

**“Without Words” - Preaching the gospel of Jesus Christ in a secular age –
Mary Forryan Centre, Hinckley, Saturday April 30 2016**

Session 1

In considering how to preach the gospel of Our Lord in a secular age, we must initially ask ourselves some pertinent questions:

What do we mean by ‘preaching’? Who does it and to whom? Why and where do they do it and then how?

Pope Francis said – *“The joy of the gospel is for all people; no one can be excluded.”* “preach the gospel, and if necessary, use words. To preach the gospel is to tell people about Jesus Christ, the Son of God, to communicate him and his message to them. In the beginning of course, the task fell to his first disciples, so why did they do it? Because this is what he had told them to do – *“go out to the whole world and proclaim the good news; make disciples of all the nations...”* (Mk.16:16) *“You did not choose me, no, I chose you, and I commissioned you to go out and bear fruit, fruit that will last”* (Jn.15:16) And he prayed that they would do it: *“I pray not only for these, but for those also who through their words will believe in me. May they all be one. Father may they be one in us as you are in me and I am in you, so that the world may believe that it was you who sent me.”* (17:20-21). Jesus’ first disciples, his personal friends who had been with him, who had betrayed his friendship and abandoned his love, but who had been forgiven, transformed in the most spectacular way in receiving the Spirit from their now Risen Lord, were full of joy and fire and enthusiasm. Nothing could stop them; they were bursting with him and his word –they believed that he was the Saviour of the world and wanted to tell everyone everywhere. Has anyone here ever had that feeling? So they went and preached and the reaction was spectacular – ‘thousands were converted’ in a day, we are told in Acts. Seems a bit ‘over-the-top for us but many of these people were looking for salvation. For the Jewish people to whom Peter preached, it meant that God had come to fulfil the promises he had made in their tradition to redeem them and that, in the short term this would mean ridding them of Roman occupation and subservience to a foreign power. So they were ‘up’ for it’. To pagan people it was a bit more problematic. They did not have this tradition of worshipping one God whom they believed had always been with them. There were many ‘god’s’ and where not, the ‘god’ of their own minds and wisdom. Hence Paul’s mission to show them that the truth

they were looking for could actually be found in the life and person of Jesus Christ. And when they did not speak it, they wrote it down in the gospel accounts or in the letters: Luke speaks of it in measured terms at the very beginning of his gospel and the Acts of the Apostles – *“I, in my turn after carefully going over the whole story from the beginning have decided to write an ordered account for you, Theophilus, so that your excellency may learn how well founded the teaching is that you have received.”* (Lk.1:4) and St. John at the very end of his gospel story says: *These are recorded so that you may believe that Jesus is the Christ, the Son of God, and that believing this, you may have life through his name.”* (Jn.20:31). He continues in his first letter to the infant church in an even more direct way: *“Something which has existed from the beginning, that we have heard, that we have seen with our own eyes; that we have watched and touched with our hands: the Word who is life, this is our subject. This life was made visible; we saw it and we are giving our testimony, telling you of the eternal life which was with the Father and has been made visible to us. What we have seen and heard we are telling you, so that you too may be in union with us, as we are in union with the Father and with his Son, Jesus Christ.”* (1 Jn.1:1-4).

This message was not to be ‘imposed’, and there was to be no indoctrination; it was rather an invitation from Jesus to follow him and live in his way. The activity of the early disciples was thus twofold: once the preaching or ‘kerygma’, had been concluded and people had accepted that Jesus was their Saviour and been baptised, the next stage was called ‘didache’ or teaching – in other words continually explaining what this life should mean. We find this very much in the letters of Paul and the other disciples. These two distinct activities remain in the Christian Church but they have become blurred, because when we speak to so-called ‘Christian believers’ today we can no longer presume that we are talking to people about a God they know and love. For some, it is as if we are speaking an entirely foreign language, even to our own people. It would now appear that there is no longer a tradition of faith and belief, nor has there been for some time. The response to this in the past from the church, the so-called ‘community of believers’ has been for people to withdraw into the ‘ghetto’ of their own minds proclaiming the church as the ‘lighthouse of truth’, ‘the bark of Peter’ riding through the storm. These images may seem strange to us now but for centuries they fuelled and sustained the Catholic mind and cut us off from other people. We are mindful also of the acceptance of the gospel in different ways in different cultures and that how, in

the West, the situation is entirely different from what you might find in other places. So, for example today in some parts of Africa and India, faith and devotion are much deeper than over here; that is why it is good to have so many people from these cultures coming among us and teaching us how to live simply with God – the missionary shoe is now certainly on the other foot!

We need to remind ourselves that this situation of non-belief and indifference, in this country is nothing new. Consider these words written by T.S.Eliot in his great poem “The Rock”, as long ago as 1934:

*“I journeyed to London, to the timekept City,
Where the River flows, with foreign flotations.
There I was told: we have too many churches,
And too few chop-houses.*

*There I was told: Let the vicars retire.
Men do not need the Church
In the place where they work,
but where they spend their Sundays*

*In the City, we need no bells: Let them waken the suburbs.
I journeyed to the suburbs, and there I was told:
We toil for six days, on the seventh we must motor
to Hindhead, or Maidenhead.*

*If the weather is foul we stay at home and read the papers.
In industrial districts, there I was told of economic laws.
In the pleasant countryside, there it seemed
That the country now is only fit for picnics,
And the Church does not seem to be wanted
In country or in suburb and in the town, only for important weddings”*

During the war years and the post-war period, there seemed to be a need for and a return to organised religion as many people were grateful for having been ‘saved’ from the horrors meted out to them and where preaching and teaching were given their proper place, but this did not last too long. When the 60’s the so-called ‘me’ decade came along, bringing with it, a breaking out of the constraints of the past socially and religiously, a concentration on personal fulfilment and a rather cynical loss of faith in governments that were going to war for no real purpose, the practise of believing and its association with church-going, changed enormously.

What was the response to this? Preaching was exercised in two very different manners: in 'fear' or 'marketing'. Remember the Catholic Missions' where 'the fear of God' was put into you by some cruel missionary. In my opinion these events were the pre-cursors of the 'horror' films and no doubt responding to the human need to be frightened out of their wits! "You'se will all be damned". People would come out of the mission sermon and ask each other how it had been for them. "Fantastic; it frit me to death"! But ask yourself this: How could you possibly ever come to love a God whom you were told was spying on you to get you? ("I might not see you, but God sees you"!) How could you possibly look forward to the prospect of living with this God for ever?

Other approach was 'marketing' – i.e. believing in God will be so much better for you. (*Tell the story when the two came together in the Bull Ring and 'Arthur Blessit' and the 'angels'!*) As a consequence of all this 'marketing' the sort of life of discipleship became prevalent that we accept Jesus and follow him because it will be good for us. Here is a form of faith that does not include 'the other', but is offered to us as for our own benefit. (*Tell the story of the lovely ecumenical moment in the football stadium in 2008.*) Some people believe in a rather 'direct' manner which Catholics often find difficult to accept without being so extreme and it must be said, however, that many so-called 'evangelical' people who profess their faith in these ways are more than often the most generous, hospitable and welcoming of all, so we must not disparage them

There was an attempt some 35 years ago in what came to be called the 'catechetical movement' to make all religious preaching and teaching 'relevant', or 'meaningful'. These were very much the 'buzz words'. Some of you may remember them! We were told that faith fitted exactly into our world and our lives, and strenuous attempts were made to show that you can 'experience' God. Everyone was quoting St. Paul and putting up posters! The goal of preaching was seen to be 'getting people into church' so that they could 'get something out of it', but this is not really what preaching is, certainly according to Pope Francis.

The fact is that as a society, it appears that we no longer have the need for God or the desire to love and serve him, and that seem to be able to manage quite well without him. Pope Francis comments in 'The Joy of the Gospel': "*The great danger in today's world, pervaded as it is by consumerism, is its desolation and anguish, born of a complacent yet covetous heart, the feverish*

pursuit of frivolous pleasures, and a blunted conscience. Whenever our interior life becomes caught up in its own interests and concerns, there is no longer room for others, no place for the poor. God's voice is no longer heard, the quiet joy of his love is no longer felt, and the desire to do good fades."

A huge sociological change has come over us in the past 40 years and its effects have been devastating for the preaching of the gospel. Bishop James used to say at every ordination – “people are itching to hear the Good News” –they are not! Even in the book we have been using for Lent, ‘Walk with Me’, it said recently: *“people are crying out to hear the gospel and to be set free from their ignorance about God. When we share the gospel with those who haven't heard it before, we dispel ignorance and darkness.”* Actually we don't and they're not – this is the problem. Many people are quite happy in a life without God and they are not anxious, angry or bitter. They are perfectly content and what is more thoroughly good-living and nice people. . *(Tell the story of the 'watershed moment' in 1975)* This can dispel our assumptions.

We therefore have to ask ourselves what are we trying to do in our preaching in this secular world, a world that apparently can live quite easily without God, to which organised faith seems an anachronism, and the notion of a ‘gracious’, self-giving love, is out of tune with the tempo of modern living. There is also to be noted the rather sinister undertone of what Pope Benedict called ‘aggressive secularism’ – the attempt thinly veiled to rid the country of any religious influence whatsoever. Much of this comes down to a fear of ‘control’, where it is presumed that religions ‘control’ people lives to such an extent that they part company from the state, and don't toe the line. The gospel of Jesus exposes hypocrisy, promotes truth and justice, kindness and self-giving to the full extent and a love without limit. There is no doubt that the Catholic Church in particular ‘controlled’ people's lives in the past and we have seen all too graphically the disastrous effects of this, as we now see in the attempts of extreme Muslim groups to do the same and brainwash people into the most abhorrent forms of behaviour with empty promises of future happiness. It also has to be said that people, can feel safe when they are being ‘controlled’ because at least they know where they are and what the rules are. There can be, however, a viciousness emerging from within and expressing itself in word or deed when stimulated by this scenario.

Modern life has changed us enormously and affected how we might ‘hear’ the gospel or ‘hear anything. It is a life of instant gratification and thus expectation.

Freddy Mercury sang about it years ago: “I want it all, and I want it now”. We go for the ‘soundbite’ rather than the explanation, the ‘highlights’ rather than the whole thing, ‘knowledge’ is available to us at the touch of the button and we all claim to be experts at whatever because we have read it upon the internet. This has made many of us arrogant and demanding of or for explanation before we might be willing to commit ourselves to a different way of life –just like the famous doubting Thomas: ‘unless I see the marks made by the nails, I refuse to believe.’ We live very busy lives or so we tell ourselves but we never question what our ‘busyness’ means. We try to fit everything in – the ‘culture of the diary’ as I call it, and a life with God, such as it is falls very definitely into this category. It is no longer a life choice but something we return to if we can find the time. A lady told me recently after a funeral: “I might come back to faith when I’ve retired and I’m not so busy”. Nightly we are told that ‘you are worth it’ on the TV and the focus has moved very much onto ourselves and our own needs, opinions and ambitions. We are fed a diet of banality and the promise of something really special happening – look at the number of gambling programmes on late at night, or the glitzy quizzes, or programmes on health or arguments between people set up for it. Social media have completely transformed how we do things and think about life, with the self very much at the centre of everything. There seems to be a continual need for extra stimulation and excitement with the proposal put before us that all this is available at a price - we have to buy it and buy into it. We find ourselves looking for entertainment in faith and enlightenment without actually wanting it to change how we see or do things. Science and its developments have created a different view of life: everything can be analysed and broken down into its constituent parts and we don’t need a ‘God’ anymore; we can make our own lives ourselves and create our own future. Every day we hear of people being martyred for their faith in Jesus Christ, or displaced and driven from their homes, but somehow we have become immune to this. It’s a pity and quite awful, but it’s not happening to us. We don’t have to pay a price for living the gospel like they do, so it doesn’t have the same significance for us. What is very difficult to accept is that not only do people not believe but that some people who used to believe no longer do so. They are not angry with anyone, and no one has driven them away, but somehow something in them has died. More to the point, they are not potential ‘returnees’ as some bishops seem to think- they are not coming back to the practice of their faith and remain thoroughly nice and good-living people. Their morals are quite as sure as those of believers but

they do not have the same reason for behaving in the way they do and are in fact quite content without any faith or religion in their lives.

Many people associate 'believing' or responding to the preaching with 'going to church' or 'belonging' to a church, which might seem to be the next rational step, and that may be true. There are those who are angry or disillusioned with their church for whatever reason who simply cannot stomach it any more or those who have just become disinterested. A journalist called Cole Moreton who writes for what used to be 'The Independent', wrote a book some years ago called "Is God still an Englishman" about the decline of the Church of England, but in fact it applies to all Christian churches.

We didn't stop going to church because of spiritual apathy or a rejection of the ways of God, or any of those things the preachers like to accuse us of. Well, maybe some of us did but most of us just found better things to do.

He singles out two factors: the rise of 'individualism' during the Thatcher years and the advent of Sunday trading as somehow accelerating a process that had already begun.

"Robin Inskip, Viscount Caldecote, whose job it was to put names forward for the Archbishop of Canterbury (George Carey) said: "the primary task of the Christian Church is to preach the gospel and to proclaim the 'good news'. There is also a duty to your neighbour. If you are going to be able to support the weak, somebody needs to be relatively wealthy. It is important that the Christian Church should support the concept of wealth creation and look carefully at the use made of riches acquired and how they are shared. It should comment on social problems and point out what needs to be put right, but it should be careful in saying precisely how those problems should be solved." English faith was being privatised, just like the Gas Board. We could all buy shares in whatever kind of god we fancied, or not; it was a matter of choice, the golden word of the Thatcher years.....the Thatcherite version of 'love thy neighbour' was to leave thy neighbour alone to mind his own business.

Sunday trading began in 1994 and had a cataclysmic effect on church-going. There was a genuine expectation among church leaders that the numbers might rise again, like the Lord, if the message was put across clearly. Instead, for some strange reason, people started to believe that looking at nice things in pleasantly lit, warm shops, and getting an instant buzz from buying them, and sitting down for a coffee and cake with their companions before looking at some

more nice things were more attractive than sitting in a cold and gloomy stone barn being shouted at by a fish-faced man who called you a sinner. Fancy that....In the 90's recession, the British responded by working longer hours than the people of any other country in Europe, which had an impact on the weekend; we were too tired, too frantic catching up with essential chores or too occupied with work that had to be brought home to think about eating, let alone going out to church. The Sunday roast fell out of favour. So did the habit of staying together in one place all day. A decade after the shopping and drinking laws were changed, researchers found that 80% of adults took a trip on a Sunday to visit friends, family, museums, gardens, parks, galleries, cinemas, shopping centres and sports events...almost anywhere except a place of worship."

This is exactly the scenario put before us by T.S.Eliot in 1934.

*"Why should men love the Church? Why should they love her laws ?
She tells them of Life and Death, and of all that they would forget.
She is tender where they would be hard, and hard where they like to be soft.
She tells them of Evil and Sin, and other unpleasant facts.
They constantly try to escape from the darkness outside and within
by dreaming of systems so perfect that no one will need to be good.
But the man that is will shadow the man that pretends to be.
And the Son of Man was not crucified once for all,
The blood of the martyrs not shed once for all,
The lives of the Saints not given once for all:
But the Son of Man is crucified always
And there shall be Martyrs and Saints."*

For all of this, however, there is still something else to say. As long ago as 2000 when he was being inaugurated as the archbishop of Westminster, Cardinal Cormac Murphy O'Connor said, "what the world needs to hear is another voice". Somehow, for all this development and sophistication, something is still missing from the modern ego-centric life. When speaking to a group of priests at Oscott College last summer, Bishop Robert Byrne said, "we are living in a society which has become wearied with its own culture". So many people have become disillusioned and bored or even frightened. In an article in last weekend's 'Observer' magazine it was argued that 'despite the plethora of high-intensity entertainment constantly at our disposal, we are still bored,' and that this is due to 'overstimulation': 'the more entertained we are the more

entertainment we need in order to feel satisfied.’ Look again at the words of T.S.Eliot to illustrate that this is nothing new:

*“O weariness of men who turn from God
To the grandeur of your mind and the glory of your action,
To arts and inventions and daring enterprises,
To schemes of human greatness thoroughly discredited,
Binding the earth and the water to your service,
Exploiting the seas and developing the mountains,
Dividing the stars into common and preferred,
Engaged in devising the perfect refrigerator,
Engaged in working out a rational morality,
Engaged in printing as many books as possible,
Plotting of happiness and flinging empty bottles,
Turning from your vacancy to fevered enthusiasm
For nation or race or what you call humanity.”*

In the modern era, the founder of the L’Arche movement, Jean Vanier, puts it thus: *“What are most people really seeking? It is joy, and joy is what is so terribly missing. It is buried under the understandable preoccupation with staying in work and holding together the fragments of life. But it is tarnished even more by the frustrations built up by the images of an unattainable consumer culture which dominate commercial centres, television and the internet. There is not joy in any of this yet it is joy for which most people thirst. Joy springs up when people work together for unity and peace”*... *“Even in our time, it is still joy which attracts us. Jesus says, ‘I give you my joy so that your joy may become complete.’*

So maybe this message of “anyone who wants to save his life will lose it and anyone who loses his life for my sake and for the sake of the gospel will find it” does in fact have real relevance after all and the need to make it known, whatever the response might be, is still as paramount as when Jesus commissioned his first friends to do so on the mountain before his ascension. To finish this section with a smile I will tell you the story of an old lady who died here last year aged 102. She lived in a home and asked the minister who brought her Holy Communion each Friday a favour for the First Friday weekend her parish priest came to her with the Lord: “You know when he comes on a Friday. You needn’t come on a Sunday. I don’t want these here thinking I’m too ’oly”!

Session 2

So how might we preach the gospel of Jesus to this secular society, and how might we communicate his message?

Teachers and preachers will spend endless time in libraries or now on the internet to find the right words, right power point presentation to get the message of Jesus over to people, ‘the resource’ that will speak the words for them and save them having to look inside themselves, but in so doing, they miss one very important thing: the message is us, all of us. St. Augustine said: “the evidence for God from someone else is not what he says but what, believing in God, he uniquely is.” We are the ‘resource’; we are the ‘preachers’ all of us. Think of Cardinal Newman’s great prayer..... “*God has created to do him some definite service; he has committed some work to me which he has not committed to another. I have my mission; I may never know it in this life but I shall be told it in the next. I am a link in a chain, a bond of connection between persons. He has not created me for naught. I shall do good, I shall do his work. I shall be an angel of peace, a preacher of truth in my own place even while not intending it, if I do but keep his commandments*” We are “preaching without actually being aware of it”. If we do not believe ourselves, if we do not love this Lord we are supposed to be telling others about, then our preaching is of no consequence. We are, as St. Paul says, no more than a ‘cymbal clashing and a gong booming’. Think of that incident on the Emmaus road with Jesus’ friends after his resurrection – “did not our hearts burn within us, as we listened to him on the road?” Ask yourself, does my heart burn within me? May God have mercy on me, a sinner, but I can tell you that after all these years my heart still does, and that gives rise to things I could not possibly think up for myself. It is a frightening experience but very real. You feel forced to speak this word and yet you know that as soon as you have opened your mouth, you have condemned yourself. I remember the most profound experience of another person’s faith that happened to me when I met an old Irish farmer called Eamon, sitting at his twin sister’s bed as she lay dying in the LOROS hospice. He told me that he himself had recovered from a cancer that had been life threatening. Was he relieved? No he said, “I was so disappointed, because I was so looking forward to seeing him..”

As a friend said to me recently, “God is in the love of people that surround you.” To preach the gospel we have to live it and be seen to live it, through our own heart and our own conviction. I am the resource; I am the messenger – cf.

Isaiah: “whom shall I send? Who will be my messenger? I replied, Here I am, send me”. They have to see the love and life of God alive in us. Not just about being ‘good people’ - anyone can do that, but why, and how far are you prepared to go to live like this? Last weekend, Bishop Patrick began his pastoral letter to us thus: *“Loving others as Christ loves us, is the very heart of Christian discipleship and it was the example of love in action that led to the amazing growth of the Church in her earliest days. Daily life in the Roman empire in which Jesus and the apostles lived, was often harsh and brutal, and sociologists have discovered that it was primarily the more caring and humane way of life of the early Christians, which made such an impression on wider society that attracted many people to Christianity. It was the Christian love and fellowship that was extended to the vulnerable, children, slaves, foreigners and the sick and the respect shown to women that led to many becoming Christians. Christian selflessness in the face of plagues and sickness and the practical care Christians showed to each other, were compelling factors which drew many people to faith in Jesus Christ.”*

Pope Francis alludes to this as well: *“Ordinary pastoral ministry seeks to help believers to grow spiritually so that they can respond to God’s love ever more fully in their lives.....Christians have the duty to proclaim the gospel without excluding anyone. Instead of seeming to impose new obligations, they should appear as a people who wish to share their joy, who point to a horizon of beauty and who invite others to a delicious banquet. It is not by proselytizing that the Church grows, but by attraction.”*

Many years ago a wonderful priest called Fr. Jock Dalrymple gave us a retreat at which he said the following.... *“How seriously do we take the everyday mystical union with Our Lord? In some parishes you would think that what was being promoted was a ‘thing’ called Catholicism, whereas we are meant not to be promoting an ‘it’ but a ‘him’, Jesus Christ, a real person who offers personal union with himself to all who choose to call themselves Christians. When a parish ceases to excite people to that wonderful offer and potters around instead in the bingo-disco-raffle field, it has become thin and almost counter-productive. What the Church exists to promote is our personal discipleship with Christ and not the rather impersonal thing-like way of life called being a good Catholic. There is a burning personal friendship with Christ on offer; it is a pity when we obscure it with intermediate church concerns.”*

And Jean Vanier said virtually the same thing years later: *“I believe that the true sign of sanctity today lies in the ‘sacrament’ of encounter. Faith is not the preaching of an ideal life, but above all a meeting with one person: Jesus... this requires a transparency, a purification of our lives. We aren’t here either to change or convert the other. That is the work of Jesus because faith is a gift of God and not an expression of power and superiority.”* This sentiment is echoed by Pope Francis in his document “The Joy of the Gospel”:

“I invite all Christians, everywhere, at this very moment, to a renewed personal encounter with Jesus Christ, or at least an openness to letting him encounter them...The Lord does not disappoint those who take this risk...Thanks solely to this encounter – or renewed encounter – with God’s love, which blossoms into an enriching friendship, we are liberated from our narrowness and self-absorption. We become fully human when we become more than human, when we let God bring us beyond ourselves in order to attain the fullest truth of our being.”

We believe in this Jesus because we have met him, even when we might not have realised it or in the most unexpected places, and want others to ask ‘why are these people like this?’ So how do we bring about that ‘encounter’, how do we preach and ‘facilitate’ hearing - i.e. bring people to a place or situation where they can hear the word and maybe respond to it. We need to go back to the beginning and presume nothing. But we also need to know that faith is intellectually respectable as well as personally engaging. No one person can change the world; desire comes from the heart of each person.

Think again about Jean Vanier’s words: *“The new evangelisation, it seems to me, doesn’t consist only in seeking personal conversion through announcing Jesus; it must invite people to enter into a community where people love each other. This means offering places where people celebrate together and experience a feeling of belonging. Joy comes from this sense of belonging to a community, of feeling good together despite our differences, of feeling that we are no longer alone with our problems and our griefs...A healthy community must be open and help each of its members to grow in a real inner freedom. Hospitality is vital for any Christian community, because it teaches us to welcome each person as they are, humbly and with respect.”* ...*“At the heart of society’s ills is a call to create more community. And Christians are surely invited to dare take the initiatives which will shine a new love into our troubled world.”*

Again this is nothing new: T.S.Eliot alluded to it in 1934:

*What life have you if you have not life together?
There is no life that is not in community,
And no community not lived in praise of God.
Even the anchorite who meditates alone,
For whom the days and nights repeat the praise of God,
Prays for the Church, the Body of Christ incarnate.
And now you live dispersed on ribbon roads,
And no man knows or cares who is his neighbour
Unless his neighbour makes too much disturbance,
But all dash to and fro in motor cars,
Familiar with the roads and settled nowhere.
Nor does the family even move about together,
But every son would have his motor cycle,
And daughters ride away on casual pillions.*

Pope Francis adds: *“An evangelizing community gets involved by word and deed in people’s daily lives; it bridges distances, it is willing to abase itself if necessary, and it embraces human life, touching the suffering flesh of Christ in others. Evangelizers thus take on the ‘smell of the sheep’ and the sheep are willing to hear their voice. An evangelizing community is also supportive, standing by people at every step of the way, no matter how difficult or lengthy this might prove to be...Finally and evangelizing community is filled with joy; it knows how to rejoice always.”*

To preach the word, therefore, involves an invitation to others to into a life with the Lord which we already experience and want to share, and to do so within a personal and simultaneously community setting. So how do we do this? It cannot be done by creating a climate of fear and control, nor by ‘marketing’. No one is brought to genuine and faith and love in this manner. This can only be done through the persons that we are and the way in which we live the gospel. The title of this day is “Without Words”, and it comes from Pope Francis echoing the expression of his namesake: ‘preach the gospel, and, if necessary, use words. Think of the prophecy of Isaiah as to who the Messiah he would be and how he would live: *“Here is my servant whom I uphold, my chosen one in whom my soul delights...he does not cry out or shout aloud, or make his voice heard in the streets; he does not break the crushed reed nor quench the wavering flame. Faithfully, he brings true*

justice; he will neither waver nor be crushed.” (Is.42:1-4) and then Our Lord’s own instruction in the Sermon on the Mount: “when you give alms do not have it trumpeted before you...when you give alms your left hand must not know what your right hand is doing...when you pray, pray to your Father in secret...when you fast put oil on your head and wash your face so that no one will know you are fasting...love your enemies and pray for those who persecute you”.(Mt.6)

If we live this gospel ourselves, the time will surely come when others cannot fail to notice. Look at the story of Zacchaeus from the gospels. He was a rich man, who had made his money out of defrauding his own people as a tax collector, but we are told, he was ‘anxious to see what sort of man Jesus was’. Why? If he had all that he needed, why would he be anxious? Perhaps all he had was not actually enough. Perhaps there was something else he was looking for even if he may not have known precisely what it was. When we live the gospel, we can “intrigue” a person, nonplus them, put them a little off-guard, unnerve them and maybe stimulate their interest, by making them ask “why do these people act like this?” Celebrate a funeral, baptism or marriage and don’t charge a fee” Get into the habit of not charging for anything. In a world where a friend told me some years ago ‘everything has an invoice’ this will surely have some effect, as also if you ‘go the extra mile’ for someone and do things you are not required to do. Furthermore, if you are good and kind to someone who has made your life difficult, (i.e. ‘love your enemies’) eventually they might ask why? Think of other practical ways of ‘preaching’ – Faithfulness in service, particularly in the Eucharistic ministry. Never let anyone down, never show off, be committed and humble. Quietly seek and live the truth. Do not be afraid to speak up for what is right without shouting. If we are faithful, truthful, generous, giving and forgiving when we do not need to be, this will surely pose a question for those who do not believe. Jesus came to save the world not just to give us a nice idea of how to behave. Excitement –is it still possible, even in matters of faith, but it cannot be manufactured. We need the gospel not as a blueprint but a living reality – live it! Jean Vanier goes on: *“It is through my own church that Jesus has called me to bring good news to the poor and proclaim the liberation of those who are captive and oppressed. I am grateful to the Church for the nourishment of the sacraments, for the word of God, and for the inspiration given by the successor of Peter. I am far too aware of my own poverty, weakness and infidelity to judge anyone else for theirs. Nevertheless, I am disappointed by the*

loss of vitality and enthusiasm among members of my church which makes it hard for them to commit themselves to the poor so that they can bring them the good news of Jesus. Too few ecclesiastical authorities affirm that faith in Jesus is intimately bound to this commitment.”

“The people...who have so often been rejected and despised – are not God’s “poor little children”, whom we have to look after. They have a special mission to humanity and to the Church. They have a gift to convey. They help us to discover a new vision for society and for the Church. It will take decades to see all the consequences of listening to the least powerful among us and allowing ourselves to be led by them....But if the Church is to discover and live the riches that the Council offers, if what the Holy Spirit is preparing is to come to birth, something defensive, in-turned and narrow in the Church’s own vision today has to disappear. .. Perhaps we have to become humbler yet before his prayer for the unity of all Christians and all the men and women of the world can be realised.”

“I dare to suggest that the mystery to which we are called is to live like Jesus, who became small and weak. He is hidden in those who are humiliated, in the poorest, the foolish and the weak of our societies, all those whom God has chosen to confound the intellectual and powerful of the earth – and also, it has to be said, of the Church itself”

This is the hallmark of the work of SPANNED which you will see practically demonstrated this afternoon. SPANNED is not just about helping people with special needs but enabling them to ‘contribute’ to the lives of all of us, thus discovering human dignity and self-respect. When we pioneered the principle of people with learning difficulties as ‘preachers of the Word’ as long ago as 1978 – and you will see precisely how we did it then this afternoon – it was a shattering experience for so many people and yet such an encouraging and inspiring one. Much of this ‘preaching’ or ‘contribution’ is done without words.

The liturgy is also a very powerful means of preaching – people may come to a baptism, wedding, funeral or some festival who have never been in a church before. How the liturgy of that particular event is carried out, especially if courteous steps are taken to include them, can have a great effect, and certainly ‘intrigue’ them. This is particularly the case where children are involved. The Vatican Council promoted what it called “active participation in the liturgy”, and it is through this participation that we come to see the meaning of what we

profess and proclaim. This is especially true of children. In a similar fashion to the work carried out by SPANNED, we are not in the business of ‘entertainment’ or helping them or anyone to ‘get something out of’ their acts of worship but of encouraging them to speak the word, live the actions and be the ‘preachers’ themselves. Many people have come to an appreciation of a life of faith through the faith and prayer of their children. What we are doing as preachers – and I do mean all of us – is so often no more than creating the opportunity, or ‘facilitating’ as we may call it, for the Lord to do what he needs to do. Then don’t be surprised if he does it! The bringing of people together for all sorts of occasions can be the means of this happening. Don’t disparage your Christmas Fair or summer barbecue or the odd play put on by your young people. What is important is not withdrawing from the world but engaging in it, understanding it rather than vilifying it, as Our Lord says, being ‘in the world but not of the world’. The preacher has to know how his audience think and how they live their lives. He or she must not be apart from that; otherwise their message will have no significance. Here is an example. (*Give the background to “Mother Mary” and show the DVD of the first three songs. This was a serious attempt at evangelisation, at communicating the message in an entirely different way, and the first thing was to demonstrate that we had actually seen and understand how this modern life was making people really feel.*)

Three years ago we undertook a project here called ‘The Servant Church’. The idea was to try to see what sort of ‘church’ Jesus envisaged and how, through the centuries, that church had not as yet been realised. We concluded that the Church of Christ would first and foremost have to be a church of service, after the example of him who came not to be served but to serve. So what does it take to be a ‘servant’? What would make anyone want to ‘serve’ another person? To ‘serve’ does not mean to be ‘subservient’, namely to subjugate yourself to the will and whim of another. The only reason you might want to serve someone else is that impact they have had on you, the respect and love they have engendered in you. Often this springs from a sense of appreciation of what they have done and are doing for you. As St. Augustine once said: ‘he who has loved me, has made me lovable’. We will only be a servant Church when we have discovered once again or maybe even for the very first time, the person of our Saviour precisely as our Saviour and Lord, and found within ourselves a desire to love and honour him. This is not dependent on the teachings of popes and bishops, but comes from the heart and soul of each individual who lives in community with others who are of a similar mind and heart depending on their

personal and social circumstances and who are willing to place themselves as the 'disposal' of this Lord without fear.

Fr. Hans Kung, one of the great 'minds' of the last century, put it thus in his last book as he calls it, "Can we save the Catholic Church?" *"Everywhere I go, I meet deeply committed people in parishes and hospitals, schools and charitable institutions, who in their practical day-to-day involvement in church life are following in the footsteps and in the spirit of the man from Nazareth. They are people who – notwithstanding their personal foibles – do much good for their neighbours and for the community, both within and without the boundaries of the Catholic Church. All over the world, I have met clergy working on the frontline, wearing themselves out in the service of others. I see innumerable men and women who offer support to young and old, to poor and sick people, to those who have been given a raw deal in life, to those who suffer under their own failures. This is not an idealistic vision of the Church or a mere Utopian projection, but an empirical fact that is confirmed by many other Catholics and Christians generally, and that explains why they, too, do not wish to leave or do away with the Church. And this is the Church with which I can still identify: the global community of committed believers, a community that extends beyond the narrow boundaries of individual denominations. This community of faith is the true Church."*

Yesterday, our beloved Bishop Malcolm, when speaking at Westminster Cathedral on the occasion of the 800th anniversary of the Dominican Order and the feast of St. Catherine of Siena, quoted her words: "do what God has meant you to do and you will set the world on fire". So dear friends don't douse the flame that burns in you or may once have and is now no more than a flicker – 'fan into a flame the gift I first gave you' says St. Paul. So let's not waste our love and energy getting angry at a church that disappoints us or we think continually gets things wrong – it always has and probably always will. Realise that we are all called to be the church, to make the servant church of Jesus Christ in the way that he wants, and that each of us is to be that 'preacher of truth in my own place, even while not intending it' as Cardinal Newman says, because we have allowed him to be our Lord, our God and we know why we need him to be our Saviour. You have been preaching the word already for so long, and you probably didn't realise that you were doing it, so keep doing it and may the God of peace be with you.

From a personal point of view, I have always found great inspiration and direction from the words of the worker priest, Henri Perrin, written in Paris in 1944 which I put on my ordination cards 41 years ago:

“There’s no solution for us to contribute except to give the utmost play to our lives and to dedicate ourselves to the human adventure according to the rules traced out for us by Christ: give, give and give again and never stop. Christ’s love is a personal love and I have felt its burning touch. Who could give me greater love than this? How could I love someone with another love? This revelation should be a source of constant joy and strength and trust – ‘good news’ that fills us with delight.”

Session 3

This is a practical demonstration of how to ‘preach’ the word by telling the very same story in five different ways. The story is how God created the world and how his creatures rejected him:

Easter Vigil – this is a piece of choral speaking for six voices and has been used to replace the endless readings we normally have at the Easter Vigil. It is short, sharp, and very dramatic

Creation – the method of using mime and music to accompany the words of scripture by people with learning difficulties was pioneered in the chapel of Mount St. Mary’s College, Spinkhill at the end of August in 1978. Here the Hinckley Sunshine Club present the story, using the words of David Kossoff (from “Bible Stories”) and the music of the Largo from Dvorak’s ‘New World Symphony’

Some Kind of Message – is a humorous play for children (and adults!) about how we celebrate Christmas. Two young people have a dream and wake up in heaven where they meet Archangel Michael, Archangel Gabriel (‘Gabe’) and ‘The Boss’, who gets very depressed at this time of year. The children recommend that the solution to the behaviour of their peers is to bring them ‘some kind of message’ and who better to do it only the angels themselves!

Mother Mary – was written in 2010 as a version of the Christmas Story performed to the songs of ABBA from ‘Mama Mia’, and has been hugely successful as a means of making the word known to people who might not normally encounter Him. Here is an extract from the DVD of the performance

in 2013 and is the song about God making the world and pleading not to be rejected

Dance of the Light – created and presented in the Millennium Year, this is the highlight of the work of SPANNED in the past 40 years. It is a version of the story of the life of Jesus ‘danced’ by a cast of 169 people, many with learning difficulties or physical disabilities, to the music of Bill Whelan’s ‘Riverdance’ and ‘The Seville Suite’. This is the opening sequence where God makes the world and we see his anguish as his people turn away.

After the demonstration there will be time for questions before we bring the day to its conclusion. Mention will be made of SPANNED’s latest project, “The Balm of Mercy” and how to access our material from the SPANNED website.

“Without Words...” – Bookstall

At our bookstall you may purchase any one of the following:

SPANNED quarterly magazine - £2 a copy or a minimum subscription of £10 (to include postage)

Mother Mary – the full script and libretto of the musical - £3

“A Man Came...” – the history of SPANNED from its beginnings to 1997 - £2

“Farewell Dear Friend” – a special tribute to Bishop James McGuinness - £3

“Remembering Mary” - a special tribute to Mary Forryan - £2

“Somehow Still Responsible” – a book of memorial poetry - £3

“Without Words...” – a modern parable about how a school bully is transformed by meeting a very special young man - £1

On-line resources – (from our website) www.spanned.org.uk

“Without Words...” – a full script of today’s presentation

“The Servant Church” - was a project in Hinckley in 2013-2014, tracing the history of the church and asking could it ever be as Jesus intended it to be?

Children’s Liturgy – this is a selection of Sunday Liturgies which might be presented at Mass by children and will need to be adapted if used

SPANNED Projects – the full script of SPANNED’s major work of spiritual formation over the past few years:

The Story – a catechesis on the parables of Jesus

Saints in the making – reflecting on the stories of particular saints and how we are all called to be ‘holy’ ourselves

The Year of Faith – how we presented and produced material for the special Year

Home is a Holy Place – catechesis of the project initiated by our bishops – we were the only people to do so systematically!

Messengers of Joy – taken from Pope Francis’ exhortation, ‘preach the gospel and, if necessary, use words’

Drama

Here is a selection of scripts of specially written plays which could be used as means of ‘preaching’ or teaching’:

First Witnesses – an Easter play about the women at the tomb. In this format it was presented over several days in Holy Week during the liturgies, but could also be used as one piece

Second Chance – this Easter play concerns the disciples who abandoned Jesus and were hoping that they might be given a ‘second chance’ to put it right

Who Cares About Australia – was a very ambitious project in 2003 written in conjunction with a group of young people (in the dining room of a hotel in Lourdes!). It imagines a scenario where five young people offer to use their gap year (instead of going to Australia!) to run a parish that no longer has a resident priest. It is a deeply moving and also quite possible scenario for the future

Dance of the Light- SPANNED’s never to be forgotten millennium presentation of Our Lord’s life in dance and movement to the music of Bill Whelan

Just for Love – a play specially written for Midnight Mass in 1999. In some ways it was quite outrageous, but it did get underneath the thinking of people who have no idea about God

Some Kind of Message – a children’s play for Christmas – two children find themselves in heaven and meet a very depressed ‘Boss’ because none of his creation ever take any notice of him!

‘Scrooge’ – a modern version of the traditional story written with narrators and performed by people with learning difficulties

The Best Jobs – Trevor is an angel fed up with being ‘passed over’ for the best jobs and having to ‘guard’ some very unappreciative children. But Michael has a big surprise for him...

In Service of the Truth – a play specially written for the 250th anniversary of St. Peter’s parish featuring the lives of Mother Teresa, Fr. Jerzy Popieluszko and Brother Roger