

'Do you check with anybody
before you preach a controversial sermon,
or one that'll disturb or upset people?'

Ben's wife asked me last Monday night
at the support group in the run up to his ordination.

It was a very good question,
as politicians say to Paxman on Newsnight.

Thinking about it,
I always try to upset or disturb people
with my sermons,
so I'd only run them past someone else
if I thought it was too bland or inoffensive.

My sole criterion really
is that I imagine myself a mathematician
who's just discovered this exciting new solution,
and is just bursting to share it with others:

'Look at this, I'm really excited about this!'

Whether the others get it doesn't really worry me,
as long as I get it and think it works and it thrills me.

We have a few occasions in the Gospels
where Jesus tells a parable
but the hearers don't get the point.

But at least they remembered the parable,
and for that to happen
Jesus must have been excited about his story.

But Rachel Nicholson's question did get me thinking
about sermons of mine which have really, really upset people.

Actually there are not that many,
most occur in my curacy and first parish.

I recall preaching at Great Ayton on Remembrance Sunday 1981
and telling them that millions did not die in two world wars

for Thatcher's government to make 3 million unemployed.

That did not go down well,

and I was hauled before the Bishop,

who spend an hour arguing with me

whether it was 3 million or 2.8 million.

It was a magazine letter rather than a sermon

which caused the most upset in my last parish.

I was ranting on about communion,

not the theology of it

but the way people received.

At one of my churches I used to summon them to communion,

but then spent ages at the altar rail tapping my foot

whilst they just dawdled along,

like strollers along the prom on a Sunday afternoon

eying up an ice-cream stall

and dithering about whether to have one or not.

Now, fair enough,

receiving communion is a big step

and should be undertaken with reverence.

And I don't go for those churches which are over-regimented,

where you almost expect to see above the chancel arch

a sign reading

'Right altar rail, left altar rail: get in right lane now!'

But given that its Christ himself

who has come down from heaven in his sacrament,

and is waiting up there for you,

I think people should have a bit more sense of urgency,

should run,

if they are physically able,

to meet the Lord of their life.

I got the confirmation candidates to run
the length of the church
at their rehearsal last Thursday,
to run from the font to the bishop's chair and back again.
I made it clear that at the actual service
they would walk with great dignity.
But for now I wanted them to run,
and they raced with all their power.
Even so, I think everybody was a bit shocked.

Why did I do it?

Well, thinking about it

there is quite a lot of running in the Scriptures.

After the angels have trilled their Gloria to them,

the shepherds leave their flocks by night

and go with haste to the Bethlehem stable.

i.e. they are so excited,

so thrilled by what they are about to encounter,

they run.

At the other end of the Gospel

on the first Easter Day,

when Mary Magdalene comes back

with her garbled tale of empty tombs,

Peter and the other disciple whom Jesus loved

(Ahem!)

both ran to the tomb,

and the other disciple did outrun Peter,

but then lost his bottle and daren't go in.

Then Simon Peter,

the heavier of the two,

steamed along and skidded straight into the tomb.

Now the Authorised version doesn't put it quite like that,

but there was a lot of running that first Easter Morn,
running in eager expectation,
running out their grief,
running in case they missed it.
My first boss used to get fed up
with people dawdling along to receive communion,
and at one Eucharist just turned around
carried on with the post-communion prayer and blessing
and final hymn,
and the congregation had missed their chance.
Unlike the Requiem for a Wolds' Vicar
taken by the Bishop of Hull,
a strictly non-receiving Requiem.
The congregation thought otherwise
and at the usual point came up as one man
to receive.

'They've come up to receive their communion, my Lord,'
the chaplain whispered to the Bishop,
oblivious to it all as he was facing East.
He tutted and with a peeved look said,
'Yes, but are they persistent?'
Peter and John were persistent when they crashed into the tomb.

As were Cleopas and friend
when they fed with Christ
at that little inn at Emmaus on the first Easter Day
and ran the seven miles back to Jerusalem
to tell the disciples what had happened.
Seven miles:
the distance between Helmsley and Kirkbymoorside.
What would make you run to KMS, brimful with thrill?
I will pass no comment on running from KMS...

One of the famous parables of Jesus
which was all too easily understood,
the story of the prodigal son,
when the father spots his wayward boy coming home,
just a mere speck on the horizon,
he runs out to meet him.

He was a rich man,
with lands to bequeath to his two boys.
in those days a rich man would be a big man:
fat was a status symbol.

He'd look an absolute fool
running with his treble chins wobbling
and his pot bellies shaking
and his face as red as the setting sun.
'Look at that old fool, running after his wayward son,'
his tenants would have said,

sotte voce,
or not so sotte voce.
Yet the rich man ran,
ran for love,
made a fool of himself for love.
As God makes a fool of himself
running to love us.

Running for the birth,
running for resurrection,
running for love:
since we are surrounded by so great a crowd of witnesses
let us run with perseverance the race that is set us;
'Get running,'
the letter to the Hebrews encourages its readers.
Maybe we shouldn't be so shocked

at youngsters running in church
as youngsters and adults not running.

And another reason why I encouraged our candidates to run:
the sheer thrill of pushing your body to the limits.

Love the Lord God with all your heart, all your soul,
all your mind
and all your strength,
all your running.

Christianity in the West is all head stuff,
has lost the idea of a muscular faith.

I go to Cambridge about once every other month,
and every time I go I sneak into Trinity College
and look in homage at Great Court.

Although I have never coincided with the bell striking twelve,

I always think of the film

Chariots of Fire

and Harold Abrahams

running around that court

before the clock strikes twelve.

Even though there are only two people in history
who have managed that,

every time I visit Trinity

I'm tempted to be the third,

just for the sheer thrill of it.

The other hero of Chariots of Fire

was Eric Liddell,

who made a stand against running on the Sabbath

because of his strong Christian faith.

In the film he says,

‘I believe God made me for a purpose,

to be an evangelist.

But he also made me fast,

and when I run I feel his pleasure.’

People who really are very faithful

and come to church and all things connected with the church

often tell me that it doesn’t really do much for them,

that they don’t feel God close.

‘Well run, then,’ Eric Liddell replies.

Liddell put his Olympic career in jeopardy

because of his Christian stance.

But the most moving moment in the film

is when he is about to start in the 400m,

and a competitor hands him a note

on which is written a text from the First Book of Samuel,

‘He who honours me, him I will honour.’

He runs marvellously,

and wins.

If I had just one text for my ministry,

that would be the one,

‘He who honours me, him I will honour.’

And when I puff on my bicycle up a hill

or soar back downwards,

I honour with my vigour and my stamina

the One who gives me life.’

At one point in the film we see Liddell reading the lesson

from Isaiah 40:31:

‘Those who look to the Lord will win new strength,

they will soar as on eagles wings,

they will run and not feel faint,

march on and not grow weary.

All are confirmation candidates are young

and have a long life ahead of them.

As I saw them running on Thursday night

I was very moved

to imagine them running through life

enjoying every second

until at the last

they run into eternity smack into the arms of Christ.

‘I will not leave you orphans,’

says Jesus in our Gospel.

‘I will ask the Father

and he will give you another,

the Spirit of truth,

to be with you for ever.’

I pray that that Spirit may come mightily upon our candidates

and indeed upon us all next Thursday.

The spirit that drives us to run

with urgency and sheer joy and thrill

for Christ.