

SERMON

Rev'd Canon Dr. Rowena Pailing

I suspect many of us have changed how we communicate in recent weeks, whether we live alone or with others. Everything is different: not so very long ago most people's windows (apart from department stores') were generally reserved for net curtains or Christmas decorations. Now they have become public message boards.

Not so very long ago I would generally have tried to avoid making a spectacle of myself, but now I wave wildly and shout and bellow friendly greetings from a distance of fifty metres whenever I see people I know across the street or in the supermarket queue.

And not so very long ago, Crispin and I sweated blood to try to help his mother get to grips with a smartphone or even send a text message. Now it turns out that she has a webcam and is highly proficient on Zoom.

In today's Gospel, Jesus introduces the Holy Spirit, so often associated with communication, as the Advocate. This gives us a chance to think about how we speak and listen and where there are voices which are not heard.

I'm on my daily walk at the moment, in a different landscape from the banks of the River Mersey. This is one of my favourite views of the cathedral, you can see it nestling at the bottom of the hill. I love our life in Blackburn, but we also need to be honest about the challenges faced by many communities here, including those in the area immediately behind me. Out of respect for the dignity of local residents I won't turn the camera round to film, but this was identified last year as the local authority ward with the highest rate of child poverty in Britain. Seven out of ten children here live below the breadline.¹

Young people living with social deprivation are amongst the voiceless of our society. But so too are others. Whole communities have been written out of history and continue to be under-represented in the public eye. There are also people who face physical challenges with communication. And even those who consider themselves to be articulate will at times need their words interpreting or their views representing. So of course I vote, but I can't speak for myself in the Houses of Parliament.

All of the people involved in this act of worship either speak or have spoken for others, in one way or another, whether through work with people who have communication needs or those on the margins of society; whether through education or the traditional idea of Advocacy in the judicial process; or whether through the vicarious communication involved in broadcasting or performance.

¹ Research carried out by Loughborough University for the End Child Poverty coalition. See eg <https://www.bbc.co.uk/news/education-48226256>

But there are others we deliberately haven't asked to take part. There is no one visible in this service who is currently in the asylum process, or who we are aware is living with abuse, because that could potentially have put them at risk. So yet again, those people are voiceless. They have been silenced.

As a Church we are called to speak with and for others and ensure that we represent the marginalised in public policy making. The ordination service specifically demands that deacons 'are to serve the community in which they are set... searching out the poor and weak, the sick and lonely and those who are oppressed and powerless, reaching into the forgotten corners of the world, that the love of God may be made visible.' But this is the ministry of all Christian people.



The style of worship here at Blackburn Cathedral and in Liverpool Parish Church involves a lot of music – and that too is a way of giving voice. At the Cathedral we don't have a choir school, but we do engage with thousands of young people from local schools, including many who may otherwise feel disenfranchised. They are able to use their voices, not just to speak, but to sing, and to glorify God on behalf of others. Some face considerable barriers to their learning, but this builds self-esteem, improves their life chances, and changes the balance of power when they are the ones who are confident to give voice.

In a more conventional interpretation of 'advocacy', the Bible presents us with a number of glimpses of the law court where those on trial have few words to give: the judgement of Solomon, John the Baptist, Jesus before Pontius Pilate.

These contrast with the speeches of the early Christians in the Acts of the Apostles. Earlier in this service we heard from St Paul, who characteristically had plenty to say for himself. He carefully used his gift of the gab to engage the people of Athens using language and ideas they would understand. Paul's example is a model for us as Christians, because as well as being Advocates for the people of God, we are also the Advocates of God himself. Not because God cannot speak for himself – Jesus makes it quite clear that we should not worry about what we are to say, because the Holy Spirit will give us the words.² However, as people living in the world, it is for us to proclaim the Gospel in everything we do and everything we say. And how do we do that? Well in part, by being advocates for the whole people of God, and working for the voices of all those who are voiceless to be heard.

² Matthew 10.19; Mark 13.11; Luke 12.11