

SATURDAY 21 JUNE 2008
CARITAS 08 – BUILDING BRIDGES OF HOPE

The Brighton Centre, Kings Road, Brighton

Bible Reading: 2 Corinthians 5:17 – 6:2

Prayer: May I speak in the Name of the Son, in the Power of the Holy Spirit, to the Glory of God the Father. Amen

As the song goes, ‘Oh I do like to be beside the seaside.’ Don’t you?

There is something about the water’s edge that is so exciting. It is the place where two worlds meet. One – the familiar world, where you have your feet on the ground, and where you are sure – at least you think you are sure – of your footing.

The other is the great deep – the unknown, ‘the wide, immeasurable sea’. We look upon it with wonder.

At the water’s edge some will just come to watch, others will dare to roll up their trousers and paddle in the shallows, while others will run in headlong and take the plunge, revelling in the waves.

Today is an opportunity to do just that – an invitation to launch out into the deep and to leave the familiar and assured certainty as well as the shallows. Yes – allow yourself to be led by the Holy Spirit into the depths of God’s eternal love, ever so full.

Of course compared to the waters off the North Yorkshire coast, these waters of Brighton are semi-tropical. I have to say Global Warming has had no noticeable effect as far as the bathers of Bridlington and Scarborough are concerned. But I guess here, as there, when you have run down the beach, thrown your towel down on the sand, and kept running till the water is deep enough to swim, and you are afloat – and your friends are with you, and the sun is shining, and it’s absolutely freezing..... what do you do first? You shout. Wow! This is great! FANTASTIC!

It's like this when you have summoned up the courage to take the plunge with God.

A bit like the leap of faith I took the other day for the Afghanistan Trust – there in the plane one second – praying Psalm 23 I find the psalms come in handy at moments like this – then the next moment – we're skydiving – floating freely at a speed of 120 miles an hour. What exhilaration!

Let me tell you, God is good. We have a great, glorious, gigantically generous God. And he is here with us today. Wawhoo! Alleluia!

As St Paul says at the end of the reading we just heard:
'I tell you, now is the time of God's favour, now is the day of salvation.'

Before anything else I want to invite you to take the plunge, to risk the thrills and spills of the adventure of faith in Christ.

These beaches in the UK are amazing. In Uganda growing up I didn't know about beaches. Our biggest expanse of water, Lake Victoria, was a less attractive prospect for swimming. As far as I know a Crocodile has never been seen on Brighton beach. But here you have something we don't – you have tides. And tides are amazing.

One moment the sea is here.....you look next time – and it is there? How does this happen? Now you see it, now you don't! And they say its all because of the moon? Well!

But the tide teaches us a lesson about the kingdom of God and the kingdoms of this world. You see at times we are like those amazing sea creatures you see in rockpools. The tide goes out, and they are stranded. Life must be pretty depressing for a shellfish. Their memory doesn't serve them well – like some people I know – so when the tide is out they think like this –

Oh dear me! Oh dear me! Is this all there is? This rock pool, with these other creatures here, and the only thing that happens is monsters come every now and then with nets and buckets and take us away one by one. Oh no! The world is not as it should be!

They are stuck, landlocked, fish out of water. Their natural habitat is water.

I believe human beings' natural habitat, by God's grace, is the KINGDOM OF GOD of which Jesus spoke. But we have got landlocked, we have got stranded in this altogether meaningless humdrum world, a 'disenchanted' world where 'what you see is what you get' and no more.

But wait Mr Shellfish. And just you wait, my brothers and sisters - Watch what happens at high tide – when the sea sweeps forward over the beach. The fresh flow of water immediately brings new life, and a new start to all the stranded cockles and mussels and crabs and lobsters – the water comes in and what do they say? Yay! Alleluia!

I am reminded of the story of an eight year old girl who was picking up stranded starfish which had been stranded when the tide went out - and throwing them back into the sea. An old fisherman came by and couldn't understand what the little girl was doing. So he asked, "Why are you doing that?" She said, "They are stranded. If I don't throw them back into the water they will die." The fisherman said, "Little girl, do you realise that the beach goes on for miles and thousands of starfish are stranded? You can't hope to make a difference."

Holding one starfish in her hand she said **"It makes a difference for this one."** And she threw it into the water.

Jesus in the gospel said

'Whoever believes in me, as the Scripture has said, streams of living water will flow from within him.' St John explains – 'By this he meant the Spirit, whom those who believed in him were later to receive.'

May we sense that surge of living, life-giving water here today. May we receive the Spirit of God, more and more and more and more – like the waves on Brighton beach – and as the waters cover the sea.

From this reading from 2 Corinthians let us think of three lifegiving waves, three surges of the Spirit.

The First is the tide of **new creation** that has come about and is coming about because of Jesus and his resurrection from the dead.

If anyone is in Christ he – or she – is **new creation**. The past is forgotten and passed away. A new being altogether begins, transforming God's people and the whole creation. When Jesus gets on board in a person's life things change absolutely. There's nobody for whom just a few minor adjustments will do. If you have been living without the benefit of Jesus' presence, and then you welcome him into your life – then you will notice the difference. It's a bit like when a long awaited child is born into a family. First of all there's the wonder of it – all the tears and laughter and flowers and people coming to visit – and you think – this is a dream – it's not real – but it is, and as time goes by you notice a lot more changes. Less sleep, and you have to learn a new language to communicate with this new person in your life – suddenly everything has a new focus. This little person has come and taken over. But in spite of the sleepless nights, and the end of your social life as you knew it, and all the work and expense that goes with it – there's no doubt – you wouldn't have it any other way!

When Jesus comes along things are a bit like this – to begin with there is the wonder, and the joy of sharing this news with other people. Then somehow things have to settle into a new routine of worship and praise and service – but a lot of this is quite down to earth. My mother put a notice above the kitchen sink for us children – 'Divine Service offered here three times a day' It had to be: 13 children, a husband and a very large extended family. Jesus calls for tough love, a love that's willing, to sacrifice security and the easy life for daring acts of commitment.

Like becoming street pastors – those amazing people who go out on the streets helping those in trouble after a night out on the town – there to pick up the pieces – there in the name of Christ.

If anyone is in Christ he or she is **new creation** – **there is a whole new world**'. Life **in Christ** is the new sphere of existence, a totally transformed way of looking at life and the world, into which one enters through trusting in Christ.

When Jesus was raised from the dead that first Easter day God released a power that could transform not only individual lives but the whole creation. So nothing is beyond the scope of God's power to change. This means we can live in hope – not despair. Even with climate change and global warming - we just have to take responsibility and act in the power and wisdom of the Spirit of God. We certainly don't limit God's concerns to the individual, to the private. In Christ there is a whole new world.

So there is a surging tide of new life, of **new creation**. The same power that raised Jesus from the dead is at work in us – a power to renew the whole of creation.

Do you know how the Spirit of God works in us?

Look at this glove. It's a good glove – no holes in it – so it looks as though it would be warm and comfortable and useful. But what can it actually do? I can ask it to pick up this book, or order it to – but it just lies there limply. I can show it how to do it – look I'm lifting up this book, now you try. But it can't do it. How is the glove going to do anything? The only way the glove can do anything at all is if I fill it with my hand. Now it can pick up the book, it can do all the things I want it to.

The Father has told us what to do, the Son has shown us, but we can't do it until we are filled with the Holy Spirit.

In the same way, for centuries birds have shown us how to fly. We have watched them and studied them and longed to do the same. But it wasn't until the invention of aeroplanes which could carry us, that we too were able to fly.

The power of the Holy Spirit is given to help Jesus Christ's invited guests live life in all its fullness.

The next wave, the next tidal surge – is one the world is crying out for. A tide of **reconciliation**. A chain reaction of love. Quite the opposite of what Topol in *Fiddler on the Roof* described when he said, ‘An eye for an eye will make the whole world blind; and a tooth for a tooth will make the whole world toothless’.

Jesus is the reconciler, and he teaches us to pray, ‘forgive us our sins, as we forgive those who sin against us.’ For St Paul this is a glorious, royal commission. It makes us, all of us who are given this task, ambassadors for Christ.

As George Herbert, the poet and teacher, has said, **“He who can’t forgive others breaks the bridge over which he himself must pass.”** The Christian Gospel creates a forgiven community and is a forgiving movement. God took the initiative in **reconciling the world to himself**, by placing the wholly obedient Jesus under the power of sin so that through him sinful human beings might come into right relationship with God. And thereby become the very expression of God’s righteousness. God’s way of making his enemies his friends. As Abraham Lincoln said, “The best way to defeat your enemy is to turn them into a friend.”

I am not someone who likes to blame people who get things wrong. I am not someone who likes to point the finger at others. As my dear mother used to say, “Remember when you point a finger, three others are pointing back at you.

In the East African Revival we did not learn to be judgmental, or moralistic – instead we learned to ‘walk in the light.’..... God knows our weakness, God knows our sins.

God knows just how much of a mixture of good and bad we are. Instead of coming down on us like a ton of bricks he chooses to send his son to offer his life and his love for us.

– So Jesus came to be the one who would at one stroke both expose the seriousness of human wrongdoing - and declare sin defeated for ever. Stretching out his hands on the cross he bridges the gap – he embraces us as his own, and welcomes us saying as he said of his killers – ‘father, forgive them they know not what they do.’

When we realize what it cost Jesus to lead us out of the darkness of our shame and guilt into the light of God's love and forgiveness, then we discover the power of this chain reaction of love, the reconciliation by God for sinful humanity in Christ.

At the Truth and Reconciliation Commission in South Africa a woman was at the hearing about her son's murder. The police officer who had ordered the brutal killing was there, shamefacedly hearing read out the details of what he and his colleagues had done. At the end the room was quiet. The chair of the commission, Archbishop Desmond Tutu, asked the woman if she had anything to say to the man who had killed her son.

"I am very full of sorrow. So I am asking you now – come with me to the place where he died, pick up in your hands some of the dust of the place where his body lay, and feel in your soul what it is to have lost so much.

And then I will ask you one thing more. When you have felt my sadness, I want you to do this. I have so much love, and without my son that love has nowhere to go. So I am asking you – from now on you be my son, and I will love you in his place."

She went on to say –

"I can say this – I can only do this, because Jesus loved me and gave himself for me."

Jesus is able to change this 'eye for an eye, a tooth for a tooth' world into a 'lion lying down with the lamb' world.

Counter-cultural though it may be, following Christ the reconciler commits us to be peacemakers. Today child soldiers carry and use AK45s. Arms manufacturers make millions out of others' misery. And computer games simulate hideous violence on screen to give young people the thrills of violence supposedly without its spills. *"If only"*, Jesus cried over the city of Jerusalem, *"if only these people knew the way to real peace!"*

We have an amazing message – the message of forgiveness, of reconciliation. It is not an easy one – as they can tell you in South Africa, or in Congo, or in Northern Ireland. But it works.

“Forgive us our sins, as we forgive those who sin against us”.

“Forgiveness of sins is at the heart of the Gospel. For God’s greatest miracle in us is his constant forgiveness.” Forgiveness for past sins, new life in the present, and hope for the future.

Should we not in the Anglican Communion, and in our Church of England, be especially praying for a fresh wave of reconciliation, and should we not seek to demonstrate it in our life together?

The third wave, the third surge of the Spirit into the world, into the church, is God’s gift of **Righteousness**. What is this righteousness?

It is from God, it is God’s righteousness given to us when we accept that we can do no good thing on our own.

It is not just ‘being good’. A mother might call down the street after her son on his way to school ‘Keep out of trouble today won’t you’. That’s not righteousness. Righteousness is way more dynamic and creative than that. It is personal – it is about living with a wild generosity and magnanimity towards others. And it is social – it is about justice; it is bold, about breaking down barriers and letting wonderful things come into being. It is desiring the best for others and bending one’s energies to make it happen.

This City of Brighton and Hove - Yes we mustn’t forget Hove – are you here you HOVITES? - This city is famous for its alternative lifestyles. I want to commend ‘righteousness’ as the most radical alternative of all. There have been some fantastic waves of righteousness. Take the fair trade movement. It is only just beginning – but it has come a long way since it began with campaign coffee at the back of church! Now most supermarkets are having to take notice – you can even buy Fairtrade underpants at Tesco!

Social and moral values do have their seasons. Now, and perhaps particularly in this city, many people have adopted a very free and easy pattern of relationships. This is not all bad – but in a typically postmodern way we all think we have the right to choose a lifestyle above all to suit our wants. That is where there is a problem.

Righteousness commits us to considering the effects of our actions and choices upon other people – especially the vulnerable poor, the women, and the children. I want to ask – what effect are the choices we are making having today upon the children growing up in our towns and cities? I can see a wave coming – a wave of righteousness from God, bringing hope and a sense of human dignity and purpose. I can see a rediscovery in Christ of human freedom and the dignity of human responsibility. We are called to be, and in Gods' strength can be, a people of righteousness.

Hosea says:

Sow for yourselves righteousness, reap the fruit of unfailing love. (Hos 10.12)

St Paul urges the Philippians to be
Filled with the fruit of righteousness that comes through Jesus Christ – to the glory and praise of God. (Phil. 1.11)

The tide is turning. It's already begun. It is now.

I want to remind you of what Dr Martin Luther King Jr called 'the fierce urgency of *now*'

For him the powerful dream was about the end of segregation and racism. Thanks be to God – and to King and others we have seen some great progress in recent history there – in the USA, in South Africa.

Now the challenge is every bit as great. We have a world grown weary of righteousness. A nation which has forgotten its spiritual roots. There is a fierce urgency about now – and it is an urgency that beckons you and me.

Jesus invites us all to come to him, to be refreshed, and to drink the fresh water of his Spirit, to strengthen us to live the new life he gives.

Are you ready for the new creation
Ready to be an ambassador for Christ?
Ready for righteousness?

Look – out there is the sea – the deep blue sea. It stands today for God's
tide of grace. Will you take the plunge? Will you?

As Antoine de Saint-Exupery has said,
*“If you want to build a boat,
Don't summon people to buy wood,
Prepare tools,
Distribute jobs
And organize the work;
Rather inspire in them a yearning for the wide boundless ocean.”*

God in Christ inspires in us a yearning for the wide boundless ocean of
God's new creation, reconciliation, and his way of living with his creation.
And he says, “Come and follow me and freely drink.”
Let us do it and let us do it now.