

**The Sermon Preached by Bishop John Gladwin at
A Way in the Wilderness Service
Held at St Margaret's Church Westminster Abbey**

on

February 6th 2012

Say to the anxious, 'Be strong, fear not, your God is coming with judgement, coming with judgement to save you'

I remember, one Friday in February 1990 the Chair of the Anti Apartheid Movement coming to me in Sheffield when I was Provost to tell me that they were sure Nelson Mandela would be released on Sunday and could they have a vigil on the Cathedral steps. Knowing what African time was like I suggested that we had a celebration inside the Cathedral on the Sunday evening. 800 people turned up. In typical South Yorkshire style we had the Socialist Choir who would not sing in churches so they became the Anti Apartheid Choir for the evening! The Chair of the Sheffield Anti Apartheid Movement said to me 'Nelson's release is going to be a challenge to us. For decades we have struggled in opposition. Now we must learn how to lead and construct a new future for our people'.

The wilderness is the place where God's chosen people are prepared for a new and different future. The burdens of the past have to be left behind (not forgotten) and the emerging shape of what is to come welcomed. Christian life is to be shaped by that beautiful advent image of St Paul – facing the dawn that is rising in front of us we must cast away the clothing of the night season and prepare ourselves for the coming day.

Change brings anxiety to us all. The future, which is not of our planning but rooted in the mystery of God's purposes, is still forming its shape in our hearts and minds. As in our wider culture, so in the church, this moment of deep change in our culture makes people anxious.

In the life of the church we need to stop complaining about the seismic shift that has taken place in our culture in the last 2 decades. People today are increasingly resistant to any form of institutional discrimination. Hiding behind exemptions in the law is not good enough. Confusion is thrown our common witness to the Gospel of Jesus Christ every time we appear to prevaricate on these matters. Our spiritual responsibility is to try and root these wholesome shifts in the spiritual soil that underpins the history of our country.

We must not be in any doubt. The Sea has been crossed. There is no going back. In regard to the issue on our hearts the door that has been opened to the full inclusion of women into the whole ministry of the church cannot be shut. The journey has now to be completed.

This for the sake of the Gospel. The great issue of our culture is the equality of all citizens. Huge strides have been made to outlaw discriminatory practice. Now we face the challenge both socially and economically to ensure that every citizen is able to play their part in the kaleidoscope of contemporary culture and vocation. If the church's witness to the Gospel truths that have the potential to root these changes in the deepest of values is uncertain the

outcome will be the further marginalisation of our life and message in our time. The inclusion of women in the full ministry of the church is testimony to our commitment to meet the Gospel challenge of dying to the old and rising towards the new. The matter before us is not just about women becoming bishops. It concerns our shared vision of what sort of a people we look forward to becoming.

Wilderness life has many temptations. There are two that come to my mind in meditating on this theme.

The first is the desire to hold on to the past as we journey towards the future. Looking back with longing is disastrous. Human and ecclesial history is littered with pillars of salt. You cannot, as Jesus reminds us, put your hand to the plough and look back. Jesus knew that was a hard challenge to his followers as it is to us.

The second is to want the change but without the cost. We all know in this church today that meeting the call to change has real costs. We all carry the wounds. But a wounded people are the people who know the depths of grace. Judgement, as the text reminds us, that opens the way to salvation. If the church thinks it can have the benefit of the new and of the change that this is all about it must resist the temptation of thinking it can have it without cost. The bearers of this message are wounded people serving a wounded Lord.

We know that others are feeling wounded and anxious as well. It is the mystery of love that, in the community of faith, God joins together in the body of Jesus Christ all, who by whatever means know the wounds in their life and ministry. It is for that deep spiritual reason that we must be cautious about any road designed to build structures around difference and keep people apart. That too would compromise our witness to the Gospel in our own culture in this era of human history.

We must not burden the future with the past and we cannot negotiate the change without recognising and accepting the cost.

That God has something new and life giving for the church through this journey across wilderness is beyond doubt. It is that vision that enables us all' anxious though we are, to keep travelling until this journey is done.

So let us march forth together

In the Name of the Father and of the Son and of the Holy Spirit. Amen

+John Gladwin

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