

Let me start with a question: 'who enjoyed languages at school?'

Well to be honest I struggled. In the Easter before my O Levels, my Latin master wrote in my report:

*'I fear that there is very little that can now be done to ensure that Andrew passes his O level. Perhaps if he had worked harder, earlier, there might have been a possibility of success, but not now.'*

Well, Mr. Bradby, also known as Digger for some reason, eat your heart out because pass I did. Getting my Latin O level still ranks as one of my proudest achievements.

In my very early days here at the cathedral I remember a conversation, an intense conversation, about the language we use in prayer and in the liturgy. I was challenged, fairly and squarely, about the use of contemporary versus traditional language in the liturgy, particularly in relation to the Lord's Prayer. Now I need to be honest I do have a preference, but it's not one I would go the stake over. You can guess my preference if you like. But as we carried on with the conversation I remember saying that one of the problems for the contemporary church is that we have failed to explain the language of faith and that we need to be very careful indeed that in the pursuit of 'relevance,' 'accessibility,' and 'a contemporary feel,' we don't throw the baby out with the bath water, for to do so might just be to render us theologically illiterate for the basic problem is that the church does have a distinctive language of its own, and it's a language that we would be better off understanding, teaching, and sharing rather than jettisoning.

This morning I would like to focus on one very specific word: holy (or holiness). It's a word not much used in ordinary life, its even a word that's used to criticise and put down, but it's a word we should apprehend (because I think it's a word so rich and multi layered that it defies comprehension) and, yes, own. You see you and I are called to a life of holiness, and if you doubt this just think of the words you are going to say in a few minutes time: *'we believe in one holy, catholic and apostolic church.'* These words aren't mere descriptors of the historic church, but articulators of the contemporary church: you and me in other words. So, as you look at the church, as you look at yourself, do you see holiness, because if you don't you really shouldn't declare that you do!

John Wesley was preoccupied with holiness and famously wrote as follows: *'I continue to dream and pray about a revival of holiness in our day that moves forth in mission and creates authentic community in which each person can be unleashed through the empowerment of the Spirit to fulfil God's creational intentions.'* Amen, I say!

Wesley also believed that the Holy life – the life to which you and I are called – comprises of two distinct characteristics: personal holiness and social holiness.

The reading we have just heard from the Book of Deuteronomy is in many ways a call to personal holiness, and I would say corporate holiness, for Wesley's reflections do come from a very distinctive protestant slant. In the reading personal, or corporate holiness, is linked to the promise of blessing: *'If you obey the commandments of the Lord your God, that I am commanding you today, by loving the Lord your God, walking in his ways and observing his commandments, decrees, and ordinances then you shall live and become numerous, and the Lord will bless you in the land you are entering into.'* If we want to be a blessing to this city, this diocese, this country, and beyond, then the place where we must start is in our devotion – loving devotion – to God.

Loving devotion is the well-spring of authentic holiness. This is also precisely the point of the Psalm: *'Happy are those who do not follow the advice of the wicked or take the paths that sinners tread, or sit in the seat of scoffers, but their delight is in the law of the Lord, and on his law, they meditate day and night. They are like trees planted by streams of water, which yield their fruit in its season.'* The Psalmist, like the Deuteronomist, insists that holiness isn't just a good to be obtained, but the very well-spring of blessing and abundance. The message is clear: if we want to be an effective, fruitful, church we must first be a holy church, or translated back into the language of the creed if we want to be an apostolic church – a church that goes out into the world and makes a difference – we first need to be a holy church.

The idea of being a church that is sent leads onto Wesley's second characteristic of holiness; social holiness. Wesley wrote that: *'The Gospel of Christ knows of no religion but social; no holiness but social holiness.'* Holiness finds its social expression in righteously reordered relationships. Holiness isn't just social; it's radical and it's revolutionary! Paul's letter to Philemon is a direct appeal to social holiness for his ask is not simply that Philemon accepts Onesimus back as his slave, but as a *'beloved brother,* and *'partner.'* Social holiness is radical and revolutionary because it overturns the status quo. Holiness isn't for the faint hearted!

If we are serious about the pursuit of holiness, we need to accept that the journey – although it will be blessed – will also be bumpy, and at times will render us unpopular. It will mean allowing God to penetrate our preferences and inherited patterns of thought and behaviour – this being in large part the point of today's slightly uncomfortable gospel reading. But the logic is clear: we can't help effect change, radical and revolutionary social change, unless we are first changed, in the words of John Wesley's brother Charles *'from glory into glory.'*

Holiness is a difficult word to understand, but it's a word we need to grow into. Our primary calling – both yours and mine – is growth in holiness: personal, corporate holiness, and social holiness. It is through the pursuit of holiness that the world is changed for the better as relationships are radically reordered to the glory of God.

May we your people grow in holiness, Amen.