



**A sermon preached on Sunday 14th April 2013
by the Right Reverend Ronnie Bowlby**

'INTERREGNUM' – Pastoral Vacancy

Sometime in the 1970's I instituted a new vicar to the parish of St. Michael's, Byker. Those of you who know Tyneside will recall that Byker forms part of a long ribbon of housing which stretches along the north bank of the river, and when at that time thousands of families lived at close quarters in terraces adjoining the shipyards and heavy engineering works.

Byker, like Jarrow opposite and many other parts of the north east went through terrible times in the 20's and 30's until the approach of the second World War. For a few decades the north east saw full employment as they replaced the ships that had gone to the bottom of the North Atlantic. But there was a great resistance to changing expensive working practices; new ships were being built much more cheaply in the far east. By the end of the 70's the pits were increasingly uneconomic as Mrs Thatcher's death has reminded us. Although Byker housing was being redeveloped, the area was again experiencing unemployment.

The Churches had maintained a presence in these communities, sometimes almost the only sign of hope in what felt like an urban desert. But by the time I visited Byker, it was obviously necessary to find a new role which went beyond simply being there for people coping with extreme deprivation and poverty. But what was it? It had never been easy to be a vicar in such parishes, but uncertainty about a new and different future made it even more so at the time.

After the service, I wandered round a bit in the hall, as bishops usually do, and eventually sat down beside an old lady who was clearly local. She told me that this was the fifth new vicar to come in her lifetime, maybe even the sixth, I cannot remember, but she went back to her time as a little girl in the 1920's. With a friendly glint in her eye, she said, "don't you worry hinny, we've knocked all those vicars into shape and we'll do the same for this one".

I have always remembered this exchange because it was so refreshingly different. Like many Geordies, she came straight out with it. No polite remarks about the good old days, which were not good in many ways, or about expecting the Archangel Gabriel to come and put the parish right. She did not subscribe to the view that the church is the vicar; in her own blunt way, she had grasped that the church is all the people of God in that place, for which vicars can at best provide leadership and good pastoral care. There was a lovely, gritty realism about her attitude. The future was once again in God's hands and theirs, and when there is no vicar you just get on with it. That sort of faith came out of the harsh experience of her early years and it was humbling to meet.

Forty years on, and here we are preparing to work through another interregnum at St. Chad's. Quite different you may be thinking. Yes, Shrewsbury is no Byker, that's for sure. But facing an uncertain future too, having to trust God as we do, and to find the right priorities for ministry and work here. That hasn't changed. And today's Gospel, where John has recalled the words of the risen Christ to Peter, still have meaning for Byker and Shrewsbury in unexpected ways.

The disciples, especially Peter already designated as a leader, were facing a very uncertain future. They had the amazing experience of meeting Jesus after his death, and of course that gave them a foundation for hope unlike anything else they had ever known.

But what to do with this experience? What to expect? Which direction to go in? What sort of work to undertake? How to cope with the intense hostility of some of the Jewish community?

Peter does not get direct answers to these questions. Indeed they were never talked about by the early church in these terms. What Peter gets according to John, are three questions which were clearly intended to test his loyalty and the depth of his faith, and to turn his guilt at denying Jesus at the trial into something positive, a trusting relationship. "Do you love me?" Is this where your loyalty really lies? Peter needs to become a reliable rock, helping others to sustain faith and move on.

At the end come the final words "Follow me". Again, nothing specific, but trust, wait on the Spirit, look to the future, not the past. Which, on the whole, is what Peter and the others did. And at the heart of it, an intense desire to share this new experience of finding God present and active in their ordinary life.

For us now, the lesson from today's Gospel is clear.

1. Focus on the reality of Jesus present and active now. Think of Thomas, doubtful till face to face with the risen Christ. Perhaps use his words "My Lord and my God" as a personal prayer in these coming months to deepen your own faith.
2. Now is the time to renew St. Chad's priority in care for people. If Peter was simply told "Feed my sheep", so must we. Devoted and caring work is already going on and I am constantly struck by how much many people do for others here. This is not a ministry to be left to the new vicar, or a few retired clergy now; it is a call to sustain and share as much as we can.
3. Always try to remember that we are to follow Jesus into the future, not the past. And that means prayerful waiting for our new vicar, but not thinking he or she has all the answers to some of the obvious problems we face. All our recent clergy have understood this in different ways, so there is a good foundation on which to build. The past can nourish us. The present gives us new tasks. The future belongs to the God of hope, who draws us forward. As Jesus says: "Follow me".