Southwell Minster 3 February 2019 Patronal Festival Eucharist: The Virgin Mary

I need to confess sometimes suffering from cathedral envy. Leicester Cathedral is a medieval parish church. Like you, we are also built on a Roman site but unlike you only we only became a cathedral in the 20th century. However, I’m especially envious of Salisbury. In particular I’m envious of their fantastic sculpture in the grounds of Mary made by Elizabeth Frink.

The ‘Walking Madonna’ shows Mary as an older woman turning her back on the religious temple and walking out into the town. We see Mary on a mission (do look it up on the internet). What might happen if we decided to go on a walk with Mary from this temple into God’s world?

Many of you may well have worshipped here for years. Christian faith may be as obvious and as integrated a part of you as anything else you can imagine. However that is not the case for the majority of the population or the majority of this town. Cathedrals are more and more valued by their communities but there are still many barriers for people to connect. Anyway beyond all that, at the conclusion of every Eucharist, we see the main point is not about *coming in* but rather *going out* to love and serve the Lord.

Fairly recently the Church of England has been reviewing the health of cathedrals particularly in terms of how we are organised and governed. Like other institutions we need to reshape ourselves so that there is greater transparency and accountability. But amidst all those practical changes, the report also considered the question ‘what are cathedrals for?

The report reflected on what it means to be ‘*the seat of the Bishop and a centre of worship and mission’*. Poetically and rather beautifully the report quoted a Dutch Theologian who described a cathedral like this: *‘as a sign of pro-existence, a symbol of diversity in unity, a Pentecostal laboratory, a theatre of basic drama, a temple of dialogue a centre of creativity, an academy of committed information, a clinic for public exorcism, an international exchange, a broadcasting station for the voice of the poor, a tower of reconciliation, a motel for pilgrims, a house of vicarious feasts and the hut of the shepherd’* (Albert Van Den Heuvel, Theology Feb 1970). What is a cathedral for?

Three aspects of Mary speak to me clearly about the mission of cathedrals. I want to explore each of them briefly as we go for a walk with Mary: she rejoices, she moves and she unites.

None of us are immune from the dark cold days of February. Brexit is a mess and as ever many of us have personal worries alongside a wider world in turmoil. When Mary sings ‘My soul magnifies the Lord and my spirit rejoices in God my Saviour’ she is not using the kind of speech which describes her mood or her sense of happiness. On a dreich Monday morning this is not a statement about her mental health or a bit of positive thinking convincing her to be happy. Rather Mary’s song much cherished by Cathedrals sung as part of Evensong is more like a statement of faith or a poise of orientation.

The Magnificat is soaked in God’s providence, and Mary’s sense of being blessed despite the challenges. She has a deep internal sense of joy and gratitude which she articulates. It becomes visible to the world. I have had to learn over the years that my face and body language tell others what I am thinking or feeling and there is no hiding it whatever the words coming out of my mouth. Christians reveal much about what we really believe whether we like it or not. Others see what really sustains us often long before we open our lips.

Musicians speak about the ‘cantus firmus’- the underlying fixed melody which can give inspiration, shape and direction to music. Cathedrals witness in stone and glass through their buildings and in flesh and blood through their communities the cantus firmus of joy and confidence in the goodness of God. Yes the stones do that but even more so the people and I know all too painfully that at times these places can be dysfunctional revealing a different cantus firmus than that of the Magnificat.

In *Letters and Papers from Prison*, Dietrich Bonhoeffer writes, *“What I mean is that God wants us to love him eternally with our whole hearts….. to provide a kind of cantus firmus to which the other melodies of life provide the counterpoint. Only a polyphony of this kind can give life a wholeness and at the same time assure us that nothing calamitous can happen as long as the cantus firmus is kept going.”* Walking with Mary we learn to sing this song which is good news for us and for others.

Secondly, Mary moves. We read in the gospels of her visit to Elizabeth; her journey and motherhood in Bethlehem; the family outing to the Temple; her presence at Cana of Galilee; her witness at the cross and in the upstairs room following the Ascension of Jesus. Mary carries and reveals the Word of Life. She becomes the pilgrim disciple who is on the move into the heart of the action, present in the world.

I grew up in the countryside with a fairly small sense of the world; a kind of parochial vision. I’ve seen plenty of that too in England such as the octogenarian who proudly told me one Sunday morning in her Leicestershire village church not far from Melton Mowbray that she had never been into Leicester and wasn’t planning on doing it now. But I also see it in the city where people don’t go exploring beyond ‘that road’. Mary’s journeys remind us that Jesus was and is active in the world.

So where are the streets you never walk down or the places you never visit or the people you never engage? Our mission is to try and discern where God is at work in the world and to join in with that. Cathedrals can be less obsessed than many others who worry about the survival of the church. That is God’s worry not ours but that doesn’t get us off the hook. We are still required to move from here out to there.

Finally, Mary unites. I might not always have said that growing up as a Northern Irish Protestant! We desperately need unifying people or places in an ever more fractious society and riven church. Mary unites us in the gift of her humanity.

She is the *mother of the poor* reminding us that it is from the margins and therefore the least promising people and places and parts of ourselves that God’s annunciation of hope comes.

As *mother of sorrows* she weeps with us, sharing grief and crying out against every injustice. A sword pierces her heart and so she is at one with every sorrowing soul.

As *mother of hope* she is the one who reminds us that with God nothing is impossible embodying hope rather than despair.

From Leicester I can recount where this also applies across the divisions between faiths and cultures. Our Midnight Mass congregation is at least a third Hindu since Mary is a woman full of divine favour and should be venerated as such. Mary is also vital in Islam with a chapter in the Quran named after her. Jews see her as exalted daughter of Zion. In other words Mary gives us an opportunity to make common ground even when difference presents. Such spaces are needed more and more.

A Cathedral walking with Mary will actively seek to be a place of dialogue where difference however great or small is not the catalyst for fears but instead the catalyst for genuine respectful exchange in the pursuit of common humanity and there is deep unity to be found in that.

What is a cathedral for?

1. It starts by walking away from here with Mary –
2. Move out into the world!
3. Find common ground and common humanity! Sing afresh your cantus firmus, your song of rejoicing of how God has done great things for you.

Thus you will reveal God’s mercy, lifting up the lowly and filling the hungry with good things. Amen.

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