paul talks about the fact that now we see through a glass darkly. We know in part now in the hope of seeing face to face. Like a long-established married couple, we shall know even as we are known: all will be revealed.

Revealed about whom? Faith is often set out as a set of principles and I am among those who love the beauty of doctrine. Yet our faith is not in a set of proofs, but in a person. It is possible for us to love at all because we first abide in the love of God revealed in the person of Jesus Christ.

In the North East of England where I spent twenty years as a priest, there is a saying 'that quiet bairns get nowt'. Jesus's disciples have listened endlessly to his sermons, and not least to what the cost of his love is going to be: betrayal and death on a cross as the way to set human beings free, accepting the bonds of the cross that all humanity might come into its true identity ruled by love. They did not get it. By contrast, a truly blind beggar is loud and demanding. He does not see gently through a glass darkly; he cannot see at all. He does not want the beauty of a formula of the truth: he wants to see the real beauty of the world. He is a filthy beggar who dares to ask that his whole life might be changed by God's forgiveness and mercy. He understood that God does not withhold his forgiveness but that we turn away because we prefer the comfortable darkness of our sins. Jesus's own friends are scared by the vulgarity of suffering, by the stumbling block of Christ's passion. A dirty beggar cuts through it all.

The love that bears all things and endures all things is the love of God revealed on the cross. The blind beggar has his wish and sees all the beauty of the world. He gives up the security of begging to find a new life. One of the first things he sees is the reality of love which surpasses all prophecies, hung on a cross. On Wednesday

many of us will begin the celebration of the season of Lent. We are encouraged to embrace some kind of austerity and sacrifice in the forty days in which we follow Jesus towards his destiny in Jerusalem. We shall be dirty like the beggar with ash on our foreheads, wanting that quality of sight which reveals the love of Jesus to us. The real sacrifice demanded of us is not to give up anything; but to take up the sacrifice of love, that we may follow him and glorify God. Amen.