

CIGB talk – 10 minutes

13:31 He put before them another parable: 'The kingdom of heaven is like a mustard seed that someone took and sowed in his field;

32:it is the smallest of all the seeds, but when it has grown it is the greatest of shrubs and becomes a tree, so that the birds of the air come and make nests in its branches.'

33:He told them another parable: 'The kingdom of heaven is like yeast that a woman took and mixed in with three measures of flour until all of it was leavened.'

Intro

In my career I have been blessed with visiting many varied places to do my job – I once conducted a disciplinary hearing in a prison – of an inmate! I have been out on the roads with an AA patrol, I have worked in a Category B Secure Hospital where you have to be escorted everywhere – even to the ladies! Most recently I have worked backstage at a concert at the LG arena where the glamour and the glitz of the concert give way to hard work and common sense practicalities out of the public eye. This is the first time I have ever found myself in a pulpit!

However, I have always been one to embrace new experiences and learn from them so here goes...

Very briefly – who am I and what do I do?

Well I am the HR Director of the NEC group, based down the road and joined about 13 months ago. There are about 4000 people employed in providing the services that we manage – the exhibitions, the conferences, the concerts and about 4 million people visit us each year. Prior to being at the NEC I have worked in a diverse range of companies – McDonalds, The AA, Centrica who own British Gas, and a care company called Craegmoor.

What does a HR Director do? My job is to make sure simply that we have the right people in the right place at the right time for what we do in business. I have to plan for the future and the challenges it will bring and make sure we have talented and motivated people to make our plans happen.

I love my job. The opportunity to select new employees, train and develop them, see them grow and develop and move onto new things gives me great satisfaction. The uniqueness of each one of us means that I am never, nor will I ever get bored in my job!

When I am not at work I am wife to Ian, mum to Emma and Sean – 16 and 12, keen amateur musician – singing in a choir and playing in an orchestra and last but not most definitely not least – to use my favourite phrase – a practising Christian. Favourite because it always reminds me that I have a lot more practising to do before I get it right! I worship at St Andrews Methodist Church in Worcester and finding out that the NEC, my potential new company supported a chaplain, and a Methodist chaplain, and someone I had met before was one of those things that makes me feel positively that God is very much playing a part in my life plan and was nudging me in a certain direction.

I am delighted to be here today to be celebrating the work of the CIGB. The Chaplaincy in the NEC is a real force for good in the organisation as I am sure it is for all of the other organisations represented here today – good for business as well as good for those who work for us and those who visit us

So to our text for today.

I was struck by three key things which I would like to share with you:

1. In the description that Jesus uses of the Kingdom - from two very mundane and rather unpromising items – a tiny seed and a portion of yeast - transformation takes place – into things which are productive and wholesome and sustaining.
2. To make this transformation happen the right environment has to be in place
3. This wonderful transformation happened because of a timely intervention by a human being

In thinking this it also struck me that this is as much true of our journey through life to faith, as it is of a satisfying work career and gives us explanation, if explanation is needed for why chaplaincy work is so important and ideas for how to develop and further enhance their work.

Transformation:

I can picture in my head the small bag of yeast my mum used to buy from the bakers to make bread. Brown, slightly sweaty looking and a bit smelly!

From this unpromising start however came a wonderful loaf, the aroma of the bread as it cooked filling the house and tasting as good as it looked.

I did a bit of research on mustard seeds and on the internet and found any number of pictures of the tiny black, red or yellow seeds many hundreds of which you could hold in one hand. I also found a great picture of a fully grown bush about two metres high and wide with a man standing in front of it to give it scale. Truly a place where birds and animals can find shelter and a place to live. But in addition I found out that in Pakistan, rapeseed-mustard is the second most important source of oil, with annual production of 233,000 tonnes and contributes about 17% to the domestic production of edible oil. It is an important product providing income, employment and food to many.

Again from a rather mundane raw material transformation has occurred.

And if you think about a young person at work on their first day the comparison is not difficult. They have everything to learn, will not immediately contribute usefully to the work effort and to a busy manager they might feel like they are more effort than they are worth. However – we all did start at that point and with the intervention of the right people and the right environment they have the ability to transform into useful, productive members of your team and some of course to be the stars of the future sustaining the work for years to come.

Environment

I have recently had a new kitchen in my house and one of the less pleasant tasks before this could happen was emptying out my old cupboards where I found all manner of neglected packets of obscure spices and other things long out of date which I had obviously bought when inspired by some new recipe on the TV. I also found some dried yeast. It was well out of date and I know however hard I tried, it wouldn't have led to me successfully making a loaf because the environment was all wrong and it had lost its potency.

With fresh yeast, the right ingredients, a warm environment and time then I could make a loaf to be proud of.

Likewise mustard seeds grow best in a temperate climate – with the right amount of water, correct temperature and good soil, the seeds will take 3-10 days to germinate and a full grown bush will take several months to reach maturity.

There have been many experiments and hours and hours of research with workers to find out how what is the best environment to be most productive. One was simply to increase and decrease the amount of light the workers had to work by. The early experiments were positively inhuman to our minds today.

The real basics of temperature and food and lighting truly do affect our ability to work well – in that we are no different to the yeast or the seed. I once was running a very bad tempered shift in my early days in McDonald's. Everyone was snapping at each other and the stress was palpable. Needless to say the customers were not having a good time either. I couldn't work it out until I finally went and checked the control panel for the heating settings. The air conditioning had not been turned on at the beginning of the day. The relief and reduction in stress as the blessed cool air kicked in was immense. We should never forget the basics. However, in addition an environment of support, where you are recognised for doing a good job, you are given the precious commodity of time to learn and make mistakes and where you are trusted to get on with the work you are given will ensure that your employees thrive and develop.

Last week we had a big show on called the Skills Show. It was attracting about 30,000 young people and their teachers and parents each day. The place was buzzing – almost every sense was in play... the noise was ear splitting, the place was packed closely so you couldn't help but make contact with other humans as you walked, your eyes were overstimulated by the colours of clothing and banners and signposts and... the smells of slightly damp and sweaty teenagers... need I say more. It was great – a really vibrant place to be but also rather exhausting. The show's purpose was to showcase a wide variety of skills and the best of the best in demonstrating those to inspire young people in the career choices. The visitors could also have a go at many of the exhibits and learn and laugh when they made mistakes. It was a brilliant environment to kindle ambition and give new ideas.

In the NEC we have a prayer room. Our prayer room is a small haven of calm for quiet prayer and reflection welcoming people of all faiths. It is exceptionally well used and a wonderful environment when you want to step out of the hustle and bustle for a while. We hold services in there to meet the needs of workers and visitors to the site. The feedback we get is positive and it is a key part of our chaplaincy offering.

Two very different environments but people can be transformed by such places.

Transformation by the timely intervention of people

In our bible reading the seed was made to grow because someone selected and planted the seed, presumably ensured that it had sufficient water, pruned it to encourage growth and harvested and processed the product.

The yeast would only ever have remained as yeast if the woman had not mixed it with flour, left it to rise, returned once it had risen, and baked the loaf.

I think we can all think of people in our lives, whether at work or not, who through their timely intervention in our lives have changed us and made us the people we are. I can think of many people who have been influential in my development at work from Ken, my first boss, who broke down tasks into small chunks which I could cope with and didn't overwhelm me when I was new. To Jeanette who identified some fantastic training and development programmes for me to attend to acquire new skills and then who also identified some projects for me to practise those new skills on

for real. For Jim whose years of experience he shared to give me ideas for how I might tackle difficult problems and to Peter (who I never gave enough credit to) who trusted me to get on with the job and fly on my own. Different interventions at different times in my career.

I think we can also make a list in our journey in faith of people who said or did the right thing at the right time for us to grow. We don't always like what they say at the time but on looking back it is part of what made us what we are now.

Our chaplaincy team are a key part of our ability to intervene at the right place and time. They provide a "safe" person - part of work but not quite part of the establishment. Wise heads, trusted. Valued.

Conclusion

I am not saying work is always like the kingdom!! We do spend a significant time there – it is better if it is a place of productive enjoyment rather than feeling like Hell on Earth.

I celebrate with you those organisations who do open their doors to CIGB and similar organisations and acknowledge that the support of the spiritual needs of their people is a key success factor for them. Even people who don't use and don't think they will ever use the Chaplaincy tell me that they like the fact that the company they work for has one.

Our scripture reading today tells me that the kingdom is about potential being met. From a raw material placed in the right environment with the judicious intervention of people at the right time, transforming into something productive, valuable and worthy of the love and effort of our God.

I thank God for my chaplains and chaplaincy who truly do assist in that wonderful transformation in my organisation and for the work of the CIGB ensuring others do the same.

Amen

