

with those who weep'. And 'do not be overcome by evil, but overcome evil with good'. There are some things for you to hang on to as we mark this time of letting go today.

It is time for me to let you go, and for you to let me go, but all that is done in the assurance that 'underneath are the everlasting arms' to catch, to hold on and to cherish each and every one.

Trinity 12 A

Letting go.

To paraphrase the writer of Ecclesiastes, 'There is a time for hanging on and a time for letting go'. It was when I was vicar of a church in Milton Keynes that I learnt this important lesson. The crucial advice given to me as a novice bellringer was that, if you pull too hard and break the stay restraining the bell then you must let go. Otherwise you get wound up to the ceiling and pulled through the little hole into the bell chamber. A time to let go. Life is full of letting go's - some of them big and significant - the letting go of bereavement, or the ultimate letting go at the end of life. And some smaller. Perhaps all our little letting go's are a preparation for that final letting go

Certainly my ministry has been full of letting go's. It even had its attractions theologically when back as a curate I was entranced by the notion 'for the sake of God you need to let go of God'. Don Cupitt's book 'Taking leave of God' was a touchstone, not for me to do so totally, but to live out what that earlier theologian, Dietrich Bonhoeffer, said, as he encouraged us at least to grow up and take a bit of responsibility in our faith. It was theology 'come of age'. As well as everything which Don Cupitt ever wrote, I have recently rediscovered on my bookshelves a whole series of the books of Richard Holloway, sometime Primus of the Scottish Episcopal Church. What a journey he followed, as described in his auto-biographical work 'Leaving Alexandria'. His was a rather wistful letting go - full of melancholy.

In order to explore some of the aspects of letting go I recall a service I once did with the congregation in a swimming pool. We tried some singing which was a bit gurgly, and I hadn't foreseen the affect on swimming costumes when I encouraged the congregation to leap up energetically out of the water to symbolise the resurrection. Some items of swimwear seemed to get left behind. However it was wonderful to encourage the experience of letting go of the bottom of the pool, of floating in faith, letting the water support you. I have always loved the idea of launching out into the deep, as Jesus encouraged his disciples to do, leaving the noisy shallow end of Christianity, for the silence of the deep end, floating and not touching the bottom.

I still feel quite proud of the time when I encouraged people to let go a bit of their church in Maidenhead, by closing it for main services for 3 weeks. Go somewhere else, I said. Experience some different traditions, or even see what it's like to have a lie in on Sunday mornings like most people do. They let go of their church for a while, then some of them even came back.

Another constant theme of my ministry has been trying to let go and live lightly in terms of getting rid of unnecessary spiritual baggage. Slim down the doctrines, hone the theology down to basics. It was this that drew me to the desert in New Mexico for my sabbatical in 2014. I found it a harsh and challenging environment, and in the sharp air at quite a high altitude there was a wonderful clarity. There was no room for slack theology there, and it was an education living for 3 weeks with what I had brought as cabin baggage on the plane.

So that brings me to the letting go of physical things. Now at the end of stipendiary ministry there is a huge letting go of the accumulation of stuff which has been accommodated in the large vicarages where I have lived. Letting go of most of that is a novel and quite freeing experience.

So lots of letting go, but surely some hanging on. I am aware that it has been the case so many times that my sermons have ended up trying to put into words what there is left to hang on to, when the chips are down, at the end of the day, when all's said and done. What is there left? It has been the poetry of things - theology as poetry, poetry as theology which has kept me hanging on in there, and the notion of depth - like the swimming pool deep end. That sense of hovering over the depth and mystery of meaning.

If all this seems to whimsical for you, then I can, as I was tempted to do for this sermon, only point you to the reading from St Paul's Letter to the Romans. It has been interesting as we have ploughed through the intricacies of some of the earlier chapters of Romans in our Sunday readings earlier this year, to hear some of the readers at St Paul's giving 'riders' to the reading - either implying that they could not make any sense of what they were about to read, but would read it anyway in case you could; or even that they didn't agree with what they were about to read. But now, as we have got to chapter 12, we have a much better sermon about the qualities which might be worth hanging on to in faith than I could preach. 'Hold fast to what is good', he says. Yes - don't let go of that, 'Rejoice in hope' - continue to 'rejoice with those who rejoice and weep