

**Sermon preached at the Church of the Holy Trinity, Philadelphia
on June 24th 2007
by the Reverend Prebendary John F. W. Watson
“The Church God Likes”**

Since there is no couple for whom I have a greater admiration and affection than Alan and Wendy it is a special joy to be with you today.

A 30th Anniversary is a time for thanksgiving and having worked with Alan as a colleague at the beginning of his ministry I do thank God for his wit and sense of humour, his academic depth gained at London and Oxford universities, his fine preaching and his spiritual insight and sensitivity. .

It is a time also for reflection and a time when we might ask if Holy Trinity Rittenhouse Square is developing as God wills it. So I am entitling this sermon The Church God Likes.

Perhaps I need go no further than the discussion between a Baptist, a Methodist and an Episcopal minister, debating which denomination God would want to join. The Baptist said, “Well, of course, God would want to be a Baptist, because he likes nice long sermons, sound theology and biblical exposition.” “No”, said the Methodist, “he would want to be a Methodist because he likes a hearty handshake, a warm welcome and really singable Wesleyan hymns.” They turned to the Episcopal minister who simply said, “I see no reason why God would want to change his denomination.”

But of course that won't quite do, so I ask the question, does God like Holy Trinity? The Sunday School Superintendent at a church where I once served took her daughters aged 6 and 4 to the new Guildford Cathedral. They soon found that their hard shoes made a marvellous clonking noise on the marble floor, as they run up and down. “Stop that”, said their mother, “you can't do that in here”. “Why not?” they said. “Because this is God's house”, she replied. The children looked round the vast building in awe, and then one of them said, “I wonder if God likes living here”. So the question for us today is, Does God like living here?

The Church God likes. What are its characteristics? I have reflected on this and actually I've drawn up such a comprehensive list that I've had to reduce it to some essential distinctive features, or we

could be here a very long time. . I don't want to be like the enthusiastic preacher who was determined to get a result that day. But no response was forthcoming. So he went on and on and they sang a long hymn, then repeated several verses but still no response. So he decided to throw in his final card. He said, "Where d'you think you're going to spend eternity?" And a man called out "I'm beginning to think we are going to spend it here".

You're so responsive - I'll just tell you one more. I get quite a kick out of telling congregations in England that it was an American architect who, noting the tendency of congregations to fill up from the back, leaving the front seats empty, designed a church with the nave completely empty save for one pew at the very front. When and only when that pew was filled another one sprang up through the floor immediately behind ...But there was a catch for the preacher also because the pulpit had a trapdoor in it - which operated after twenty minutes.

Well, that should be about my limit, but having come over 3,000 miles to preach this sermon perhaps I might be allowed just a little latitude.

So let's just look at some of the critical characteristics of the Church God likes, characteristics that would justify Alan's ordination and 30 years of ministry.

In no particular order, perhaps we could say first of all that God likes a Church with a Vision. Isaiah's call to the priestly and prophetic office came with a vision of the throne of God. He saw the Lord upon a throne, high and lifted up... Yes, at the centre of the universe there is a throne. From it the wheeling planets receive their orders. To it gigantic galaxies give their allegiance. In it the tiniest organ finds its life. Before it angels and men and all created things in heaven above and earth beneath bow down and adore. That is the throne Isaiah saw in the temple that day.

And as we come into Holy Trinity and catch a vision of the lord upon the throne high and lifted up, so we recover the truth that history is his story, that God is king above the shifting patterns of the world's events, that he is lord of the church and lord of history, and that the church is both a monument to the past and a promise for the future and can become as it was ever meant to be the provisional demonstration of God's intention for all mankind. A

vision of that kind under Alan's inspiration and leadership would justify his ordination and ministry.

This leads me to the second characteristic of the church God likes because the consequence of that vision was that Isaiah went forth in God's service. And God likes a Serving Church. We are all called to serve and service is both humble and glorious and the life of service always begins with humility.

During a mission in central England one of the missionaries walked up to a man at the bar in a pub and said, "If Jesus Christ were here what's the first thing he would ask you to do for him?" And with great insight the man replied "He wouldn't first ask me to do anything for him. He would first ask to do something for me." Yes, before ever I can be of any use to him he must wash my feet, he must place the burning tongs from off the altar on my lips, he must cleanse me - and then I can go forth in his service.

Yes, service is a humble thing. The Indian Christian D.T. Niles once defined evangelism as one poor beggar telling another poor beggar where to find bread. That's a great service and all service is like that. Great service, humble service.

A former colleague of mine, Neil Britton, is a brilliant linguist. One day he was acting as an interpreter at a gathering of the World Council of Churches at Uppsala in Sweden, and encountered the Archbishop of York, Stuart Blanch, during a coffee break. Stuart approached him in his friendly way and said, "Hallo, and who are you?" "Oh", said Neil, "I'm just a humble curate." "Are you really", said the Archbishop. "I didn't know there was such a thing." But of course Neil knows and Alan knows and I know that whatever we become in the church we remain a deacon, a servant. And Jesus was a deacon.

But service is glorious also. As the old plantation Negroes sang:

Oh, you gotta getta glory in the work you do
A hallelujah chorus in the heart of you
Paint or tell a story, sing or shovel coal
You gotta getta glory or the job lacks soul.

Humble and glorious. A friend of mine, Roy Trevivian, conducted interviews for the BBC. One of his interviews found its way into print

under the title of “I’ll just go on sweeping the corridor.” He was talking to a 43-year-old woman with a husband and three children who’d been given a few more weeks to live. She was dying of cancer. Roy said to her: “My dear, how are you going to spend these last few days of your life?” And she said, “Well, I think it was St. Ignatius who one day was sweeping the corridor in his monastery when his novices came up to him and said, “Ignatius, if you knew the world was coming to an end in ten minutes what would you do?” And he said, “Go on sweeping the corridor.” And this dying woman said, “That’s what I’m going to do,

because I love God and he loves me. He served me to the end and now I’m going to serve him to the end.” A serving church is a justification of a person’s ordination and ministry.

A serving church must by definition mean a Living Church, a Lively Church. There are, you see, churches that are dead, like the church in Sardis to which the lord of the church said, You have a reputation for being alive, but you are dead. I’ve seen them ... In a Scottish village the residents became concerned because the parish graveyard was nearing its full capacity and they feared there would not be room for them, particularly because there were an increasing number of incomers in the village. So they approached the parish council who after due deliberation had a large notice erected outside the church door which read “This graveyard is exclusively reserved for the dead who are living in this parish” God likes a living church.

Being alive depends on daily sustenance, daily renewal, daily dependence on God, and God likes

A Church that trusts him Day by Day. You’ll recall how the Children of Israel learned this lesson the hard way. They were grumbling because they were hungry and God promised to give them food. There was one condition. They were to emerge from their tents in the morning and collect enough for the day, but they were not to store it up. They disobeyed and we read that the stored food “bred worms and stank”.

By contrast look at the last verse of II Kings. Jehoiachin was the last of the Jewish kings to be taken into captivity by Nebuchadnezzar. He was put in a dungeon. When Evil-Merodach became emperor he released Jehoiachin after 37 years and sat him down with his princes. Then we read, And his allowance was a continual allowance

given him of the king, a daily rate for every day all the days of his life. Give us each day our daily bread. Rely on God day by day. His reserves are endless. As David reminds us in Psalm lxxv: The river of God is full of water.

God also likes the Church where the Cross is Central, where the cross is proclaimed, that glories in the cross, that takes up the cross every day. The church has been rightly criticised because of the bland inoffensiveness of much church life. It isn't persecuted because there's nothing much to persecute about it, it avoids the offence of the cross.

I have had the privilege of conducting parties around the Holy Land – several times. On one such occasion I left my party to look round the Garden Tomb while I sat on a parapet at the end of the garden. It overlooked the Jerusalem city bus station. People were mounting and dismounting, running, walking, standing, sitting, swearing, laughing, spitting, shouting, buying and selling – a microcosm of life.

As I looked up, there was an ugly outcrop of rock, Golgotha, the place where Jesus died. And I recalled some words of Dr. George McLeod, the founder of the Iona Community, when he said, "I want to call for the cross to be raised again in the market place. For I am recovering the claim that Jesus Christ was not crucified in a cathedral between two candles but on a cross between two thieves, where roads meet and cynics swear and soldiers gamble, at a crossroads so cosmopolitan that they had to write his name in Hebrew and Latin and Greek. Because that's where he died and that's what he died about.

God likes the Church that Recognises the Inwardness of Faith. There was first a hint of this way back in the O.T. in Jeremiah xxxi, where the new covenant is announced, written on men's hearts, written within. Then in the N.T. the use of the word 'in' makes for a most profitable study, e.g. Galatians iii, 16, I have been crucified with Christ. Nevertheless I live, yet not I, but Christ lives in me.

There was a boy at a boarding school whose enthusiasm for sport exceeded his ability. He was keen on it but not good at it. The other boys used to laugh at him because his father visited frequently and they were seen walking arm in arm around the school precincts. One day the boy's father died and his mother rang the head and

asked him to break the news to her son which he did, and the boy took it very bravely.

The day after the funeral was the most important sporting fixture of the school year and the boy asked if he could play. He wasn't good enough but for what we might call pastoral reasons he was included in the team. He played out of his socks, brilliantly and unexpectedly the team won. After the game the master said to the boy, Whatever got into you that you played so well? Well, said the boy, you remember how my father used to visit me and the other boys laughed as we walked arm in arm around the school premises? There was something about my father no one ever knew. He didn't want them to. My father was totally blind; to-day was the first time he ever saw me play. The spirit of that man had got into the boy ...

And I recall Michael Ramsey, a former Archbishop of Canterbury, concluding a television broadcast by saying, "We can theorise and theologise until we're blue in the face, but at the heart of the Christian message lies the truth that the living Lord Jesus wants to live his life inside me."

Finally, and I end with this, God likes the Church that has a Sense of the Eternal, a vision of the eternal, that lives in the light of eternity. The gift of God is eternal life. For we know, says Paul to the Corinthians, that if the earthly house of our tabernacle be dissolved we have an house of God, not made with hands, eternal in the heavens. And nothing would justify Alan's ordination and ministry more effectively than that he should lead us on in the next 30 years of his ministry with a glimpse, a vision, of everlasting life in Christ.

I wonder if you have ever visited Milan in Northern Italy. It is dominated by a vast cathedral. For all the glory and splendour of its inside appointments perhaps the most impressive features can be found outside. Over the northern entrance is a sculptured wreath of flowers and underneath the words, All that pleases is but for a moment. Over the southern porch is a cross and a crown with the words, All that troubles is but for a moment. And over the huge west door simply the words, Nothing is important save that which is eternal.

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