* I knew it would be very moving looking out from the pulpit this evening over a sea of faces so well known to Jenny and myself; the city and county of Leicestershire has become our home over the past 30 years with many, many dear friends and colleagues and countless wonderful shared experiences in all the varied and diverse communities of this diocese. I am immensely thankful to God for all those who have supported and encouraged us and upheld us in prayer or in practical ways over those years, giving thanks to God for you all in worship this evening.
* And as I have been preparing for the moment of laying down my current role during this service, I have found myself thinking of all the people (so many of them present here) whom I have tried to serve as best as I have been able over the past 7 years as archdeacon; it has made me mindful of the huge privilege it has been to journey closely in that role with faithful, gifted sisters and brothers in Christ (serving in parishes, fresh expressions chaplaincies and schools), including those whom I dearly wish I could have served better.
* The word ‘Archdeacon’ is in some ways a strange term, putting the servant ministry meaning of ‘deacon’ right next to the chief or hier-arch-ical leader meaning of ‘arch’. If I’m honest I have often felt slightly more comfortable with the ‘deacon’ element than the ‘arch’ element (and in that respect do look forward to continuing simply as a deacon and as a priest/presbyter in my new role West of Manchester – although I do think Jenny is going to miss her current nickname of ‘archdarling’….).
* But what **is** quite challenging (and even scary) for me in my new role outside of Leicestershire is the fact that I will not anymore be the person with indepth knowledge of the people, places and history of the diocese in which I will be serving. So I won’t anymore have that local knowledge to rely on should I feel out of my depth with a new ministry role.
* Which is why for me it’s a real blessing for this farewell service to be on Holy Cross day; and especially so with that epistle reading from the first chapter of Paul’s letter to the Corinthians, which takes us to the heart of the **real** treasure we can each share and by God’s grace live out as ministers of the Gospel…. so I hope, as we reflect upon this passage, it is a blessing for you also.
* Paul is reminding the Christians in Corinth (through his personal example) that, if they are relying primarily upon their own knowledge and human wisdom in their witness and service, then they are rendering that witness and service much less effectively in Kingdom terms. As he puts it in the verse immediately preceding our reading today: ‘for Christ did not send me to baptize but to proclaim the gospel, and not with eloquent wisdom, that the cross of Christ might not be emptied of its power. ‘
* Paul says this because the world-transforming and people transforming heart of Christian ministry is **not** actually h**uman** knowledge or wisdom, but the reality of God’s self-giving love, as perfectly expressed in the cross of Christ, and the living out and sharing of that self-giving love.
* ‘We proclaim Christ crucified’ says Paul which is ‘foolishness to Gentiles’ . As he goes on, ‘For God’s foolishness is wiser than human wisdom, and God’s weakness is stronger than human strength’.
* The cross (in Paul’s teaching here) was where:
* Jesus accepted the place of being vulnerable as an unjustly condemned criminal so that so we, despite the wrongs we have done and hurts we have caused, might (with repentance) be find forgiveness and a place of right relationship with God;
* It was the place where, the crucified Jesus poured out his life to death so that we might be filled with his new resurrection life discovering life in all its fulness through the Holy Spirit;
* It was the place where Jesus became a slave without any rights, that all might be offered a new freedom as redeemed and adopted children of a loving heavenly Father.
* So the heart of our faith and ministry, in Paul’s summary later in verse 30, is: ‘Christ Jesus who became for us wisdom from God and righteousness and sanctification and redemption’.
* Here we are here reminded loud and clear that self-denying servant hearted, generous love for others (as fully expressed in Jesus) is God’s wisdom and truth for the world – something we so much need to hear in our day and age, where we struggle so much for our own truths to be heard and forget that in the way we strive for **our** truth we so often undermine that very **God-given** self-denying, cross-shaped truth and wisdom for the world (which, ironically, is the real heart of our faith).
* So what might our response to that cross-shaped wisdom be today?
* First, as a eucharistically shaped church, our primary response is simply one of being thankful to God and expressing thankfulness in our living.
* Over past few months, I have been deeply impacted by kind words and encouragements as news of our move to the North West emerged, in response to which I have found myself saying thank you time and time again for all the wonderful people in this diocese. Jenny similarly said to me the other day ‘I feel like I am spending my life simply saying thank you’. And, there is so much in those few words which we easily overlook. We underestimate the power of Christian ministry that is visibly rooted in thankfulness (and in an awareness of everything being a gift).
* As in the words of Isaiah from our Old Testament reading: ‘I will recount the gracious deeds of the Lord, the praiseworthy acts of the Lord, because of all that the Lord has done for us’.
* Secondly, alongside thankfulness, and without trying to over complicate things, our response on this Holy Cross day, might simply be to reflect upon the heart of the baptismal calling to live out the self-giving selfless love modelled for us in the cross of Christ, to see what adjustments the Spirit might be calling us to make right now in our day to day lives, wherever God is calling us to serve.
* Leicestershire has been a fantastic place for seeing and experiencing self-giving, generous love that breaks down barriers between our many differences of backgrounds, cultures, faith and urban, rural and suburban context. Long may that continue to grow and be an example to other parts of the country. I will certainly be taking that experience with me to the North West.
* So, at this moment of the parting of our ways, may the Holy Spirit inspire and enable us in our journeying to stay close to the cross-shaped, loving wisdom found in Jesus.