

## John Beauchamp's institution 070314

Right next door to St James Clerkenwell, just down the road from here, lies a restaurant that my wife and I heard about some while back, and long before we thought we might be moving to London. It's called Dans Le Noir – you may have been there. The USP, the particularity of the restaurant is this: all the meals are served up in total darkness by blind waiters and waitresses. They call it dining in the dark.

The idea is that because you cannot see the food you begin to taste it in a new way. Because you cannot see your dinner companions you interact with them at a deeper level. And because you are being served by blind waiters it changes your understanding of disability. Let's have some friends round and dine in the dark, said Gill. So we did, and I have to say it was amazing and I would recommend it to anyone.

I want to say something this afternoon about the importance of new ways of looking at things, because you stand on the thresh-hold today of a new chapter in the story of St Stephen's Canonbury. This is a church with a rich history, serving Jesus Christ in the midst of a rapidly changing environment; and I believe you need to resist the temptation to define your future in terms of your past. This new start offers you the chance to re-imagine who you are and what ministry here might look like in the days to come.

I want to work my way in to this by talking briefly about the parable of the prodigal son. You'll be familiar with the parable, but let me read you a brief section of it (Luke 15:11-16):

*<sup>11</sup> Then Jesus said, "There was a man who had two sons. <sup>12</sup> The younger of them said to his father, 'Father, give me the share of the property that will belong to me.' So he divided his property between them. <sup>13</sup> A few days later the younger son gathered all he had and travelled to a distant country, and there he squandered his property in dissolute living. <sup>14</sup> When he had spent everything, a severe famine took place throughout that country, and he began to be in need. <sup>15</sup> So he went and hired himself out to one of the citizens of that country, who sent him to his fields to feed the pigs. <sup>16</sup> He would gladly have filled himself with the pods that the pigs were eating; and no one gave him anything.*

A new testament scholar conducted a fascinating experiment with this passage. First he selected a random group of 100 Americans (different ages, races, genders, educational and economic backgrounds, etc); he set the parable before them and asked them to read it carefully. Then he took away their

Bibles and asked them to recount the story in their own words as accurately as they could.

Every single one of them mentioned that the prodigal son squandered his wealth on easy living. For them, this was the primary reason for the state he was reduced to. It was his own foolish fault, squandering his wealth. Only 6 of them mentioned that there had been a famine.

He then did exactly the same exercise with a group of people from St Petersburg in Russia. While a third of them mentioned that the young man had squandered his wealth, 84% of them mentioned the famine.

The Siege of Leningrad (re-named St Petersburg after the war) was a 900-day famine, part of the collective memory of all those who lived there. For them, the reason for the prodigal son's plight was the famine.

The way they read the parable, and more importantly the way they interpreted it, was hugely dependant on their context and history.

This same scholar found himself in Tanzania a couple of years later and decided to repeat the experiment on a group of Tanzanians. To his surprise their focus was not on the young man squandering his wealth, nor on the famine – they all mentioned the fact that nobody had given the young man anything to eat! In Tanzania, where hospitality is prized and valued, this was the most obvious reason for the state he found himself in.

This is a fascinating insight into the way that the same words can hold many meanings. And it reminds us to be careful of imposing our own cultural bias on to Christian truth. People who are different from us may see things very differently indeed, and enrich our understanding of the gospel in the process.

Any healthy church will be faced with the challenge of holding together a community of people which includes those who have been around for ever, and those who only joined yesterday. Growth and fruitfulness can't happen without change, but it's never easy for a resident community to welcome in outsiders.

St Stephen's has been blessed with a number of people who have been here for a considerable time, and this is a great gift – bringing continuity and stability, wisdom and experience.

But in a cultural context changing as fast as this part of London, every church community must be open to those who will see things from a different angle,

open up new possibilities, and bring fresh insights. That sounds great, and I have yet to meet a church that doesn't say it's what they want, but in practice it can feel quite threatening.

I'd want to urge you to approach this new phase of your life with an openness to both continuity and change.

You serve, along with most of us in Stepney, the most diverse, fastest growing, fast-changing place in the UK. It's at a multi-cultural cross-roads and the whole of life is here. Like Jesus' parable, your church community must be a narrative that invites different opinions, different approaches, and won't be threatened by new perspectives or ways of doing things. That, it seems to me, is to be true to the many voices in which scripture can speak to us.

I began with dining in the dark, and let me draw towards an end by taking you back to that thought. Dans le Noir is a restaurant that has helped people see themselves and see life in a different way, by the gift of those who cannot see. John's blindness may be a gift to help this congregation see itself and see the Gospel in a new way. Every new Incumbent brings fresh insights, but I have a feeling that John will help you see yourselves and see your parish in new ways that you have yet even to imagine.

God, I believe, is set to bless St Stephen's afresh. Do please enjoy your dinner in the dark.....