

Episode 183 Being Real with Philip Plyming

This transcript has been edited for clarity and space.

Philip Plyming

I'm Philip Plyming and I'm Dean of Durham in the northeast of England.

David Capes

Dr. Phillip Plyming. So good to see you. Welcome.

Philip Plyming

Thank you very much indeed, David. It's great to be with you.

David Capes

What does that mean that you're Dean of the cathedral. This is one of those magical, wonderful places in England. It's beautiful. Tell us a little bit about what the job entails?

Philip Plyming

Bill Bryson describe Durham Cathedral as the best Cathedral on planet Earth. I've yet to find anyone who really disagreed with him, David. I'm Dean of Durham, which means I oversee the life and mission of Durham Cathedral. People have been worshipping Jesus Christ here for a thousand years. The current building is 900 years old. And it's a center for pilgrimage, prayer and proclamation within the Northeast of England. It's a place where Cuthbert is buried. It's one of our very favorite, finest northeast sites. It's also where Bede is buried. Bede, as you know, is the father of English history and a polymath in his own generation. But we're a living church. We have people visiting us for pilgrimage, and we have worship three times a day and Sunday congregations as well. And we welcome people from all over the world to come and explore and encounter God.

David Capes

If you are traveling in England, and sweeping to the northeast, stop off in Durham. You will not regret that because it is amazing.

Philip Plyming

You will come in on the train. And you'll have the most amazing view of the Cathedral and the castle, which is part of a World Heritage Site. And you'll come up to the steps and you'll walk where thousands and thousands of people have walked in the past. It will not disappoint you. The pillars are Norman pillars and they were built in 1133. It will take your breath away!

David Capes

They're huge. They're really are. How many people does it take to get around one of those?

Philip Plyming

Well, I reckon probably it's about a dozen people, because you have to really stretch your arms out. I say to the people, when they come, you'll never forget the size of these pillars. But above all, we're a place where we want people to encounter God. So, the building points towards God. And my ministry as Dean is to help people to discover God, to encounter God, and to know God's love in Jesus Christ.

David Capes

How did you, Philip Plyming become the dean? What was your journey in life that led you there?

Philip Plyming

That's quite a good question. Actually, David, it was a bit surprised to find myself in the role. I grew up in Sussex, in the south of England. I went to church as a child, but there wasn't really any experience of a living faith. I came to a living faith during university when I was 18. I was studying German and Russian at Cambridge. And some friends just explained the gospel to me. And I'd understood that Jesus died for me and loved me. And I wanted to give my life back to God. And I remember even in those days, choral Evensong in King's College chapel in Cambridge was something that really helped me connect with God.

But I went off to finish German and Russia and then I studied theology here in Durham. I was a Curate, so an Assistant Minister for five years. Then I was a Vicar, so a pastor of a big church for 11 years. And then I went to be Principal of a theological college here in Durham called Cranmer Hall within St. John's College. That's when I used to teach New Testament and leadership. Then suddenly out of the blue God called me to apply for this role. I'd never worked in the Cathedral before, but I guess I've got some experience in terms of leadership and vision in larger organizations. And I just felt a real burden that God placed on my heart to offer myself for the mission of God in this place. Because cathedrals are an amazing opportunity to reach out with the good news and love of Jesus Christ. And I've been doing this job for six months now. And it continues to be a real privilege, but it continues to be a surprise.

David Capes

Probably every day a little bit of a surprise. Well, that's exciting. Cathedrals are amazing places, where they sit in a city, and often the size of them, and the way it just draws people. And even people who are secular, find themselves going in there and having a sense of transcendence.

Philip Plyming

You absolutely do. And what's really interesting is people come in and they're blown away. They want to do something in response. So often, people will light a candle and say a prayer. Sometimes they're almost reaching out to God, and it's great. Here in the northeast, we don't charge for admission. It's free to come in. And people say, I just felt drawn to the cathedral. I needed to pray. And these are people perhaps who don't worship normally, but they recognize that there's something bigger than simply what they see on the news every day. There's a God who made this world and a God who inspired the creation of this extraordinary building. And it reminds you how small you are and how great God is.

David Capes

We need that reminder from time to time, don't we? We're not the center of the universe. Now you've written a terrific book called *Being Real: The Apostle Paul's Hardship Narratives and the Stories We Tell Today*. It's a fascinating book. It's a great book, well written, but also fun to read. But tell us, what is the big idea of your book, *Being Real*.

Philip Plyming

The big idea is that we can be real about the tough times in our lives because God is at work in more places than we think. That's in one sentence what the book is about. We can be real about the stories in our lives, tough bits in our lives, the challenging bits in our lives, because God is at work in more places than we think. We often assume that God is at work just when things are going well, or when we see answered prayer. But it's really interesting that Paul goes out of his way especially to tell the Corinthian church about the tough times in his life.

Why does he do that? He does that because he wants them to see that God is at work in cross-shaped places. God wasn't just at work when Jesus was crucified on the cross. The cross wasn't something that's just happened to Jesus. The cross continues to be the pattern through which God works in the world today. And Paul said, look at my life, I'm going to tell you some stories about my life when I've really struggled. But I've known God in those places.

And so, my book explores those passages in some detail, David. And then it says, hang on, why are we so reluctant as Christians to be honest about some of the tough stuff in our lives? And is it because we're buying into a narrative of shame that thinks God's only at work in the good stuff and not in the bad stuff. And I want to suggest that if God's at work in our cross-shaped places. We can tell people about them. And when we tell people about God at work in cross-shaped places, we're giving glory to God. We're saying God's at work in more places than we think, including some of the bits that I'm struggling with. That includes the times when I'm physically, emotionally or socially having a really rough time. That's what the book is about, saying we can be real, because Paul was real.

David Capes

You focus on I and II Corinthians. But later in the book you're looking at other books as well. Because although I think it's really concentrated in II Corinthians, you can still find it in Galatians and Romans too. It's not just a one-off kind of thing.

Philip Plyming

No, it's particularly focused in I and II Corinthians because of the challenge that Paul was facing in Corinth. In Corinth there was this real worldview challenge Paul was addressing. Because we all think the Corinthians were all over the place. And what was their problem? I think their key problem was they were looking at the world through Corinthian glasses, if you'd like. And Paul says you've got to look at the world through a cross-shaped lens. I think that's why in the Corinthian correspondence, you get these stories again, and again. But you're right, David, the sense that Paul is honest about his struggles in the other letters is true as well. We're reading 2 Timothy in the cathedral at the moment, and Paul says, you know, I wasn't ashamed of my chains. He's not going to be ashamed by the fact that he was chained. Why were people shamed in those days? Because they thought that suffering was somehow bad, but Paul says I'm not going to be ashamed of this. So, you're right. It comes throughout his letters.

David Capes

Yes, it really does. I want to read a passage from 2 Corinthians and just get some of your comments on that. I'm going to read 2 Corinthians 6. So we'll start in verse 3. And then I may stop and ask a question or two as I'm reading. This is a place where Paul is very honest about what has happened and what he's been through. And not just him, because he says "we". He says,

we are putting no obstacle in anyone's way, so that no fault might be found with our ministry. But as servants of God, we have committed ourselves in every way, through great endurance and afflictions, hardships, calamities, beatings, imprisonments, riots, laborers, sleepless nights, hunger, by purity, knowledge, patience, kindness, holiness of spirit, genuine love, truthful speech and the power of God with the weapons of righteousness for the right hand and for the left. In honor and dishonor, in ill repute and good repute, we are treated as imposters. And yet we are true, as unknown, and yet we are well known. As dying and see, we are alive. As punished and yet not killed. As sorrowful, yet always rejoicing. As poor yet making many rich. As having nothing yet possessing everything.

It's a powerful piece of rhetoric, isn't it?

Philip Plyming

It's extraordinary. There are two things that I think are really worth spotting there. First is the range of suffering that Paul's referring to. There's the physical suffering that he's going through, the imprisonments, the sleepless nights, the hunger. This is Paul being really honest about his body. There's the emotional suffering in terms of the sleepless nights you know. He's a guy who worries. Then there's a sort of reputation or social suffering because he says we're treated as imposters. We're treated as people of ill repute. Paul is getting flack. It's really the nature of his ministry. So, that's the first thing to notice, this range of hardships. It's physical, it's emotional. It's what you might call social.

The second thing to notice is that this hardship isn't a cul-de-sac for Paul. In the last part of verses 8, 9 and 10 he uses this contrast of imposters-true, unknown-well known, dying and alive. Michael Gorman writes about this. I quote him in my book and he says, the great thing for Paul is he thinks that as Christians, we need to inhabit Good Friday, and Easter Sunday at the same time,

David Capes

One foot in both worlds.

Philip Plyming

One foot in both worlds. In other words, we can be honest about our good Fridays, and we can expect that God will be at work in that place. Because what goes on in that place is the power of Easter Sunday filling our Good Friday. I can have nothing yet possess everything. I can be dying and yet see how I'm alive. And so sometimes when I'm really struggling, I might feel well, what's given me the power to keep going even in the midst of the struggle? It's the resurrection power of God at work in my life. And so, Paul doesn't glory in suffering for the sake of it. He says, hang on, you know, God is at work in cross-shaped places. Not necessarily in taking you out of them and making everything right and

rubbing out all the pain. But enabling you to keep going, to keep praying, to keep praising, to keep loving, to keep forgiving. And he does it again. He does it in 2 Corinthians 4 as well, where he uses this contrast? You know, so does that make sense?

David Capes

Oh absolutely. I appreciate you pointing that out. One of the things that strikes me is that very often in our church services, there's focus more on the Easter, and not so much on the Good Friday experience. In other words, it's not just God is good, everything's great, life is fine. Probably at any given Sunday, people who've arrived there may have lost their job, they may have lost a parent, or friend. And so, they're struggling. And yet, I don't know that churches very often have a place for people like that. At least in America, in a lot of our mega-churches, it's just praise and worship. It's all good. It's all good. And yet we need a place for lamentation. And for grieving. We don't really provide that. Is that true within the Anglican liturgy?

Philip Plyming

I think it's one of the three gifts of Anglican liturgy. Particularly morning and evening prayer that I pray every day here in the cathedral. We just read the Psalms every day. Just read Psalm after Psalm after Psalm. Of course, as you know, when you read the Psalms, they're not like our modern worship service.

David Capes

Yes, about half of them are laments.

Philip Plyming

They inhabit a much bigger emotional space. And the great thing about reading the Psalms is, as you read them just day after day after day, it gives you a voice. Sometimes it's for yourself, and sometimes it's for other people, you're lamenting on behalf of other people. You know, there's lots of people lamenting on behalf of us. I look at the news at the moment.

Now, I agree with you in churches, we're not great at doing that. But partly what I suggest we can be doing through the book is telling the stories about our own good Fridays. I remember when I was a Vicar, we had a vision evening and obviously you want that to be fairly upbeat. But I made a decision to interview somebody from my congregation who I know is living with a life-threatening illness. She has not seen healing in this world. She has a struggle to keep breathing sometimes because her muscles are wasting away. And I just interviewed her and the way she just held on to God in the midst of that. People were so moved and they said you could almost touch the presence of God as I interviewed her.

And I made the decision when I was a theological college principal to be honest about some of the struggles I had, including some of the tough stuff that happened to me as a child. Not because I want to get pity from people, but I want to say, look, the Christian life isn't about waltzing from one glory to the next. The Christian life is finding God as much in your good Fridays as in your Easter Sundays. Now, that's actually good news, David, because if the Christian faith is simply for when you're feeling great, that's not much gospel. But if the Christian faith is about a God who's at work in the tough stuff, as well as the great stuff. That's good news.

David Capes

I think that's very helpful for a lot of people, if not today then tomorrow, and I appreciate you bringing out the idea that we also mourn, not just for ourselves, but often for others who are struggling. And that's one of the Beatitudes. Blessed are those who mourn. And I take that not only for my own grief and sorrow, but also for the grief of other people and the losses that are being experienced. It's not that we're comparing ourselves necessarily, it's understanding the reality of this world. There are beautiful things that happen. There are terrible things that happen. And we live between those two realms.

Philip Plyming

There's a great writer Frederico Villanueva, who writes for Langham Publishing. He wrote a book called *It's Okay Not to be Okay*. And he tells a great story about when he was in the Philippines. And they just had a major natural disaster, a huge flood. And he went to church two weeks later, and it wasn't mentioned. And he said, well, how has this not been mentioned? Was God not there? Was God not present? That kind of denial about what's right in front of you doesn't do God any favors? It doesn't do our credibility as Christians any favors, right? You know, we've got a huge scandal in the UK, in the Church of England around safeguarding. And, you know many institutions in the UK are struggling with this. And I think sometimes we think we're glorifying God by pretending it didn't happen. But I think we need to be honest, and we need to lament, and I sometimes think we can be reluctant to do that. But actually, we do ourselves no credit by being unreal about the things right in front of us.

David Capes

I think you're exactly right. Listeners to this podcast will remember I've discussed this before. Our son died about four years ago. And as he was really struggling and the cancer was doing its worst to him, I couldn't write anything. I couldn't communicate anything. But after he died, I used Facebook of all things as a place to tell his story. And I showed pictures of him. And I would express how much I missed him and how hard it had been, And my posts went on for months. And I had people coming back, saying thank you for being honest about grief.

I did it in a variety of ways. I did it on my web page as well, the davidbcapes.com. And I had a chance to tell his story. Because his life was more than just the cancer that ended it. His life was 36 years of some really wonderful things. Being able to do that and doing what you've described here, help us a great deal in terms of dealing with what's real, and what's happening in life. As opposed to presenting this person that I want everybody to think I am. Because I am one who struggles and I know, everyone is like that. And I often refer to the fact that the name "Israel" means the one who struggles with God and wrestles with God. And that's part of what we do, through the Psalms, through Job and through other places as well.

Philip Plyming

And I think it gives permission for us to be real about that. And it's part of being attractive, because I think what new generations want is they want people who will be honest. You know, kids recognize that Instagram, Snapchat, and other social media sites are fake, really. There's a great book, called *The Happiness Effect* by Donna Freitas interviewing college students in the US about the pressure in social media to look great all the time. I tell you, it's not sustainable. You cannot live your life, pretending to

look great all the time. And so, I've been deliberate as a dad to let my kids see me cry. You know, they tease me about it. But I want to say that I inhabit an emotional space, whereby I find things hard. And I think that's what younger generations wants to see. They want to see authenticity. They're very canny about things that look fake.

David Capes

Yes. Dr. Philip Plyming, we've been talking about your book *Being Real: The Apostle Paul's Hardship Narratives and the Stories We Tell Today*. It was published just last year, October 2023, by SCM press. Thanks for being with us today on The Stone Chapel Podcast.

Philip Plyming

Thanks very much, David. It's been good to be with you.