

Civic Service 2018

Genesis 28: 11 – 18; 1 Peter 2: 1 – 10

Well, having heard the choir singing the theme tune from the Vicar of Dibley, we've come to the point in the sermon now where we pay no no no no tribute Cllr Colin Croft and reflect publicly on what a no no no no good mayor he's turning out to be.

What a ridiculous programme Vicar of Dibley was, though. I mean those jokes at the end – the ones in the vestry that the vicar told Alice, the vergers – they're just not the sort of the material you can use in a sermon: "What do accountants do about constipation? They work it out with a pencil!" That's the sort of thing you simply can't say from a pulpit; and you'll be pleased to hear I'm not going to do so: you won't hear that sort of joke from me.

The Vicar of Dibley was full of the most silly, over-the-top characters that bore no resemblance to real life. I

can assure you that life within the Church of England is nothing like Dibley; and whilst we might be able to get hours of mischief out of trying to work out which character on the Dibley civic parish council best corresponds to which member of Bridlington Town Council, there isn't really much mileage in it if we're honest. Vicar of Dibley was a bit a silly fun.

Except: there was something deeper going on as well. The writing of Richard Curtis, coupled with the acting of Dawn French created a character that became a national treasure. The Revd Geraldine Grainger was a subtle, complex combination of immense wisdom tempered by human vulnerability. At a time when women were only just beginning to be ordained, she helped people come to terms with woman vicars. 25 years on it may be difficult to remember what the fuss was about. But at the time there were many people who didn't have any theological objections to female ordination, but who just couldn't quite get their head

The Revd Matthew Pollard, Rector of Bridlington Priory

round it. And the clever characterisation of Revd Geraldine Grainger helped allay anxieties.

And as for the slap stick of those civic parish council meetings, once we get beyond the entertaining and outrageous silliness of those characters all being thrown together around a meeting table, there is a very significant message for us. And the message is about the importance of negotiating difference in order to promote the common good. It's something we're losing the ability to do.

The unedifying, and indeed harrowing, coverage of the Senate confirmation hearings for the appointment of Judge Kavanaugh to the US Supreme Court this week have shown just how debased by polarisation and fragmentation our public life has become. And that applies to the UK as much as to the US. We run the risk of tearing ourselves apart, not over issues of ideas or policy, but whether we bear the label of a remainer or a leaver.

Events in Senate Committees on Capitol Hill, Washington DC, may seem a world away from Bridlington Town Council. But they're not. Because it's from the bottom up that our shared values are forged. And when they're under attack it's from the bottom up that our shared values are defended.

Don't get me wrong: we need people to have political convictions. But we need people to put their political convictions at the service of a respectful exchange of ideas and arguments that leads to a synthesis that benefits the whole community.

In order to achieve this we need more of the graciousness and non-partisan cooperation we see in the Bridlington Town Council and other civic parish councils across the East Riding, and which we celebrate in this service today. We need to see less malice and guile and insincerity and slander – in fact, those very things this morning's second Bible reading

The Revd Matthew Pollard, Rector of Bridlington Priory

encouraged us to get rid of in order to achieve what it described as holy living.

Not that those who commit themselves to holy living, who commit themselves to following the Way of Jesus Christ, make better public servants than anybody else. They don't. Because God-botherers *are* no better than anybody else. But the insight that Christian faith does bring is a brutally realistic assessment of human weakness and the fact that we are dependent on something that is beyond ourselves. And the name Christians give to that something is God.

Cllr Shelagh Finlay, the Mayor Consort of Bridlington, read for us this morning the story from the Bible of Jacob's ladder. A little bird told me Cllr Finlay was rather excited by the reading because it contained the word "awesome"; and she was hoping to be able to inject enough passion in the way she said it to show she was really down with the yooof; which I have to say, for a Labour Party councillor, is about as desperate as

coming up to the lectern to Abba singing Dancing Queen. But it's a good Bible story because what made Jacob realise he was in an awesome place was that he'd experienced an interplay, and interaction between heaven and earth, between divinity and humanity. And that was a foretaste of the truth about God that's ultimately revealed in Jesus: that God is more than a detached and remote old man in the sky: God is someone who touches and interacts with our humanity, to release us from our human nature - limited by malice and guile and insincerity and envy and slander - and to enable us to be more than we could ever be in our own strength. He is able to redeem us, whoever we are - regular members of the Priory congregation, Bridlington Town Councillors, even residents of Dibley - so that goodness and mercy shall follow us all the days of our life: and we can dwell in the house of the Lord for ever.

Amen.