

# Speechmaking and Slogans – The Sermon for Easter 6

by The Revd Canon Dr Malcolm Grundy

**Speechmaking** has to be the theme which springs out from our readings today. We have speeches from St Paul given us by St Luke and by Jesus given to us by St John. We have all heard speeches that can be inspirational – or a great turn-off. Just think of the '*I have a dream*' speech by Martin Luther King. It was not only great but gave a much-needed vision. **Slogans** are also very much in the news – '*Stay Home*' replaced by '*Stay Alert*' meaning whatever our common sense tells us it means. In our current situation we can adapt another familiar slogan and say '*A church which prays together stays together*' because that is just what we are doing in these very participative services at St Olaves.

We have come a long way together since Palm Sunday. Paul's speech shows just how far these first believers had come since the discovery of the empty tomb. They too were trying to link the local events which they knew about to the bigger picture which they were only just beginning to understand about the nature of God's Kingdom.

Covid-19 has had a devastating impact on so many communities. People have lost grandparents, parents and children, uncles, aunts, sisters and brothers, friends and workmates. One journalist has written this interesting almost theological comment about our lock-down:

***“Freed from the need to talk about work, or sport, or where we've been out to eat, we can actually discuss things that matter, or enquire after each other's welfare, or, heaven forbid, talk about our feelings.”***

The first church 'historian' was St Luke and it is his account of St Paul's speech which we have as our epistle. In this speech – given in Greece at the Court of Areopagus – after a flattering introduction, Paul goes on to say that this intervening God lives not in human shrines which can trap our imagination but is the creator of the whole human race and ***we find Him deep within ourselves***. That is what every grieving community needs to hear.

The events of Holy Week and this Easter season are the story of a grieving community which was just learning to talk about its feelings. St John gets it just right when he reminds us that Jesus said he would ask the Father to send the Holy Spirit who would plead as Advocate to the Father. The word he uses is ***Advocate*** so that we can be sure God will hear our prayer. But he also calls it the ***Spirit of Truth***. Meaning what we *really need* will be what is really asked for.

Critics say that Luke was writing in the style and shadow of classical historians. We know that it was far from unusual for them to write the speech which their heroes might have made! In this case I am sure that is only part of St Luke was doing. The events are too close in the community memory to permit over-imaginative reconstruction.

The ideas which both writers share span the centuries. Bishop John Robinson in the liberating but controversial book *Honest to God* – highlights another memorable phrase – the theologian Paul Tillich said we know God now '***in the depth of our being***'. Such an important spiritual concept speak to us in a new way especially when we cannot find or worship God in our own buildings.

I have listened to a great number of sermons and speeches over the years. Like many of you, I have forgotten most of them. Relevant to our current situation as we await a new vicar, two come to mind for me.

At Induction or licencing services, I have encouraged bishops to use the Parish Profile as a basis for their sermon. My best memory of this is by Bishop Gordon Fallows at St Mark, Broomhill in Sheffield. He just said – '***you have asked for at least seven impossible things in the profile. Here are three I think you and your new vicar can achieve***'. In his speech afterwards the new vicar thanked the bishop, saying that in his sermon he had done his first year's work for him!

My second 'best speech' comes from when, with others, I launched the new Foundation for Church Leadership at King's College in London. Archbishop Rowan gave a brief lunchtime speech saying the good church leader will know their people. But he put it rather better than that. Drawing on St

Augustine he said the church good leader must be able to '*Listen to the heartbeat of the Body of Christ.*'

Like those examples and the '*I have a dream*' speech there has to be believable content alongside the oratory. The person delivering the speech has to be credible – to lift a slogan from my youth, from Marshall McLuhan, '*The medium is the message*'!

The forthcoming festivals of Ascension and Pentecost will unpack more of the experience of the early church for us. **Today we have these two speeches. First the content of Paul's speech; that in Jesus, God comes close to us especially in grieving or challenging times and is the care-taker of the whole human race. The second is no accident. St John and those who have known anxiety and failure through the centuries had a special name for the sense that God has come close. A new face of God emerges from them but for us – The Holy Spirit who St John also calls – the Comforter.**