



CATHOLIC BISHOPS' CONFERENCE

Bishop Dunn Memorial Lecture 2012

Archbishop Vincent Nichols: Faith Finding a Voice

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I am very pleased to be here to give this Bishop Kevin Dunn Memorial Lecture. It is an honour. Along with so many of you gathered here today, I have the fondest memories of Bishop Kevin. Indeed, I still miss his presence, his vitality and his down-to-earth approach to our faith and Church. I extend my warmest greetings to his family and close friends and assure them of my continuing prayers.

Kevin would have approved of the title given to this talk: Faith finding a voice. He wanted to get on with the job while at the same time thinking carefully about what it entailed and demanded. He wanted action rather than talk, and that must be a criterion we use for ourselves, including for this evening. I hope we can go from here with some resolution carrying us towards action.

In this setting it is right to recall one particular and remarkable action taken by Bishop Kevin: the establishment of the Bede Chair of Catholic Theology in the University of Durham. That truly was a lasting achievement and one which indeed typifies the importance of our theme. Bishop Kevin was determined that our Catholic faith would indeed find a particular voice in the University and in the local Church. And, to its credit, the University responded so positively, and continues to do so. So do not be surprised if I return to your beloved Bede later in this talk.

As we begin to ponder on various aspects of the challenge of faith finding a voice in our world today, it is important to recall the wonderful, well-known reflection of St Augustine, given in reference to the role of St John the Baptist. Augustine insists that we understand the difference between what is said and who is saying it. He says:

'John is the voice, but the Lord in the beginning was the Word. John is a voice for a time but Christ is the eternal Word from the beginning.' (eg Sermon 293 cf Office of Readings for Feast of the Birth of St. John the Baptist.)

There are a number of important points for us here. First is the realisation that in finding a voice, faith – my faith, your faith – must seek to express only the Word of God, the person of Jesus. It is to him that we wish to give voice, not to ourselves.

This is not as easy as it sounds. Our whole frame of mind, shaped by the very air we breathe, is that we want to give voice to ourselves, to our own ideas and thoughts, to the insights we believe are rather special to ourselves. We want to have our signature on what we say.

So this has to be born in mind throughout our exploration: He is the Word, we, in all our different circumstances, are only the voice.

Then there is a second point made by St Augustine: we are a voice – or voices – for a time; He is the Word for all eternity. Our voice is crucial, for it is the voice for this day and age. So we have to work hard at understanding the day and the age so that our voice has a certain coherence, so that what we say 'makes sense'. But in doing so we have to remember that the Word to which we are giving voice has an unchanging truth, an abiding grasp on reality that we, of ourselves, cannot achieve.

There is a tension here, of course. On the one hand is our creativity. We are properly explorers, adventurers even, wanting to bring to the surface, to bring into the public eye, what has been seemingly lost or hidden. Yet

in all of this we are not creators of the reality we seek. Rather we are creatures of that reality who is Himself our creator. So our own creativity is at the service of given truth, a given goodness, a given beauty: given in the unfolding mystery of God, most visibly in the person of Jesus.

You will recall, perhaps, the wonderful image used to describe the work of the great sculptor, Michelangelo. His work was described as that of releasing, from within the block of marble, the beauty of the statue that was already hidden in it, which he, in his genius, could already discern. The furious pace at which he could work was fired by his desire to set free the wonderful form already present in the stone. Musical geniuses may well be similar: Mozart frantically writing down the score of his Requiem; Handel intensely completing his Messiah in an astonishingly short time. This is creativity in service of a great, given good. This is beauty finding its particular expression in time and space, just as, for us, faith, too must find its voice.

To summarise this first point, then, is to state this: faith finding a voice is always a work of fidelity. Faithfulness to what is given is a key and essential quality of the way in which the great mystery of faith finds fresh expression. And we have clear ways of understanding that faithfulness: it is a faithfulness to Jesus, the Word of God, as expressed in the Scriptures and the Tradition of the Church and safeguarded by its Teaching role, or Magisterium.

There is much contained within that last sentence which I cannot explore now. But its meaning is not a prison, even though some would wish to suggest it is. Fidelity to a gift – whether the love of one's beloved or to the gift of how the Holy Spirit works within the Church – is not a prison, not an impeding of freedom. Rather it is a form, a shape, the result of a decision, through which freedom is tutored to explore ever more deeply that which it has accepted as lovely, true and beautiful. It is the harness of love which holds us to the task and guides us, often against our more wayward instincts, more deeply into the gift we have received.

From this flows a second and crucially important point, already implicit in what I have said so far: the voice has to be for today if it is to be a true service of the Word. Replaying the voice of yesterday will not be enough, even if a yearning for the familiar, or even a nostalgia for the past are frequently at play within us. In order to fashion a voice for today one thing is necessary: an attentive listening to the heartbeat of the age of which we are a part. In the language of the Church this is to say that dialogue is the essential partner of proclamation.

I heard a wonderful illustration of this point recently. It was a sermon given on the episode, in the Acts of the Apostles, in which Philip meets the Ethiopian eunuch and helps him to come to faith and be baptised. You may recall that the Ethiopian invites Philip into his chariot as he journeys home. The crucial phrase, as emphasised in the sermon I heard, was this: 'So he urged Philip to get in and sit by his side.' (Acts 8.31) It was from that position, being side by side, that Philip is able to engage in conversation, offer insight in response to questions, leading the Ethiopian to baptism. To sit side by side is to be ready for dialogue.

So it should be with us, too. Here too there is much that can be said about the art of dialogue, the art of attentive listening. But I would like to make one point only. Those involved in dialogue take great care not to misunderstand their interlocutor. They take care not to distort or misrepresent the other with which they are engaged. They desire a true understanding and exchange, not an easy and superficial confrontation or argument. Indeed St Thomas Aquinas set as a standard the ability to express the others' argument better than they can themselves.

In our world today this is a crucially important point in the work of enabling faith to find its voice. Our manner of talking together may not always be like this. There is a danger that we allow the pattern of much media communication to tutor our more personal manner of communication. Yet much media communication is far from our normal way of talking together. After all, the media constantly deals in the exceptional and, of course, tends to sensationalise it, too. News and comment features are designed to catch our attention and to draw us into an often confrontational interpretation of a trend or particular event.

Our own personal communication, which is usually about the very ordinariness of life, is best shaped by the different qualities of dialogue: listening, understanding and shared empathy. The media's typical focus and methodology should not dominate our ways of communication. Indeed we do well to step back from the media output which we are constantly receiving and evaluate or question its underlying assumptions.

But more of that later.

The principal point I want to make here is that the way of dialogue is the pathway by which faith best finds its voice. So, in our task, in our conversations, we have to be on the look out not so much for the points of opposition but for the points of possible agreement, not so much for controversy as for convergence, not so much for highlighting what is missing as seeking out the good that is to be found in the other, without ignoring or glossing over real differences (Cf 'Meeting God in Friend and Stranger', Bishops' Conference of England and Wales). The pathway of dialogue is the pathway on which we are encouraged, as was made clear by Pope Benedict during his Visit to the UK in 2010.

In our Catholic tradition, there are three pathways down which faith finds a voice, three arenas or areas of dialogue with our world and our society. These are the pathways of truth, of goodness and of beauty. I would like to say a word about each one in turn – but in reverse order!

The pathway of beauty is, perhaps, the one which is most readily appealing to people today. In places and objects of beauty there remains an unobscured appeal, a quality that raises our minds, hearts and spirit above present circumstances, whatever they may be. Such beauty helps us to see ourselves within a wider perspective, loosening our preoccupation with ourselves and appreciating how our lives are but a part of a wider pattern, a wider response to the mystery of life itself. Often, but not always, that beauty has an explicit connection to the religious, to the account that faith gives of our endeavours and experiences. There are many places which are recognised as 'holy' and people still flock to them: 'Holy Island', Durham Cathedral, or the tomb of St Cedd in Lastingham – to name a few near here.

Works of art also have a great eloquence. Some of the most successful exhibitions in London have put forward the beauty of our faith: Seeing Salvation, the Treasures of Heaven and, most remarkably, The Sacred Made Real, the exhibition of Spanish works of art. One of those pieces, a figure of the dead Christ, presented a new problem to the museum: visitors were kneeling in prayer beside it! They were gently asked to move on.

This, I suggest, highlights two points. First, we should be cautious about too easily identifying our age as one of 'aggressive secularism'. Of course there are some voices of that tone and content, but there is also a widespread and deep sympathy and search for the transcendent, for the things of God which we should note, respect, reflect and to which we can respond.

Secondly, the beauty of our churches and homes, the beauty of our liturgy and behaviour, the beauty of our musical endeavour and the harmony we seek with others in our living together are all parts of the way in which we express our confidence that this is indeed God's world, it was God who made it and it is 'very good'. Finding such a voice is hard work, as hard as producing any masterpiece. But it is a work in which all of us can be involved and to which we can give much thought.

The second pathway, on which I wish to touch, is the pathway of goodness. This, too, is clear and practical, within the reach of each one of us.

Pope Benedict, in his Encyclical 'Deus Caritas Est', gave great emphasis to the importance of practical charity, rooted in and directed to the love of God, as that which gives credibility to the Gospel (cf 'Deus Caritas Est' para 31). The words of Gospel truth begin to ring true when they are accompanied by deeds of kindness and goodness. It is charity which gives them their cutting edge. This much we know. St James made it clear in his Letter (James 2.18); axioms such as 'actions speak louder than words' embed this truth in everyday language, and saints have emphasised it too. Remember the words commonly attributed to St Francis: 'Let us proclaim the Gospel always and when necessary use words.'

This is faith finding a voice on every street corner, in the kitchen and in the workplace, among friends and strangers, in every part of the broad pathway of life. This is the work of each individual, spontaneous and personal; it is the work of parish groups coming together for a specific task; it is the work of great organisations such as our own CAFOD reaching across the world in charity. Far more goes on in this work than we realise so it is appropriate that, as a Church, we seek to serve this witness of charity a little more systematically. This we are doing through the development of 'Caritas', a pattern of support and networking which has recognition in so many countries and which help to develop the local work of charity and enable it to find a voice, a word of advocacy, which has a strong base in evidence and experience. A good step in that direction is for every parish just to review and bring to light all the charity work which goes on and simply ask how it can be better supported and encouraged.

Faith finds a convincing voice through the work of practical goodness.

The third pathway, that of truth, is the most complex at the present time, for we live in an age in which truth has been largely relativised. 'You have your truth and I have mine and you must not impose your truth on me – though I may well want you to accept mine!' The complexity of this cultural norm with which we are living is felt everywhere: in conflicts between the generations, in debate about the ethical and social norms to be upheld by society – such as the nature of marriage – and in the fields of academic study. How are we to respond? How can the truth of faith find a voice in this context?

I would like to make three practical suggestions.

The first concerns the practice of prayer. Prayer, as the raising of the mind and heart to God, is the first way in which the truth of faith finds its voice. Christian prayer is an explicit statement about the existence of God, about the gift of the Incarnate Word in Jesus Christ, and about how we live our lives in God's presence every moment, every day.

There is a great openness in much of society to the reality of prayer. It may not be fully understanding of all that is involved, it may be an unformed instinct, but there is an awareness of the reality which prayer touches. Think of the example of Fabrice Muamba, the young footballer who suffered heart failure on the pitch. There was a huge appeal for prayer. Newspapers had headlines such as 'God is in charge.' The young man and his family have never ceased to speak about the importance of prayer alongside deep appreciation of the dedication and skill of the medical professionals. In a recent interview he spoke of waking up to find his family around the bed saying psalms for his recovery. 'They were praying so loud', he laughed. 'No one could sleep through that!' Also, at a time when there is often controversy about the place of religious belief in the work place, his fiancé spoke so gratefully of 'a young African cleaner in the hospital who would come into the room every day to pray silently in the corner.' She gives us all good example not only of the importance of prayer, but also of the importance of respecting the circumstances and the needs of each particular situation. Prayer is not to be imposed.

In my experience, no one has ever rejected me when I have offered to include them in my prayers, particularly when they have told me of something burdening or troubling them. Sometimes people ask for our prayers. That is an important sign. We should be ready to offer, sensitively and even a little diffidently, to pray for others. To make such an offer is a simple, everyday way in which faith finds a voice in our lives and its truths are proclaimed. Its fruit is clear. Fabrice Muamba states it clearly. He said, and it was a newspaper headline: 'If God is with me then who can be against me?'

A second way in which faith finds a voice in the proclamation of truth is in public debate. This could readily be a lecture in its own right, but I want to make one essential point.

Often public debate produces more heat than light. Tempers rise – and are provoked – and listening ends and the debate becomes a battle of wills not a meeting of minds. Of course it is not always so, but the temptation to concentrate on making one's own point rather than seeking to understand and respond to the other is very real as I know too well. In this context Pope Benedict has made a particular appeal for the part that silence and reflection has to play in communication. He said this:

'Silence is an integral element of communication; in its absence, words rich in content cannot exist. In silence, we are better able to listen to and understand ourselves; ideas come to birth and acquire depth; we understand with greater clarity what it is we want to say and what we expect from others; and we choose how to express ourselves. By remaining silent we allow the other person to speak, to express him or herself; and we avoid being tied simply to our own words and ideas without them being adequately tested. In this way, space is created for mutual listening, and deeper human relationships become possible. ...When messages and information are plentiful, silence becomes essential if we are to distinguish what is important from what is insignificant or secondary. Deeper reflection helps us to discover the links between events that at first sight seem unconnected, to make evaluations, to analyze messages; this makes it possible to share thoughtful and relevant opinions, giving rise to an authentic body of shared knowledge. For this to happen, it is necessary to develop an appropriate environment, a kind of 'eco-system' that maintains a just equilibrium between silence, words, images and sounds.'

In summary he said:

“When word and silence become mutually exclusive, communication breaks down, either because it gives rise to confusion or because, on the contrary, it creates an atmosphere of coldness; when they complement one another, however, communication acquires value and meaning.”

Message for World Communications Day, 20 May 2012

In practice this can mean many things which you are well able to discern yourselves. One suggestion from me: every radio and TV set has an ‘on/off’ switch. Perhaps we should use it more often and free ourselves from too much input, from the constant round of news and debate, so as to reflect a little more and then deepen the quality of our understanding and of the contribution we can make. Too much input and there is no time or space for reflection. A little more stillness, space and silence and then the ‘still, small voice’ of faith will find its power.

The third area in which faith can find a voice for truth, I suggest, is in the area of history, of the telling of a story, the giving an account of what has happened either today or many years ago. And here I would like to turn to one of your own favourite saints, St Bede, whose feast we celebrate next week.

His work in giving an account of our history is formed by one overriding conviction: that the work of the Holy Spirit continues in history. So the chronology which he presented differed from the one predominant at the time which was centred on the date of the foundation of the City of Rome. In contrast Bede placed the Birth of Christ as the centre of history, and therefore interpreted that history from the perspective of the Incarnation of the Lord.

This might suggest to us a way of giving an account of our own personal histories, the stories we so often want to share. To speak of our lives as being under the providence of God and of having key moments recognised as part of that providence, or as a moving away from that perspective, would be a remarkable way in which faith could find a voice in our everyday speech. This is not so much a question of adopting a kind of pious phraseology, in which speech is interspersed with references to the good Lord, but rather a way of seeing our own history as the unfolding of the gift of life, given by God, and the journey to a deeper understanding of that gift and all it entails as we journey towards an eternal fulfilment.

An illustration of a ‘guiding principle’ at work in a narrative is seen each week in the Antiques Roadshow when person after person overrides the financial value of an antique with the value it has for the family to which it belongs. Here value and meaning are given a specific focus. The story these people want to tell is the story of the richness of their family life and heritage, not the story of the commercial value of what they own. Things look quite different, and indeed carry different value, from the perspective that is taken on them.

We can take a further step, then, and speak about the meaning of our life’s experience from the perspective of our faith in God, in our relationship with the Lord and in the perspective of the continual presence of the Holy Spirit prompting and guiding us, not only in the bigger decision of life but in many smaller moments, too.

This is not as strange as it might seem. In my experience, those who attain to old age often adopt this perspective. A fine example of it was seen in the film ‘Catholics-Women’, recently broadcast on the BBC. There an older woman reflected quite spontaneously on her whole life from the perspective of the faith which she has recently rediscovered. She spoke of sixty years of her life, years in which she had been professionally very successful, as ‘wasted years’ now that she viewed them again from the perspective of faith. It was a remarkable and moving testimony: faith finding an eloquent and compelling voice.

Commenting on the life and work of the Venerable Bede, Pope Benedict recently highlighted the ‘timely messages’ given by Bede for many of us in the Church today. The Pope pointed out that for scholars, the message of Bede is this: ‘to examine the marvels of the Word of God in order to present them in an attractive form to the faithful; and to explain the dogmatic truths, avoiding heretical complications and keeping to Catholic simplicity, with the attitude of the lowly and humble to whom God is pleased to reveal the mysteries of the Kingdom.’ (General Audience, 18 February 2009)

Bede’s message for us pastors is that we should give priority to preaching, with the Holy Father adding that ‘Bede recommends that they - the pastors - use the vernacular as he himself does.’

The Pope continues by recommending to those in a consecrated way of life that their pattern of prayer and community life, coupled with attending to the practical apostolate of evangelisation, as the way spelt out by the Venerable Bede.

Finally the Pope says that 'The Holy Doctor (Bede)' urged lay faithful to be diligent in religious instruction, to pray ceaselessly 'reproducing in life what they celebrate in liturgy' and offering all their actions as a spiritual sacrifice in union with Christ, giving special emphasis to the role of parents.

In conclusion, one last thought. Of all the aspects of the Eternal Word, which took flesh in Christ, one strikes me of particular immediacy for our world today. It is the word of hope. Perhaps, as we struggle to enable the faith in our lives to find a voice, whether in beauty, goodness or truth, and always down the pathway of sensitive dialogue, it is the word of hope that we might most strive to articulate. Hope is the virtue by which we see all things in the perspective of the heavenly kingdom. Hope expresses that for which we strive, which is as yet not attained but which we know, on the promise made to us by the Lord, can indeed be attained and is indeed our true destiny. When we articulate that hope, then present reality takes on its deepest meaning, its true perspective. And within that perspective we human beings can maintain our true dignity, our true poise no matter what we face. It is with a true hope of heaven in our hearts that suffering is borne with dignity, that failure is faced, that betrayal is endured and that success is properly celebrated. Christian hope strengthens our resolve and deepens our charity for in its perspective we know that we are all truly brothers and sisters of one Father and sharing in a common destiny.

To live without such hope is to live with vital pieces of the jigsaw of life missing. And that is frustrating and annoying. We search for the missing pieces and know that until they are found we see the work as incomplete and are tempted to think of it as worthless. But when they do emerge from under the sofa and are clicked into place then the whole jigsaw becomes a thing of joy to behold. Our word of faithful hope can bring great joy to many.

One example of such faithful hope finding a voice is given to us in the Acts of the Apostles. Stephen is presenting to his Jewish brothers and sisters his great witness to Christ. He is proposing to them a new reading of their history, a reading now centred on the coming of Jesus as the promised one of God. It all comes to a difficult climax at the apex of which we read: 'But Stephen, filled with the Holy Spirit, gazed into heaven and saw the glory of God and Jesus standing at God's right hand. 'Look! I can see heaven thrown open,' he said, 'and the Son of Man standing at the right hand of God.' The fruit of this hope is clear. Even as Stephen died he said, 'Lord Jesus, receive my spirit' and 'Lord, do not hold this sin against them.' Peace and forgiveness are the fruits of such hope!

Let us give thanks for every fleeting glimpse we are given of the glory of God and the goodness of the Lord. Let those moments form and deepen our faithful hope. And, in that light may we indeed enable faith to find a fresh and compelling voice in our society today.

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