

Sunday 9 March: The Fifth Sunday of Lent - Passion Sunday

Prosperity, Passion & Prophecy and the renewed St Martin-in-the-Fields

Readings: Ezekiel 37.1-14; John 11:1-45

Good morning!

Can I start by saying that it is an absolute joy to be speaking to you today on Passion Sunday. For those of you that don't know me I have been a member of the St Martins community ever since a certain Canon Geoffrey Brown tapped me on the shoulder at a conference and asked if I would like to help at the then St Martins Enterprise for a week or two. Well, 17 years later I am still here!

During the last 17 years my wife Kate and I have managed to bring up two lovely children in Dorking, Surrey. Career wise, a couple of redundancies led me to start-up a company that now provides Internet based business services to the hospitality and charity sectors.

Most of my time at St Martins has been spent down below in the Crypt...its great to be asked up into the light – and what a beacon of light this Church has become! My personal motto for St Martins is 'Feeding body and Soul'. I have mostly been involved in the former, but not exclusively. Bringing guests here for so many years has also helped to start conversations about the Soul bit....

As a long-time Director of St Martin-in-the-Fields Ltd and latterly as a Trustee of the Development project, I have been privileged to see many sides of the Church and its works. It may be no surprise then that I will put this sermon on Prosperity, Passion and Prophecy firmly in the context of that fourth 'p' – the Development Project.

When Liz asked me to give today's sermon I accepted with some trepidation. And when she told me the title I have to say that trepidation grew even greater! As an Englishman I could relate to and aspire to one of the p's – prosperity – pretty well. Even passion is a word that with a certain shuffling of the feet I could stumble through. But when it came to prophecy I felt really out of my depth!

However when I thought about all three words in the context of St Martins they started to make sense, as I'll explain in a moment.

As with most people my faith has been greatly influenced by those around me. A formative influence for me was my grandfather, a Royal Navy padre who was very 'hands on' in the approach to his faith. Famously in one trying incident during the war he was heard to yell at a particularly pious colleague "get off your knees and help someone".

Little wonder then that when I got the tap on the shoulder from Geoffrey I said 'yes' to 'could you help at St Martins?' I can honestly say that was one of the best decisions of my life. In fact in many ways I think that all of life is here at St Martins.

For example I have seen countless acts of kindness with one sticking in my memory like no other. As you may know the Development project has required a lot of money to be raised, which has often involved rubbing shoulders with the 'great and the good'. One such occasion several winters ago was a reception at the House of Lords at which our vicar Nick gave a

rousing speech. The very next morning I sneaked into the back of the Church to warm-up. Over there in the side isle was Nick - who just a few hours before had been charming their Lordships - now talking quietly to one of London's homeless people. That simple act of kindness with the juxtaposition of the evening before had a great impact on me.

I have also seen joy, for example at my brother's wedding here some years ago and high emotion as when Archbishop Desmond Tutu unveiled the memorial at the back of the church, which many of you will also remember. I have even seen irony concerning of all things, the Christmas appeal, to which my parents have contributed a sum of money for many years. My sister meanwhile is a social worker who we learnt only quite recently every year asks for a similar amount of money for one of her needy clients!

Many of you will have a similar range of memories from this place.

So let me move into my comfort zone with the first 'p' of today's sermon - prosperity. The word conjures up for me a certain complacency but I have come to recognise the absolute necessity for prosperity through a thriving business community. When that occurs the resources generated can do great things.

The company that has run the Church's commercial concerns for nearly 20 years, St Martin-in-the-Fields Ltd, is special in many ways. To continue the Royal Naval theme from my grandfather - I have long thought of the Crypt as the financial engine room of the Church. Indeed an image that has frequently popped into my mind is one of Nick standing here on the bridge piping down 'more cash Hugh' and 'aye aye sir' coming back up!

St Martin-in-the-Fields Ltd has been a leader in the social enterprise movement through showing how to build prosperity on a not-for-profit basis. The company is run on commercial grounds but very much in a Christian context. This relationship creates certain tensions which don't exist in mainstream businesses. Issues such as the reward of our staff, the value offer to our customers and the provenance of our suppliers have to be balanced with the need to drive big sums of surplus cash for the work of the Church. We don't always get it right but at least we are a thriving example of how to work through the issues.

I now come to the second 'p', Passion. The story in today's readings of the raising of Lazarus and before that the imagery of the rising of the House of Israel in the valley of bones have great resonance for us here with the transformation of the burial vaults of the dead into fantastic spaces for the living.

Next week we celebrate Palm Sunday and Christ's triumphal entry into Jerusalem. The whole world was at his feet and the people couldn't have been more welcoming to their acclaimed leader. What a contrast then with a few days later when even his most favoured disciple, Peter, denied him. Christ was nailed to the cross and buried, only to rise again on the third day with the promise of forgiveness for all mankind.

As far as St Martins is concerned passion has always been associated with this place and it has been needed in spades to drive the Development project. However with the bricks and mortar and ultra modern glass all nearly in place it is surely only by a renewed passion that we will deliver on the promise that we see around us.

This moves me along to the third 'p' - prophecy. In the Old Testament the prophets challenged both their peoples and their princes in uncomfortable ways.

A contemporary word for prophesy could be vision, although it is a much overused word in business circles. The business community looks for certainty and discounts the future accordingly. Prophecy is about predicting the uncertain. The Development project was started as a vision by a few people, some of whom I see here today.

Indeed there is more than an echo of the story of Palm Sunday in our Development project. We will soon open our shiny new building with a no doubt triumphal festival – but then what? Will we march on victorious towards sunny uplands or will there be uncertainty around the Church and its future role?

It could well be that the uses to which the buildings are put are completely different from how we now envisage them. As Nick is fond of saying, the last time the Church had major work done was in the 19th century when the Victorians cleared out the burial vaults. They couldn't have foreseen then the use to which Dick Shepherd put the spaces in the 20th century in caring for first world war soldiers and sailors. Will there be a 21st century Dick Shepherd to lead us in ways which are equally uncomfortable? What would our view be for example, if instead of soldiers sheltering in the Crypt, an army of impoverished refugees camped out here?

Here are some more thoughts about the future:

Last year we celebrated the 200th anniversary of the abolition of slavery. We look back now and think 'how could our forebears have been party to such an abomination?' My fear is that the generation 200 years from now will look back at us and say 'how could they let the equal abomination of global poverty - sometimes called economic slavery - continue?' Will St Martin-in-the-Fields be seen then as a beacon of light in the crusade to eradicate poverty? Another thought - A big advantage we have as a church is our strong business experience and the fact that St Martins is sited in one of the world's great commercial centres. As such we are uniquely placed to speak to people about an aspect of their life that is central to many of them – their work. What more can we say about the future role of work that will resonate with those around us?

Another area of future endeavour is communication. Famously in Dick Shepherd's time the world's first religious broadcast was made from here via the new medium of wireless. We are now in the midst of another communications revolution that is taking place with Web 2 et al. St Martins could again lead the way in what it means to communicate as a Church, this time in the 21st century.

And as a footnote, a personal bugbear of mine - will the renewed St Martins be the last public place in London without both TV screens and CCTV in every space - where only God has the overview?

One thing I am sure of - my own prophecy if I may be so bold – whatever happens next here will be important – the history of the place and its people dictates it!

In conclusion then - this decade we have re-set the context for St Martins: the physical surroundings through the Development project and the financial base through St Martin-in-the-Fields Ltd. We now need to re-set the spiritual through continuing prayer and contemplation of where God wants to lead our church in this new century.

The Development project gives us the chance to be much more holistic throughout our activities. The spaces are truly 'joined up' with visitors to the Crypt getting a glimpse of the Church directly and its place in past and contemporary society through the new interpretation

panels. As a Church we can more easily get across our central message of hope which Easter Monday gives to all.

For St Martins all three 'p's – prosperity, passion and prophecy – have been much needed in recent years and are much in evidence all around us now. Having been a small part of its past I hope to be some part of the renewed St Martin-in-the-Fields.