



An Ordinary Man

A sermon by Revd Dr Sam Wells

Readings: Genesis 12.1-4a; 1 Peter 2.4-5, 9-10; Matthew 5.2b-12

Geoffrey Brown was an ordinary man who by the power of the Holy Spirit inspired ordinary people like you and me to do unbelievable things.

There are three words that I believe sum up Geoffrey's life. The first is incarnation. Incarnation means two things. It means that creation is good; that God is willing – in fact longs – to take on human flesh and experience the joys and sorrows, the height and depth of embodied existence. It also means that creation isn't an end in itself. Creation is the theatre for the drama of relationship, most profoundly the relationship between us and God.

For Geoffrey this meant taking human existence seriously. It required particularly taking seriously some things the more pious and world-wary church ignores or scorns – things like wages, work and wealth-creation. Geoffrey earned people's respect because he didn't see faith as an escape from life: he saw it as a deep attention to, and trust in, the details of making a living, doing good and doing well. In particular he encouraged people to question. He wanted adult believers, not infantilised converts. He believed Christianity set you free to name the truth about sin and death and desire and regret and longing and wonder. He worried that some popular forms of faith in fact suppressed doubts and questions and so risked doing as much harm as good. Incarnation means taking this life seriously, standing alongside those who mourn, those who hunger and thirst, and those who are persecuted – not pretending to be able to solve their problems, but touching them, listening to them, looking deep with them to the bottom of the pond. Teenagers liked Geoffrey precisely because he took them seriously and didn't treat them any differently from adults. Geoffrey was an ordinary man who by the power of the incarnation inspired ordinary people to do unbelievable things. He did it by taking people seriously.

The second word that sums up Geoffrey's life is cross. Paul says, we are 'always carrying in the body the death of Jesus, so that the life of Jesus may also be made visible in our bodies.' Ministry took its toll on Geoffrey. The issues he was called to face in people's lives, in the lives of institutions, not least in the one we're in right now, and in the life of the church more broadly, were weighty ones, and at times they brought a cost to him, to Jane and those close to him, and he bore the scars of helping people face up to things they'd rather not think about or deal with. If you look at the Beatitudes, in each case Jesus is describing himself. Each Beatitude comes in three parts – the blessed part, the future consolation part, and, in between, the comma, the bit right now. When you look down the blessed parts and you realise that these are exactly what took Jesus to the cross, the comma looks different. Geoffrey Brown dwelt in that comma. He was an ordinary man who, in large part through his own sacrifice, inspired ordinary people to do unbelievable things. He did it by sharing Christ's way of the cross.

And the third word that sums up Geoffrey's life is resurrection. When Geoffrey came to St Martin's it was a powerhouse of love, living a dream of a church that existed on compassion and vision and friendship where no one finally picked up the bills. Austen Williams' extraordinary ministry had left Geoffrey a fighting fund that Geoffrey would draw on at crucial moments; but Austen like his predecessors had a problem that had been brewing for decades about finding an income stream to support St Martin's enormous ministry.

Geoffrey's honesty saw the problem; his courage meant he didn't duck the conflict involved by naming and addressing that problem. He, perhaps alone, believed that the future could actually be bigger than the past. In the spirit of never wasting a good crisis, he told everyone St Martin's needed to exploit its commercial potential to balance the books. But what he was really doing was way beyond using the business to shore up the church. He was transforming the church. Every single one of the insights of his earlier ministry, his humility before the working world, his seriousness about the creation of wealth, his investment in the kingdom – every such insight converged on what began to emerge at St Martin's. There's no resurrection without death. Some of the fondly-held myths and much-quoted legends about this community had to be dispelled. But look around you today, here in the sanctuary and downstairs in the engine room of our renewed life; this is resurrection. And it would not, could not have happened without the incarnate, cruciform love and vision of this ordinary man who inspired ordinary people to do unbelievable things.

'The Lord said to Abram, Go from your country and your kindred and your father's house to the land that I will show you. I will make of you a great nation, and I will bless you, and make your name great, so that you will be a blessing. I will bless those who bless you... and in you all the families of the earth shall be blessed.' Geoffrey and Jane left Grimsby. They left the known and the loved and the established and the successful. They imagined they'd go to a quiet parish to coast into retirement. But instead they went to St Martin's, to a land that God showed them. And the Lord made of them a great people, and blessed them.

And we are that people. And our vocation as the descendants of Geoffrey and Jane is simply this: that in us many people of the earth shall be blessed. Geoffrey took living stones that had been rejected by the builders and crafted them into a temple in which myriads of people from all nations continue to find a blessing. God called Abram to do something new, something that hadn't been done before, something beyond his own strength, the final outcome of which Abram couldn't imagine and would never live to see. If Abram had said no, there would have been no Bible. God called Geoffrey Brown to do something new, something that hadn't been done before, something beyond his own strength, the final outcome of which Geoffrey couldn't imagine and hasn't lived to see. If Geoffrey had said no, there would likely today be no St Martin-in-the-Fields.

Geoffrey Brown was an ordinary man who, like Abraham, set out he knew not where because he trusted God and, by the power of the Holy Spirit, inspired ordinary people to do unbelievable things. And if you want to know what those things are, start by looking around you today, at this community, at its beauty, truth and goodness, at the countless people who've touched the hem of this cloak and found in it a blessing.

During the Second World War there was a Romanian pastor in a concentration camp in Eastern Europe in whose ministry and goodness people goodness, truth and beauty. Some who'd lived their lives under Communism said to him, 'This Jesus you talk about, what was he like?' The pastor said, in all humility, 'He was like me.' In this community for many years we had a man who lived a life of incarnation, cross and resurrection – an ordinary man who made the life and death and rising of Christ present to countless numbers of people. He did what the Holy Spirit does. The Holy Spirit takes ordinary people and empowers them to do unbelievable things.

When people ask us, 'This Holy Spirit you talk about, what is it like?' We say, 'It makes Christ present to us today. It inspires ordinary people like us to do unbelievable things. It's like ... Geoffrey Brown. And if Geoffrey, in all his modesty, in all his humility, turns to us and says, shyly, characteristically, 'Who – me?' we say to him, gently, gratefully, and joyfully, 'Yes, Geoffrey. Just like you.'