

## **Sermon preached at the Miners' Gala in Durham Cathedral: July 14<sup>th</sup> 2012**

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“The Labour Party owes more to Methodism than to Marx” – so the well-worn aphorism goes. However you think about the truth or otherwise of that statement, I want everyone to know how proudly and gratefully I stand here today as a Methodist preacher. We have such a close and intimate relationship with the mining communities of Country Durham – a common history with its ups and downs, its tragedies and its triumphs, its culture and its destiny. Just last Sunday (July 8<sup>th</sup>), I was preaching at Esh Winning, not that far from here, preaching for the 80<sup>th</sup> anniversary of the Methodist Chapel there. The Deerness valley is green again now – gone is the railway link to the pithead, the drift mines, the smoke. The community spirit is still high, though heaven knows how people have absorbed the body blows of recent history.

So, I'm delighted to be here. A Methodist preacher, a son of the South Wales coalfield, to share in this service and to stand in solidarity with my comrades in the Labour movement as well as my fellow-workers in the Church.

As I've thought about today, my mind has gone back to a day whose memory I cherish – July 16<sup>th</sup> 1984, when four of us gathered in a vicarage parlour in Headingley, Leeds, to do some brainstorming with a Professor of Theology who had an important sermon to preach soon after. This Professor had just been made a Bishop, the Bishop of Durham no less. Days after his consecration earlier that month, a bolt of lightning struck York Minster, an event that revealed just how superstitious we are as a nation.

Not much survived those discussions with David Jenkins (yes, it was he!). In the end, he preached his own sermon, an unforgettable feat of prophetic eloquence and brave analysis. But two things did travel from Leeds to Durham between July and September 1984. Firstly, the text chosen by the new bishop, one that I'm glad to repeat now, as relevant and needful today as it ever was. It was taken from Romans Chapter 15 where the apostle Paul urges his readers never to give up on life:

*May the God of hope fill you with all joy and peace by your faith in him until, by the power of his Holy Spirit, you overflow with hope.*

Not a bad word to hear in the very month that the strike began. The second detail that made it through that summer was Bishop David's assessment of what happens too often to those who accept episcopal office. "Bishops, generally speaking," he declared, "are just that: *generally* speaking." He determined not to speak in generalities, to recognize and identify what was actually happening and to speak a gospel word into the real world. And that meant addressing the plight of the miners – they must not be defeated, he declared; they must not become pawns in the ideological battle being fought. He marched and demonstrated with them, spoke up for them, wept with them and fought for them. No "generally speaking" for him!

That was then. What about now? Well, we have another Bishop of Durham [Justin Welby] who is clearly ready to deal with the particulars (rather than the generalities) of the world we're living in. More than once I've heard him declare that "mere exhortation" is not enough in the difficult times we're living through. "Action and leadership" are called for, he declares, "words won't do on their own." Let economists and politicians speak of what he calls (he's an educated man) the "macroprudential" and the "macroeconomic" levels. For him, experienced as he is in the complications of high finance and corporate activity, the things that matter are poverty, unemployment (especially of young people), the shortage of skills, loss of confidence, breakdown of families and dependence on loan-sharks – as experienced by the people of Darlington, Sunderland, Gateshead, Durham and their surrounding communities. He yearns for human flourishing, a reversal of the catastrophic demutualisation that's occurred in our financial institutions since the 1980s, and hope, overflowing hope, to fill people's hearts once again. As Bishop Justin has put it, he doesn't want to be thought of merely as someone "dressed in a white nightie and a black dressing gown" (the outfit he wears in the House of Lords). He wants to play his part in the regeneration of the economic, social and cultural life of our nation and of this corner of our nation. One of the earliest Christian martyrs was named Justin – I trust that the work and witness of this latter-day bearer of that name will have more luck and that he sees and helps to make his ideas turn into action.

Our Roman Catholic friends have mechanisms and procedures that allow them to beatify and canonise those they identify as saints (no, this is not a plea or a

ploy to canonise our bishop!). I want to promote the cause of a forgotten hero of the Labour movement, one Jim Griffiths, once deputy leader of the Party and architect of much of the Welfare State in that extraordinary post-war Labour government. He was my MP as I grew up. My mother adored him. My brother was named after him. All of which explains why I feel passionately about him. We've all heard of Nye Bevan, why does Jim Griffiths lurk in semi-obscure? He did, after all, bring so large a part of what we now take for granted onto the statute book: he implemented the Family Allowances Act, shaped and delivered the Injuries at Work, the National Insurance and the Family Assistance Acts. I have a personal interest in this last – I was raised on National Assistance and got my life-chances through all this legislation. The achievements of Jim Griffiths are surely on a par with the National Health Service and Saint Jim should be brought out of the shadows.

He'd worked down the pit, got himself educated through night classes, won a scholarship to the Labour College in London (with Nye Bevan) before going on to head the South Wales Miners' Federation. He entered parliament in 1936. In 1945, Clement Attlee offered him a cabinet position as Secretary of State for the Commonwealth. He declined. The Prime Minister asked him if he'd wanted something else and, if so, what that might be. "Ministry of Pensions," Jim replied. He wanted to do something for the people he'd come from, the people he knew. And that was that. He became one of the architects of the Welfare State. No mere rhetoric for him. No "generally speaking". He delivered.

I realise that this sermon is turning into a series of pen-portraits, word pictures; I hope you'll think of it as anecdote rather than mere dotage. And I trust that you'll have perceived a line of thought coming through. Hope can survive if and when words turn into action, ideas give birth to deeds, generalities focus down on actualities, and we find a way to engage the energies and experience of men and women here and everywhere in the effort needed to rebuild the society we live in.

The Queen's Diamond Jubilee has concentrated our minds on 1952. That year was also a significant one for the diocese of Durham too. It was the year Michael Ramsay became the bishop of this diocese (I've already mentioned to Bishops of Durham, I may as well go for a third!).

I happen to own the Bible that was presented to Michael Ramsay on the occasion of his consecration. When I showed it to an eminent leader of the Church of England, he took it from me, examined it cursorily, and said, “Aha! just as I thought. The old boy never opened it.” But he was wrong. The Bible certainly looks in pristine condition but a closer look would have shown my cynical friend that Ramsay had indeed opened its pages. The letter to the Hebrews has been closely read. It’s heavily marked in a number of places and the picture that emerges from a study of these scorings is an interesting one. The verses marked out refer to the ministry of Jesus and especially the way his readiness to suffer contributes so materially to his authenticity. Because Jesus suffered, he could stand in solidarity with his brothers and sisters who were also suffering. All the lofty claims of Christian teaching are rooted in this salient fact. Our great High Priest is only great, only high, only a priest, because of the unbreakable bonds forged through his readiness to enter “the school of suffering”. But once that bonding had been made real, then all of us could find in Christ a way to transcend (not obliterate but overcome) our own difficulties. Christians in general, and Christian leaders in particular, are called to follow Christ in this regard and to stand in solidarity with the poor, the marginalised, the suffering. We are to seek the lost, lift the lowest, give value to the least and bring forward the last – by standing with them, shoulder to shoulder, walking forward with them, bringing them hope at all times.

David Jenkins, in his enthronement sermon, gave this idea his own inimitable colouring:

*I face you, therefore, as an ambiguous compromised and questioning person entering upon an ambiguous office in an uncertain church in the midst of a threatened and threatening world. I dare to do this and I, even with fear and trembling, rejoice to do this because this where God is to be found. In the midst, that is, of the ambiguities, the compromises, the uncertainties, the questions and the threats of our daily and ordinary world. For the church exists, despite all its failings and all its historically acquired clutter, because the disturbing, provocative, impractical, loving and utterly God-centred Jesus got himself crucified. Then God vindicated this God-centred way of life, love, and being by raising Jesus up.*

Earlier in this service, we dedicated the banner brought forward by the good people of Felling (near Gateshead). It commemorates the terrible accident that occurred in the pit in that community on May 25<sup>th</sup> 1812. A huge explosion brought destruction and a massive loss of life. It took almost four months to bring the bodies of the 91 people who lost their lives underground to the surface. Among them were children, many of them under 10; one body was never identified. It is right to honour the memory of those who died on that distant day two centuries ago. But not as an act of history, not by turning our minds back to the past. Nor will nostalgia for an irrecoverable past ever be enough. Rather as a perpetual reminder of the price paid by ordinary people who work by the sweat of their brow for our comforts and necessities. Their labour must not be in vain. The memory of them must continue to inspire and goad us, their successors, into action – no generally speaking for us, no fine words without action. Just commitment to work and toil to build a society fit for our children and our children's children, where all God's people are filled with all joy and peace overflowing with hope.

May it be so. God help us.

**Amen.**

**Leslie Griffiths.**