

The Diaconal/Transforming Church

Last weekend I attended a conference for deacons with the overall theme: "Becoming a Diaconal Church: Broadening the Vision". We were stimulated and challenged by three talks by David Clark, a Methodist who has written and lectured extensively on this topic.

His basic thesis of the Church as servant of the Kingdom of God is that its mission is not just about the salvation of individuals but also about the redemption of the world. It is called to make known the gifts of the Kingdom: life, liberation, love and learning. As such its aim is nothing less than the transformation of communities, of society, of the world.

David Clark sees a renewed diaconate as an important part of that mission, primarily as enablers. But it is first and foremost the laity who are called to be active in this task of transformation.

That is a great responsibility indeed. Quite how this is to work out in practice depends on our own circumstances and situation. Yet transformation can be effected in simple everyday ways as well as by larger gestures and actions, and above all by small acts of love.

I doubt whether any of us here would deny that our world needs transforming, that there is much that needs to be changed. That has always been the case and is a constant message of the Bible.

Last Monday was the feast of the Annunciation of our Lord to the Blessed Virgin Mary. Mary's positive and willing response to God's call to be the mother of God's Son was in itself a moment that helped the process of transformation to take place.

We heard as our Bible reading just now the well-known words of Mary's song, the Magnificat (Luke 1.46-55). If we are not careful its very familiarity can blunt its radical message. For it is in many ways a revolutionary manifesto of the transformation that is heralded by God's Kingdom.

In Mary's song the values of the world - power and wealth - are challenged. The values of the Kingdom are instead to protect the weak and the humble, the poor and the hungry. Mary's words challenge not only the world but also us as Christians. They challenge our attitudes, our priorities, our lifestyle. And so it may be that as well as seeking ways to transform the world we too may need, with God's help, to be transformed. May that be our prayer this Lent.

Kingsley Boulton
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