

St Luke's in the City

Celebrating at the Crossroads 2nd Sunday in Lent 2008

There are many things that are said about bishops (not all of them exactly complimentary) and many images that we use in liturgy and in job descriptions and in strategic planning documents. Manager, employer, chief pastor, CEO, dispute arbiter, guardian of the faith, fundraiser, overseer, administrator, chief liturgical officer, shepherd, judge, wise and faithful servant. But the first thing that is said about the bishop in [the] liturgy of ordination is that "a bishop in God's holy Church is to be one with the apostles in proclaiming Christ's resurrection and interpreting the Gospel."

If the first task of being a bishop—the primary task, the one that shapes all the other tasks—is to proclaim the resurrection and interpret the Gospel, then it would seem that what a bishop needs to be prepared for above all is to look for those places where the living and resurrected Christ is at work, going into situations of despair and making them sources of hope, seeking reconciliation where there are broken relationships, speaking words that lift the eyes of the despondent or the quarrelsome or the anxious to the loving face of Christ alive in their midst. It is to seek and point to Christ in every person and every place—in the ordinary places, in the extraordinary ones, in the unexpected ones. It is to equip God's people to bring Christ into every place they go, to transform a broken society with the healing presence of God's mercy and love. Where is resurrection? Where is Christ's presence?

What is the good news? Is it that our churches are filling up, that our disputes about how to interpret and apply the Gospel are all resolved, that we are making a difference in secular society? All of these would be splendid to see. But the good news is that even if none of these things come to be, Christ is here with us, is alive and alive forever. Whenever we mess up, as individuals or as community, or are overcome by our limitations and fears, the good news is that Christ is still here with us, to turn us from despair to energized life, to bring us to our senses and see that our real trust can only ever be in him.

While a bishop is necessarily going to be concerned with statistics and the health of communities, the first concern needs always to be not "are there enough people?" but "are the people faithful?" Our health as Christians is in the end measured only by the measure of the stature of the fullness of Christ—people who are not cranky and grumpy and quarrelling, but alive with the glory of God.

from a sermon preached by **Canon Dr Alyson Barnett-Cowan**
at the Episcopal ordination of Linda Nicholls
as suffragan bishop of the Diocese of Toronto, Canada, on 2 February 2008

(full text of the sermon at http://www.anglican.ca/news/news.php?newsItem=2008-02-04_as.news)