

EASTER DAY 2009.

BRECON CATHEDRAL.

The use of the word ‘Halleluiah’ is a very much a part of the liturgy of the Church during the Easter season. One of the best known quotes from St Augustine links the two: ‘We are [an] Easter people and Halleluiah is our song.’

This morning, we have already said or sung ‘Halleluiah’ a number of times and we will continue to do so as our service progresses. How many times in total it will have occurred by the time you leave, I’m not sure – perhaps if you get bored with this address, you might decide to read through your booklet and count! (If you do, please don’t tell me your answer at the door; because there is no prize for a correct answer, and because your doing so will be a bitter blow to my own self belief in my ability to hold the attention of a congregation.)

So, to ‘Halleluiah’, for Christians an expression of faithful joy, meaning ‘Praise the Lord’, or something like that. Today I want us to reflect upon it as a description of moments of revelation or renewed understanding; what I might term ‘Halleluiah’ moments.

‘Halleluiah’ has had something of a renaissance of late courtesy of Alexandra Burke who, in 2008, won the fifth series of UK television talent show *The X Factor* singing her cover version of Leonard Cohen’s 1984 composition ‘Halleluiah’. Cohen, best known as Canadian songwriter, began work as a poet and novelist. His original ‘Halleluiah’ ran to 80 verses, took over two years to write. His words take those who possess both sufficient patience and a liking for his style, on a long journey through a variety of emotional experiences, some of which are grounded in well-known Old Testament stories. The words express profound experiences of spirituality, sex, sin, regret, repentance, longing, love, despair, failure, weakness, redemption, ecstasy and devotion, to name only some – remember that the original does have 80 verses!

Of the song, Cohen himself said that it “explains that many kinds of ‘Halleluiah’ do exist, and all the perfect and broken ‘Halleluiahs’ have an equal value.” I’m no expert on Cohen, and confess to finding much of what he wrote very challenging and not, sometimes, more than a little depressing, but I take his explanation of ‘Halleluiah’ to mean that from every situation,

perfect or imperfect, we can try to extract something worthwhile which in that process helps our learning and growing. In so doing we affirm the value of life's experiences,. And this process of learning and growing can convert mundane and ordinary experiences into a 'Halleluiah' moments.

Spending my first Holy week as a bishop has meant not being wedded to a particular place or a particular timetable. That could be the recipe for a spiritual disaster, but it hasn't been so. In fact, during the week, some of my experiences have become some pretty important 'Halleluiah' moments.

Let me give you three examples which may say more about the random wanderings of my mind; or they may help. Only you can judge.

First, on Wednesday evening I settled down to watch 'The Apprentice' on BBC1. For me the stars of this aren't the calculating, self aware (or are they) contestants, nor even Sir Alan Sugar himself. I like Nick and Margaret, Sir Alan's advisers. And it was Margaret who provided what I might call a 'Halleluiah' moment this week. (I apologise to those of you who don't watch

the programme if I give just a little more detail) Contestant James, who on the programme's website describes himself as 'astute, shrewd and smart', has proved to be anything but; and it was touch-and-go this week whether he would be the one to be told 'You're fired.' As it was, he survived, because, as Sir Alan told him, the Margaret had saved him. She had seen something in him, some glimmer of promise and she had spoken up for him. James was as good as dead, but lives again. Here an 'Halleluiah' moment. It's not the best analogy or one that you can follow through to the last detail. But the thought crossed my mind, that it's good to have someone step in and haul you back from the brink; someone who sees some hope in you; someone who saves you and gives you a chance. What's Holy Week about, if not that? Jesus has done just that for us, and shown us how to live as children of God. An 'Halleluiah' moment such as that has an eternal importance that lasts for ever. For The Apprentice's James, I fear that his 'Halleluiah' moment won't.

Then there was Thursday; Maundy Thursday, the day on which we remembered Jesus showing that to truly be a child of God we have to be ready to serve the needs of others.

I spent part of that day visiting a community project. (Bishops get to do quite a bit of this). This one was run by the Cyrenians in St Matthew's Church, Swansea, and while there I helped in serving lunches to homeless or severely disadvantaged people. Among the people I served was a man who, minutes before, as I walked to the church, I had seen slumped in a shop doorway, 30 or 40 yards away, downing almost a whole half-bottle of vodka, and raging against the world with language that would make many blush.

But there he was now, on the other side of the counter, handing over his voucher and walking away with his lamb stew, boiled potatoes, green salad, coleslaw, beetroot and peas. (I know it doesn't sound the perfect combination, but being selective with a menu after you've just downed half a bottle of vodka as an aperitif is no easy task)

So, a 'Halleluiah' moment dawned. Here, in that setting, in serving others, was Jesus's call to serve put into practice. It would be easy to say that the man at the counter ought to be more sensible and not waste money on his vodka. But who are we to judge why he sought refuge in it? 'If you do it to least of these, the most

challenging and awkward and different of your brothers and sisters, you do to for me.' Did Jesus ask those whom he helped to explain why they were in such a mess? No, he didn't. In fact, quite the opposite. Asked by a clever lawyer, 'Who is my neighbour' – who deserves my help? - his response can be summed up in a few words: 'Anyone who needs you at the moment they need you.' We may need to employ some discipline in assessing the needs of others, but we should be wary of being too choosy. Because, 'if you failed to do it to the least of these your brothers and sisters, the most challenging and awkward and different of your brothers and sisters, you failed to do it to me.' Around us in the world, in our own community, not hard to find, are many victims for whom such compassion would be welcomed at present in a world marred and broken in many, many places. A world with so many rejected, unloved and damages people. There's always someone you can try to help, however challenging and awkward and different they may be. A 'Halleluiah' moment to carry in the heart and to practice each day.

Finally, and perhaps as strangely as 'The Apprentice' 'Halleluiah' understanding, there came the sitting-in the-barber's-chair

'Halleluiah' one, when the clippers caught in and tugged one of those little hairs on the back of my neck. Ouch! As I nearly leapt out of the chair, into my mind leapt to part of the book of the prophet Isaiah, used in the Liturgy on Good Friday, and particularly to chapter 50, part of verse 6. (What else?) 'I gave my back to the smiters and my cheeks to those who pulled out the beard.' The sharp pain around my neck made me think of the infinitely greater physical and spiritual pain experienced by Isaiah's suffering servant, prefiguring the pain suffered by the rejected Jesus. We should frequently contemplate the sharp hurt which can be caused to others when his ways of love are rejected, and when, for example, self interest to the point of greed takes over. A 'Halleluiah' moment in very weird circumstances. A glance in the direction of the management of some of our one-time highly respected financial institutions, and the lack of wisdom or just plain arrogance that characterised aspects of their affairs will provide ample evidence for the truth which that 'Halleluiah' moment reveals.

So to draw some conclusion to these experiences. We are Easter people. We wouldn't be here if we weren't. If 'Halleluiah' truly is

our song it means learning and growing day by day, sometimes in ordinary events of daily life. It means understanding and living risen life and bringing resurrection – new hope, new life - to the lives of others. And in doing this we won't be alone.

Frightened women fled from the graveside of their friend, afraid to do or to say anything. No 'Halleluiah' moments for them or the men for a while. However, as risen life grew within them and within others, their tongues were loosed and their lives were freed. 'Halleluiah' As Paul put it to the Corinthians, 'so we preached, and so you have come to believe'. 'Halleluiah'. As Peter taught those gathered and eager to listen in the house of Cornelius: 'we are witnesses.' Millions of others today and down the ages have listened, have received, believed and become witnesses with us, and so Jesus's risen life retains its unstoppable magnetism. 'Halleluiah'.

With them from the past; in company with our friends in faith of today, be witnesses, be part of the Easter enterprise. Seek 'Halleluiah'. Find 'Halleluiah'. Experience 'Halleluiah'. Live 'Halleluiah'. Bring 'Halleluiah'. Amen.

