

Sermon by Rt Revd Dr David Hamid, Suffragan Bishop in Europe
Licensing of Revd Canon Dr Leslie Nathaniel as Chaplain of St Thomas Becket,
Hamburg, 17 September 2016
Eph 4.4-16; Ps 84.8-12; St Luke 4.16-21

Dear brothers and sisters in Christ, it is a great day for the people of St Thomas Becket Church here in Hamburg. It is a happy day for Fr Leslie too as we celebrate the beginning of a new ministry here in what is one of the most beautiful Churches in our diocese, in one of the most historic places of Anglican ministry on the continent. It is an exciting day for all our ecumenical friends in ministry who, today, are receiving a colleague and a priest to work with them in bringing the good news of Jesus Christ to this city.

He begins his ministry in a Church of *England* parish on the continent of Europe at an auspicious time, when, despite what politicians may engineer or envision, we declare most strongly that the Church of England remains a *European Church*! We continue fully committed to the Pentecost vision of a united family of “saints from every tribe, language and nation”.

Fr Leslie comes to you already well known by me as a much loved and respected priest, an outstanding ecumenist, a creative theologian, and brother citizen of the world. When it was known in Church House Westminster, in Lambeth Palace, and among ecumenical partners that Leslie would be leaving the post of European secretary of the Church of England to become the Chaplain of St Thomas’s Hamburg there were gasps of panic. Church leaders and Church bureaucrats alike who have depended on Leslie’s guidance and vision realised immediately what a huge gap this would leave in the heart of the Church of England’s ecumenical life. Leslie does not know this, but I had many conversations with people expressing dismay and concern about the future of the Church of England’s ecumenical work, with which I had to outwardly agree while knowing joyfully in my heart that this Diocese in Europe has made an absolutely winning appointment!

So just a word of caution. If any of you happen to be in London for any reason, and run into anyone in the central institutions of the Church of England, it may be best that you do not reveal that you are a member of St Thomas’s Hamburg! We will not just be accused of sheep-stealing, but in this case, we will be accused of stealing one of the key *shepherds*!

What this says is that you are really privileged to be welcoming Fr Leslie; his ministry will now enrich your own community life and that of this deanery, archdeaconry and diocese. And I am truly overjoyed to that he is among us a colleague in ministry in this diocese. In so many ways Leslie is coming home. His wife Julie is German, his children grew up in this great land, he speaks the language flawlessly, and can even turn out a mean Bach prelude and fugue on the organ! Oh, and he loves beer.

There is another very rich dimension to our celebration today. As Anglicans in Europe, we are deeply aware that our life and mission must be in partnership with those Churches which are part of the very soil of the place we find ourselves. Here in Germany we are blessed that for so many years we have enjoyed a deep unity in Christ with EKD brothers and sisters, through the Meissen Agreement. We also live in visible unity with the Nordic and Baltic Lutheran Churches through the Porvoo Agreement, who, like us have a venerable historic presence in this Hanseatic city. We are in full communion with the Old Catholics and we seek and long and pray for the restoration of communion between ourselves and the Roman Catholic Church. We Anglicans are essentially sojourners in this German land, but we are united with our Sister Churches in the task of proclaiming the one Gospel of our Lord in this part of the world which we have come to make our home and which we love.

I have mentioned the anguish of the good people of the central institutions of the Church of England. It is also, inevitably, a slightly anxious time when a community begins a new chapter like this, a new partnership between priest and people. There are all sorts of questions in the minds of parishioners when a new priest arrives, about who he really is, and what he really is like. And so it is dangerous for the preacher at such an occasion because he has to tell you the truth!

So let me take advantage of this moment and tell you some things that Fr Leslie may not ever be able to say to you! But I can as I am here as your bishop. The truth I want to share with you is not about Leslie alone. It is about you and him, priest and people together. The scriptures appointed for today help us reflect on this.

We have a very important and dramatic lesson from the Gospel of St Luke. Jesus enters into the synagogue in Nazareth and unrolls the scroll of Isaiah. Then he reads these words. “The Spirit of the Lord is upon me, because he has anointed me to bring good news to the poor. He has sent me to proclaim release to the captives and recovery of sight to the blind, to let the oppressed go free, to proclaim the year of the Lord’s favour”. He rolled up the scroll and everyone was looking at him. He said these profound words, “today this scripture has been fulfilled in your hearing!”

Think for a moment about the reaction of the people to these words of Jesus. They hear Jesus say that God’s love for the poor, for the captives, for the blind, for the oppressed, for all at the margins, for all who are not enjoying the abundance of life, that God’s love for them, his mercy, forgiveness and new life was *now present and fulfilled at that very moment*. What a powerful message Jesus preached that day in Nazareth.

We the Church, we who are the body of Christ, the ones who follow Jesus, are called to continue this startling proclamation of Good News. We are called to make God’s love, God’s solidarity with the poor and the marginalised among us, real and truly present here and now. What does this mean here for our Church in this city of Hamburg?

Our calling is to be more than simply a warm community where we can meet our friends and worship and share in English. We are the Church of England, yes, but we are not an exclusive English speaking club. Everyone without exception who comes to our Church comes with something which burdens them, which holds them down, which oppresses. It could be guilt, worry about finances, illness, isolation and loneliness, broken relationships, addiction, fear about the future. It may be their life has been shattered by war in their homeland, who have been part of the march of millions into our lands seeking peace and refuge. We are the community founded by Jesus who proclaimed that by the power of the Spirit, God’s healing, liberating love and compassion is poured out *here and now*. This love flows from our Lord truly present in this sacred meal as it flowed from our Lord as he hung on the cross. This love is to flow into the world in our daily lives as members of Christ’s Body.

Your particular calling Leslie is to be a servant and a focus of the work of this community of disciples. Your vocation is to hold these members together so they can act together and collaborate with other Christian sisters and brothers in the great work of spreading Christ’s love, compassion and justice in the world. The tools you have at your disposal to build up the community for this task are the tools that the Church throughout all ages has used. First the sacraments through which the Gifts of God flow into this people, so that they receive the new life in Christ which comes in baptism, so they are fed with none other than Christ himself in the eucharist, so that they may know the power of the Holy Spirit in the times of blessing, healing and reconciling. Then your ministry will centre on preaching and teaching the Word of God, so that Christ, who is the Incarnate and living Word can truly take root in their hearts and

minds. But all this you are doing so that this community can live, act, minister, witness and worship as part of Christ's Body.

This means, dear members of St Thomas's that Fr Leslie is here among you, not to do all the work of ministry, but to stimulate *you*, lead *you*, inspire *you* and pray for *you*. *You* are the members of the Body, you are the ambassadors for Christ in your daily lives, and your calling is to bear fruit in your lives, to build the kingdom, to love your neighbour. A priest's job is not to do the work of ministry, but to make sure *you* do that work. Rather like the coach of a *Bundesliga* club, keeping an eye on all the members of the team, exploiting the talents and gifts of all the players. But the coach is not the one out on the pitch scoring the goals! You, the players are!

Dear friends, you are welcoming an excellent priest and coach. He is deeply devoted, hard-working, a sensitive pastor, a challenging and prophetic leader, and a person with a warm embracing heart.

But let me tell you a little secret, it part of the truth I want to share with you: A loving, caring church can turn a *good* priest into an *extraordinary* priest. That is your role. All pastors are dependent on the prayer and moral support of the people of God. Fr Leslie is in one of the loneliest and trickiest jobs there is. The loneliest and most dangerous parts of the job are the weariness that comes from trying to satisfy conflicting demands, from being on call day and night, from not knowing when the next pastoral crisis will come, from listening to criticism when confidentiality demands that you can't say everything you know, and from dealing too often with the huge gap between expectation and reality.

So it is your task to be good to him. Not only because he's my colleague and because I care for him, but also because you will never know when he most needs some encouragement from you.

Of course he is not perfect. There are no perfect priests (only perfect bishops!) And there are no perfect congregations either! So if Leslie at some point in the future tells you something you don't particularly care for, or asks you to stretch and grow as a team in a way that you might find uncomfortable, pay attention. He may not be right 100% of the time, but probably it will be something you need to hear. And Leslie, when the parish does the same thing for you, for there may be times when you should pay attention to them, I know you will be listening.

Father Leslie, in a moment I will give you a licence, which is really a licence to love your people. Enjoy leading them in the celebration of our faith, never tire of teaching them the wholesome doctrine of Christ, and constantly remind them of who they are: the Body of Christ, and that the Spirit moves among them and strengthens and guides them for their mission in this world. And my friends, I am not giving you a licence, but nevertheless love your new priest and pay attention to his coaching, for he is here to help you grow in your discipleship. Forgive him when he is less than you want him to be, as he is only human. Together with him I want you to build a wonderful community that is committed to the mission of Jesus, to transform your lives and the lives of others, and to be busy with the work in this city of building God's kingdom of justice, love and peace.