

## IRVINE WATSON AND GOD'S KINGDOM

York Minster

Monday July 18<sup>th</sup> 2016

© The Rt Revd Dr Stephen Platten

'Take care – I think that's what we're meant to say.' Often those would be Irvine's final words as I left number 19, Main Street, Fulford to go on my way. In those few words was encapsulated much of Irvine's remarkable pattern of life. 'Take care', he knew was no more than a cliché, but also in knowing such a cliché, one could see that right up until his final breath, Irvine *lived in this world* and not in the past. But second, in using the phrase in that way, it bore witness to Irvine's enduring humour. Indeed, what I've missed most in these past weeks are our telephone conversations. They were amply spiced with humour and wisdom. I always felt better after speaking to him. Then finally, the sentiment of 'take care' was real to Irvine. Irvine did himself always take care. He always bothered about *people*.

So from where and what, in the Christian gospel, did Irvine draw his inspiration? What was it that fashioned his long and rich life? Much is captured in that brief reading from St. Paul's Letter to the Corinthians. 'Listen, I will tell you a mystery! We shall not all die, but we shall be changed, in the twinkling of an eye, at the last trumpet.' Even in that brief extract, both God's eternity and his transforming grace are made crystal clear. 'We shall not all die, but we shall (all) be changed.' The Christian life speaks of a stability, an equilibrium within creation. Despite the extraordinary unpredictability of life – and we've seen plenty of that in these past weeks – despite this, God is constant. It's there in those beautiful words from Lamentations: 'The steadfast love of the Lord never ceases; his mercies never come to an end; they are new every morning.'

This was the life that Irvine manifested. Over the twenty-six years I knew him, I suppose I stayed at 19, Main Street the best part of thirty times. As we'd all testify not very much changed – The Times, Church Times and sometimes the Yorkshire Post – all sat there on the table in the parlour, alongside countless books – many about architecture but about much more too. Grape nuts and a boiled egg for breakfast; pork pie from round the corner for lunch. Things stayed much as they were.

*Paul's* words, however, speak too, of profound change or transformation, for they bear witness to God's work in Christ: 'Thanks be to God, who gives us the victory through our Lord Jesus Christ.' However much the Church of God is seen as the repository of tradition or even inertia, that is nowhere to be seen at the heart of the gospel. For God's mercies, steadfast as they are, are *new* every morning. The cosmic significance of Jesus Christ, in his incarnation, ministry, passion, death and resurrection hardly describe a static state.

Interestingly, of course, nor did Irvine's cherishing of tradition suggest any such a thing. Just short of a century of devotion to this Minster never drove out the possibility of change for him. Changes in worship, as long as they were carefully wrought, were embraced. He was never a Prayer Book fundamentalist. Similarly, in terms of ministry, I can never remember Irvine finding new roles for women in the church, for example, a stumbling block. Instead, the changing scenes within our world came together with faith, to offer wise but thoughtful and imaginative reflection on an unfolding universe.

As I've mused on Irvine in these past weeks, so I've reflected upon his lifestyle and his example. A bachelor life-long, his understating and balance put me in mind of the rule of St. Benedict and of the three vows which focus that rule. So those vows are, of course – *stability, obedience* and *conversatio morum*. These three aspects of character, almost *spiritual virtues*, shaped Irvine's life as they shape the Christian life more widely.

One could rely on Irvine. As with Benedict, this reliability grew from his real *obedience* to those virtues which nourish the good life. The word obedience means to *listen to*. Such is the basis of prayer in the Christian life, listening to God. Irvine was an excellent listener. Then there's that arcane phrase *conversatio morum* – but it's not really arcane, it simply means the conversion of life – we shall all be changed. Irvine's religion formed his life.

Finally, there is *stability*. In the reading you will soon hear from Joyce Grenfell, this is perfectly expressed: 'We don't *become spiritual* when we die. We *have always been spiritual*.' That too is at the heart of St. Paul's teaching as we have just heard it. With Irvine, then, we give thanks for God's mercy, *new* every morning. As Joyce Grenfell puts it, '... a continuing reality of all good.' So, for that, and all that we have learnt of it in Irvine, *Laus Deo*.

Amen.

### Readings

I. Cor. 15. 51-57.

Extract from *Joyce: by Herself and Her Friends*:

'Believing as I do that man is spiritual here and now wherever he may seem to be, I have no doubts that [name] is simply continuing in the continuity of life; and, that is, in the spiritual realm where she has always essentially been. We think we love someone for their looks; their walk maybe; tone of voice, touch- but when you analyse it is really for their qualities- their warmth, their humour, their intelligence, kindness etcetera. These things are spiritual qualities and are recognisable only by the spiritual in us. This, to me, is proof of spirituality. We may think it's the shape of a person's nose or the way the eyes light up or whatever it is, but in fact it is the impression these things have on us and this is not physical or material, is it? So- although the sense of loss is brutal and a shock - when you can look at it and think of it and feel the very real gratitude you have for having known and loved someone, then I think a sense of real reality takes over and one comes to the reasonable conclusion that spirituality is a reality; a continuing reality of all-good. I believe the way to peace is not to mourn, but to free her in your mind and heart and realise she is always whole, always real because she is spiritual- and so are you. We don't become spiritual when we die. We have always been spiritual and that, as I see it, is what life is for- to discover and rejoice in this. It leads into harmonious living now. It reveals what is actually real and durable.' *Joyce Grenfell*