

Sermon for Musalaba – 26th November 2019

Let us pray: May I speak in the name of the Father, Son and Holy Spirit. Amen

It is a delight, and a privilege, for Geraldine, Julia and I to be here with you today. We bring greetings and prayers for you – from our parish of St Mary Magdalene in Lincoln in the United Kingdom. As you may know, Margaret Ford, who served with Archbishop Janani Luwum, is part of our ministry team, and Margaret leads us in praying for you.

On the day that I became the vicar of our church – the 4th of September 2018 – Margaret began to encourage me to make this trip. I was unaware of the special link between our church and Musalaba Church (our buildings received new roofs at around the same time and our church paid for the roof on the church here), and so that evening in September, when I had just become the vicar, I began to hear some of the story – your story; our story; together.

Our church sits next to Lincoln Cathedral, which was once the tallest building in the world. Our church is quite small but it is filled with love, hospitality in welcome, and prayer.

We have services every day. There is space for everyone to grow in their faith and to serve our Lord. We have a good relationship with our neighbours at the cathedral. Indeed, in July of each year, when we give thanks for St Mary Magdalene, the main part of our special service is in the cathedral, and it is a time of great gratitude and prayer.

And gratitude and prayer have been in my mind as we have prepared for our journey to come and see you all.

Geraldine, Julia and I know that we are being held in prayer – by you, and by our families and friends at home.

It is through our prayers for you that, in a way, we feel as though we know you, or know something of you. We feel close to you – and by being here, we are that bit closer!

In recent weeks, I have become aware of God at work in my life. I have been aware of how God has helped me. I have been aware of how God has prepared the path for me. I have been aware of God at work in situations that other people wouldn't see, because they're personal to me.

So perhaps we might start to think, together, of where God has been at work, and beside us, in our lives? It is helpful for us to consider this every day, but especially here today as we give thanks to Bishop Johnson and to you all for this opportunity to meet and share with you, and as we give thanks for those from the Church Mission Society, who brought the good news of the gospel here.

Today, as we give thanks in a spirit of love and celebration together, we stop and think about where God has been – and is – at work in our lives, and we think about where – and how – God might be calling us into his service.

I was struck recently by a passage in the Gospel of Luke.

During a time of reading and prayer, this passage spoke to me as I looked at the text and thought about this trip.

As you may know, in chapter 17, verses 11 to 19, we hear of Jesus going through the region between Samaria and Galilee. As Jesus enters the village, we are told that 10 people with leprosy approach him. These 10 keep their distance, but they call out to Jesus, and call him 'Master'. They are made clean, and they go on their way. But then one of them, and only one of them, realising that he has been healed, turns back and praises God with a loud voice, before coming before Jesus and offering his 'thank you'.

Jesus, we are told, wonders what happened to the other nine. What happened to the other nine? How many times might we have been like one of the other nine?

A reflection that I used alongside this passage challenged me to think through the past few days, and to think about what had been good in them.

Well, where do we start? Since arriving in your country, we have received a warm welcome everywhere we have been. We have seen the beauty of creation at Murchison Falls National Park. We have shared in the joy of confirmation, as Bishop Johnson confirmed 117 people on Sunday, and more today (160) and marriage! We have seen so many good things.

And I was challenged to think about whether I had thanked God for the goodness of those days.

Had I got lost in the excitement, or had I stopped, turned back and thought about God and offered my 'thank you'?

It seems a simple thing to say, but I think that discipleship is about a living and loving relationship with our Lord.

When I was at theological college, one of my tutors, Roger Walton, wrote a book titled *The Reflective Disciple*. Towards the end of this book, Roger writes that 'One of the most pressing needs for all churches is to make new disciples'. Roger refers to chapter 28 of Matthew's Gospel and Jesus' last command to go 'and make disciples of all nations, baptizing them in the name of the Father and of the Son and of the Holy Spirit, and teaching them to obey everything that I have commanded you'.

Importantly, my tutor's message is that what is needed is 'reflective disciples'. 'That is, disciples who will take up the challenge to be sent into the world to meet with God, to shape the world and be shaped themselves throughout life...' As he later says, 'The core discipline for reflective disciples is to engage regularly in making connections'.

We can think about this in many ways:

- Our connection with God, day by day, in prayer

- Our connection with God in recognising where – and how – God is at work in our life, in the life of others, and in and through the Church
- And in the connection we have, through our link, to live and learn and grow together, even though we are set thousands of miles away from one another.

During our time together, Bishop Johnson has spoken to us about the importance of mission, of looking out, connecting, seeing that we are a part of the worldwide body of Christ.

We are formed and we are shaped by our connections.

In leading our prayers at our church in Lincoln, I have given thanks for those who have inspired us in our lives of faith. Those special people who have helped us and cared for us.

In my life, I can point to people who have been – and are – special in my life of faith. My family; a former parish priest who listened when I began to explore a calling to ordained ministry; a colleague at work who said I should be a vicar; my tutors at theological college; those who welcomed me on student placements in a prison and in various churches; those who I have sought to serve as a deacon and as a priest; and all those who have served – and who serve – with me.

There is quite a list. I could go on. But in thinking of this list I begin to see where God has been – and is – at work in my life, and I give thanks for this gift.

My Dad once gave me a precious gift. He gave me his mother's – my late grandmother's – Bible. I reached for it while preparing these words and noted the date inside: 1916. A year when our country would have been at war. The First World War.

I turned the pages of this Bible, looking for our reading from Luke that I had decided to focus on here today. I found it, and I also found that the passage, verses 11 to 19 of chapter 17, had been marked in pen. A mark at the top and a line at the end of the text that says, 'Arise, go thy way: thy faith hath made thee whole'.

In making this discovery, I felt a wave of emotion, of connection. Why had this passage been marked here? Why was this passage special to someone in my family? What would my grandmother (and all my grandparents) think in seeing me stand here, in Northern Uganda today? I think they would be amazed – what an opportunity. And they would be thankful.

I flicked through the pages of this Bible, and, as far, as I could see, this is the only passage that had been marked. Why had I been drawn to this passage for this time here today? What is God seeking to say through me?

Well, we go back to our theme of gratitude and prayer. Today, we give thanks for those who have gone before us and who have prepared the path that is set before us now.

- Those who brought the gospel and preached good news to this land on this day in 1904.
- Archbishop Janani Luwum – we remember his commitment to his faith
- Margaret Ford – we think of her service and love of this land
- Bishop Johnson and his ministry and passion for discipleship; yourselves and the people of our church – for friendship, love, and prayerful support.

In a sermon given in our church in Lincoln in February 2015, Margaret said, 'For me, Archbishop Janani is a shining example of Christian discipleship'.

Perhaps there is no greater tribute. What might people say of us? Do people catch sight of God when they see us? These are questions we should ask of ourselves.

Later in her sermon, Margaret also said that Archbishop Janani's 'legacy is enduring' and he 'kept the faith to the point of giving his life'. And then, in closing, she said this:

'I know that Janani is now one of that great cloud of witnesses encouraging us to continue to fight the good fight, run the race, and keep the faith, and last but not

least, to build this partnership relationship between St Mary Magdalene Church [in Lincoln] and the Diocese of Northern Uganda through prayer, generous giving and visits'.

Well, here we are. We thank Bishop Johnson for his kind invitation and for the welcome that you have offered us.

We have come here to bring greetings and to say thank you on behalf of our brothers and sisters in Christ at home for your love and for this partnership; to share in prayer and in worshipping God together in this special place on this special occasion; to hear some of your stories and your requests for prayer and assistance; to give thanks for all that has been and to look forward in hope, as, together, we think about how we should live as disciples of Jesus today.

Above the door to our church at home there are some words from Psalm 46: 'Be still and know that I am God'. We each pass under these words as we enter our church.

Today, our focus is all on God and in seeing where God has been at work for some 115 years, and where we are being called to service, together, as disciples in sharing his love and serving his people in his name and for his glory.

And our starting point, our foundation, is gratitude – we say 'thank you'.

On Saturday, as we sat and ate together, there was a sign on the wall that was based on scripture and was titled 'Thank You'. It began with the words, 'Words cannot express what you have done for me'.

Today, we are to be like the one who turned back to thank Jesus. We say thank you for what happened here in 1904; for the ministry that has followed; for all that God is doing in our lives; and we say thank you for the friendship and love that exists between us.

Lord, we pray that we may look forward now in faith, hope and love as your disciples, the body of Christ, working together to your praise and glory.

Let us pray:

Loving God, today we give thanks for this day.

We give thanks for the courage of others to share your good news.

We give thanks for the love that is shared between us.

And we pray that our faith will deepen as we serve as your disciples, proclaiming the gospel in our time together.

In the name of Jesus Christ our Lord, we pray. Amen