

Rev'd James Hutchings licensing St Marys Barnes 22/7/19

2 Timothy 2.3-13 and John 8.31-36

Sermon by The Very Revd Dr David Ison, Dean of St Paul's Cathedral

You will know the truth, and the truth will make you free. It's lovely to welcome James and those with him, especially supporters from East Devon. Exmouth was the first place my family headed for when we moved into Exeter, and in my loo is still a picture of us all on Exmouth beach.

It's a joy and privilege for us all to be here this evening, to mark the beginning of a new time, new possibilities: an opportunity for the ministry of St Mary's and the Barnes team as you welcome a Rector who has different gifts and experiences to bring; and an opportunity for you, James, as you bring together your former life in London and your experiences from Exeter Diocese into your own ministry and calling here, now, in this place. It's an opportunity for growth and development for everyone, for the possibility of new things and creative responses to challenge.

There are a number of tensions to be held together as a parish priest, like strings on a violin or guitar. These tensions can provide energy and opportunity; but, if unacknowledged and out of tune, they can undermine a new ministry. The way through isn't to pretend that tensions don't exist, but to accept and work with them. To ignore them is to be enslaved by them. As Jesus says: the truth will make you free. And I think of three tensions in particular:

The first is the move from one place to another. In archery, it's the tension in a bowstring that impels the arrow to fly – the archer draws the bow to tighten the string, and as the arrow flies away the tension in the bowstring is released.

One of Kahlil Gibran's most evocative images in his famous poetic book *The Prophet* is of parents being like archers shooting their children like arrows into the future, into times they themselves will never see – an image which can fall a bit short given the reality that some children will be shooting back again for some board and lodging or a loan to tide them over.

The support and encouragement James has received in Littleham and Lypstone from congregation, colleagues and others have helped to develop his spiritual life, skills and ministry. There will have been very positive times, and there will have been times of tension and challenge.

And together those of you in Devon now shoot James and his family into Barnes – and you have to let one another go. There will be a sense of loss on both sides as the tensions of building up to the move release, and also a wondering about what new things will come to be, as life changes for everyone.

And James, as you come to this parish and team, you bring the learning of the past into a new setting, where who you are and who everyone else is will be in tension, hopefully creative tension, as together you explore your impact on the life and lives of the church and community here.

As a parish community – clergy and laity, ministers of various sorts, faithful Christian disciples and those on the fringe of faith – you'll be learning with James about each other and from each other, and how God in Christ will be at work in you all as you share in mission and ministry.

Clergy learn so much from those they share ministry with: and the task here as elsewhere is to build a shared Christian life which sustains individuals and transforms the lives of people in the community.

And some of it will be hard. There will be conflict. The words of Paul in 2 Timothy promise us that. Suffering is part of being faithful to Christ, whether it's being like a soldier obedient to what God asks us to do, being like an athlete keeping the rules of the law of love in Christ Jesus even when it's difficult, and being like a farmer who works hard and even then doesn't get the reward they thought they deserved. No one says it will be easy; but it's in the creative tensions that the music comes into being.

The second string in tension is that for you, James, of being both in the parish and for the community. As a parish priest you're not called to be the chaplain to the congregation, but to share the gospel of Jesus Christ with all in this local community.

To be a priest is to be a bridge, suspended in tension between two sides: you're called to make it easy for people to move in Christ's service between church and community. You need to be at the edge of the church and not safely at the heart of it.

It's an exciting role, one which requires keeping relationships in tension, even when, as with the original design of the millennium bridge, things may get a bit wobbly. As a parish priest you're a bridging person, living in two worlds and bringing them together in our risen Lord Jesus Christ.

And the third tension is that between success and failure. You as priests and people here will try your best, and sometimes it will be great, and sometimes it will fail. And the way to deal with failure isn't to pretend that everything's really fine, while turning your distress about it into gossip and anger. The words of Jesus from John's gospel are wonderfully and literally liberating: 'you will know the truth, and the truth will make you free'.

Living in the truth isn't comfortable, but it does free you to learn from mistakes, to apologise and be reconciled, to be kind to each other as we struggle to become what God in Christ calls us to be.

Don't be afraid, don't be unreal, but speak the truth with kindness, with a learning culture not a blame culture. To acknowledge how things really are and how they need to change is to meet God in what is and allow God to transform it.

Tensions are part of life: moving and suffering; ministering in parish and community; living in the truth when the truth is hard to face. We need the right amount of tension to sound bright and strong, as with the strings on a musical instrument; but overtightening strings makes them discordant or even breaks them.

And that's where the words from 2 Timothy are so encouraging – they've haunted and supported me throughout my Christian life: 'if we are faithless, he remains faithful – for he cannot deny himself.' However it goes from here, however we may succeed or fail, we can be confident that God will not fail us; that God holds us in our tensions so that we can sing the music of God's praise, together.

In the crypt of St Paul's Cathedral there's an evocative epitaph which I only noticed a few weeks ago - we so often walk past things without really seeing them. It's in memory of Mary Milman, the beloved wife of Henry Milman who was the first reforming Dean of St Paul's, a poet and a theologian who wrote many hymns, including the Passiontide hymn Ride on Ride on in Majesty.

On the Milmans' grave it says of his wife that she 'lies beneath this stone buried in one grave with him for whom she made the poetry of life reality'.

James, I'm sure that all of us here this evening, and many others who can't be here tonight, will want to support and pray for you in your ministry.

You're here to continue becoming who God has made you to be – and through the tensions of your calling and in your faithful service, may you live in the truth so that many may be set free, and the poetry of life be here made reality.