

THE RIGHT REVEREND RICHARD BLACKBURN

BISHOP OF WARRINGTON

21st April 2018

Thank you, +Paul, for the opportunity to return and to celebrate +Richard's retirement.

When I think of him there are four 'H's that come to mind. Three begin with 'Hum' and the fourth begins with 'Hel'! His Humanity, his Humour, Helen and Humility. And there's a connection between the last two, because it is Helen that keeps him humble! But more of that later!

When I became a bishop some 24 years ago and joined the staff meeting of the Archbishop of York the thing that surprised me most was that they talked about the clergy! That they actually knew the clergy! It never crossed my mind when I was a vicar that the bishop knew anything at all about me or what went on in the parish!

You'll be glad to know that this tradition continued under me in the Diocese of Liverpool! When someone's name came up in conversation for good or ill it would invariably end with someone saying, 'this calls for one of Richard's pub lunches!' This played to one of Richard's strengths! His gift for eating and drinking! But more seriously, to his tremendous humanity. Richard knows that religion can do funny things to people. It can sometimes squeeze the humanity out of us. Richard was always one of the first to see the signs. He stands in the best liberal catholic tradition knowing that the word 'liberal' comes from the word 'to set a person free'. There are many of us including myself who have benefitted from Richard's hospitality and humanity. So much so that if it were in our gift we'd rename his local pub 'The Pint and Mitre' or more aptly 'The Chateau Neuf du Pape and Mitre'!

His humanity goes hand in hand with his humour which is a great spiritual gift! It's sometime said that in the Old Testament God laughs but never cries and in the New Testament he cries but never laughs. I'm not so sure. The parables of Jesus, from the man with a plank in his eye to one who owed 10 times the nation's tax bill, are shot through with humour.

When Richard became a bishop he was already one of the most experienced Archdeacons in the Church of England. In that role he had used humour powerfully like tossing a proverbial hand grenade into a discussion and standing back to see the reaction – with a smile on his face! As a bishop he became experienced at picking up the pieces that other archdeacons scattered!

But I for one was always grateful that he never lost the knack of using humour to challenge us all to act with integrity. He is the first to spot humbug! As was Jesus. His observations of others, be they pompous bishops or uppity members of a PCC, could reduce you to tears. I'd love to give you some examples now but the data protection act and certainly the laws of libel make that very difficult. But should you ever get an invitation to 'The Chateau Neuf du Pape and Mitre' you'll be richly entertained!

+Richard retires after two decades of senior leadership in the Church's ministry and throughout that time his constant companion and partner has been Helen. Her own calling to priestly ministry and her insights into the mission of God have not only complemented Richard's but have also informed and shaped his own vocation. Her wide experience of both chaplaincy and parish ministry have given her an empathy and an authority and the courage to challenge the breaking of boundaries when episcopal ministry became too all consuming.

And it has been Helen that has kept Richard grounded and humble because she is herself a priest of great stature and someone who stands no nonsense or pomposity.

For all +Richard's gifts, his energy, his ebullience, his compassion there is a humility which was to me most apparent in the liturgy. Formed in the best Catholic tradition he knows that it is at the altar of sacrifice that we form the most sober assessment of ourselves. It is the cross that brings us to our knees. +Richard's presidency at the Eucharist reveals his own relationship with God. Although in the leading of liturgy there is always the need to project, it is not a performance for him but an expression of his utter dependency on the grace of God. Such is +Richard's evangelical demeanour at the Lords' Table.

By the time Helen and Richard came to Liverpool their children were all adults and making their own way in life but I would like to thank them for their support of their parents and for the sacrifices that they have made along the way of their parents' vocations.

I am honoured to be here today to pay tribute to +Richard and to all that he and Helen have given to the Diocese of Liverpool, to the wider church and to the even wider Kingdom of God. Sharing the Liverpool episcopate with him was a blessing to me; even when on the rare occasion we disagreed there was never a falling-out. That was due in no small measure to his generosity of spirit.

So for his humanity, his humour and his humility and for Helen and Richard we give God thanks.