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Christ Church West Wimbledon
Sermon : 18th Sunday after Trinity ~ October 15, 2017

Recently I have been remembering the lives of two celebrities. No, not celebrities as the world tends to define that word, but nevertheless two special people who made an enormous difference to those who encountered them. The first was a 95 year old retired Bishop, Mark Wood, who served the Anglican Church in Southern Africa for over 30 years, working in Johannesburg, Transvaal, and Zimbabwe before becoming Dean of Salisbury in Rhodesia. He was then made the Bishop of Matabeleland before returning to England as a Suffragan Bishop in the Diocese of Hereford, which is when I knew him. Co-incidentally, just before his death, I met up with him for the first time for 35 years. Frail, deaf and almost blind, he nevertheless retained his spark and humour. Regretting that, at 95, he had lived too long, he still asked the waitress for a second glass of wine at lunch! To have been a priest and a bishop for so long will have been to touch the lives of many thousands of people. He certainly made a big impact in the Diocese of Hereford. A true celebrity.

The second person I have been remembering was an English teacher of mine called Chris Nicholson – whose affectionate nickname was Bomber – because he always bombed around the place. Here was a truly inspirational teacher, who made a unique impression on those he had taught over a 35 year career. And it wasn't just that he was a remarkable teacher – he also kept in touch with the many hundreds of boys whom he had taught when they became adults. Small wonder that his Church in Bedford was packed for his memorial service with people full of praise for him. Part of the service include a BBC radio 4 snippet of him teaching an English lesson. Priceless. A true celebrity.

Why on earth do I mention these two men to you this morning, neither of whom you will know or have heard of? Well, you will have realised that there is a lot of rejoicing in today's readings – and many people have been full of rejoicing for the difference these two men made in the lives of countless human beings. So today I want us to think of those who have made and continue to make a difference to us and our lives – and to rejoice.

Today we heard a lovely letter written by Paul to Christians living in Philippi, Greece, while he was in prison. Paul was concerned that the Philippians' faith and their love for one another should not fail, as they, too, may have been facing persecution – "Rejoice in the Lord always. I will say it again: Rejoice. Let your gentleness be evident to all. The Lord is near. Do not be anxious. Whatever is right, pure, lovely, admirable, think about such things". Think about such people.

And then our Gospel reading – the strange story of the wedding banquet. You might be thinking what a group of ungrateful family and friends the king and his son were lumbered with. But then you might feel sympathy for the poor man who wasn't wearing the right wedding clothes and was chucked out by the bouncers. A bit of explanation is needed. As one commentator puts it: "There is a great sense of opposition and rejection about this passage. All of us can count ourselves amongst the guests who have accepted the invitation once it is thrown open to those walking in any direction and with a good or a bad past life. And it is quite a celebration, stretched over all time and space, heaven and earth". But then what about the last part of the story? "It was the practice of kings to provide all their guests with a suitable robe, and they had special servants in charge of the huge wardrobes. So, with wedding garments provided free of charge, there is deliberate insult in the guest who has decided not to wear his, but who remains in the filthy rags of his old life. Jesus wants his hearers (and Matthew his readers) to be under no illusion. Accepting the honour of a place at the banquet obliges us to also accept the grace to be renewed and transformed.

Priest and Bishop Mark Wood; Teacher Chris Nicholson – both these men, both educators in their own different ways, helped to transform the lives of many. Mark, by his faithful preaching, brought many in Africa and in this country, to know Christ more. Chris, by his dedicated and unique style of teaching, helped to transform the lives of many students with a love of the English language. Here truly was someone who could and did transform a pig's ear into a silk purse, as the saying goes!

God wants to invite all to the Church of Christ and feed them here with love and rejoicing. But – there is a but – we do have to remember that if we say yes to God, we do need, in humility, to let him reclothe us in the right and proper manner. That is why we always start our worship by saying sorry to God, hearing his forgiveness, and letting him clothe us once again with robes of righteousness.

And thankfully God still sends, commissions, people to help us on our journey. In particular we give thanks for Flis Banks today who begins her ministry as a Reader in the Church and we look forward to her ministry amongst us. Flis would say that she has felt called by God to assist in the church and we are enormously grateful to her for responding to that call. So we thank God today for the people who have guided and helped us. Thank him for those who still help and encourage us, so that we can really celebrate and enjoy our worship and our life together as disciples of Christ – and truly rejoice.