

ANNIVERSARY SERMON

Preached by
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EMBARGOED UNTIL DELIVERY

850 years – we celebrate today a remarkable anniversary of this beautiful and hallowed place. It is an enormous span of time – a story of continuity and faithfulness. But we stand together in the presence of God who as Psalm 90 says

*‘For a thousand years in your sight
are like yesterday when it is past,
or like a watch in the night.’*

Ancient church buildings are extraordinary places. They are hallowed with the prayers of generations. They are a repository of memories - countless baptisms, weddings and funerals – alongside civic and community events of all kinds. People have been faithful across the centuries. God has been faithful – and it is to his eternal love that this building a sermon in stone - as Shakespeare’s memorable phrase put it - gives vivid testimony.

The dedication to Mary roots that story of faithfulness in our salvation history. The angel brought the news of the coming birth of her child. Mary replied in obedience ‘I am the Lord’s servant’. She was there too at the end on Good Friday. Remembered also today in the great song which we know as the Magnificat. It reverberates down the centuries with its promise that the mighty will be cast down and the humble and meek exalted. This is a radical God who challenges the orthodox patterns – a God of justice and a God of love.

But what might a building like this be for in our times

A Cathedral is of course the seat – the cathedra - of the bishop. It provides unity for the diocese and its leadership. Here the bishop ordains people and sends them out in mission. If, as some put it, ‘people have lost the habit of God’ this sending out in mission must be our constant concern if we are not to slip into a sort of holy twilight.

This Cathedral of course matters deeply to the Church of Ireland community of the south and west. It symbolises our distinctive way of faith. But Cathedrals are much more than that - they transcend the life of the Christian denomination which happens to hold them in trust. Look around at the ecumenical and community diversity of this congregation – we welcome one another and we support one another in ways which would have been unimaginable a generation or two ago. So there is an ecumenical imperative about the life of a building like this..

It needs to take its place at the heart of the life of the wider community - a gathering place in good times and bad – a place of celebration and of mourning. As a holy place, it challenges us to rise above the short term and the everyday – to recognise our common humanity – to see the image of God and the face of Christ in one another.

And these are times of promise for our ancient cathedrals. Faith is not dead. For, there are many people who describe themselves as ‘spiritual but not religious’. Every time I have gone on retreat, I have met them – people who claim no faith but recognise the need to nourish their spiritual core. When I walked the Camino towards Santiago de Compostella, I found myself walking with a planeload of Irish pilgrims. We were complete strangers. But we talked about everything including the deep things of life. There were people walking bereavement out of themselves – a person with terminal cancer – people carrying deep hurts. The pilgrimage was as much spiritual journey as footsore walk.

Alongside retreat and pilgrimage as places where people can explore their spirituality and be touched by God, I would add Cathedrals. People who come as tourists can become pilgrims. Beautiful architecture, music and liturgy – a sense of timelessness – can begin to put people in touch with their spiritual side. When I was ill a few years ago, some said they would pray for me. And others said they would light a candle. And that becomes a prayerful action for people who would not consider themselves as people of faith.

And all the time, the dedication to Mary taps us on the shoulder – reminds us that we should not bring this wonderful building down to a reduced faith – that it stands for the action of the God who casts down the mighty and exalts the humble and meek. When he was Dean of Liverpool, Justin Welby now Archbishop of Canterbury said that it was a safe place in which to do risky things for God.

Not a religious museum – not a spiritual theme park – but a place from which the church can be energised and where people who search can encounter God and his faithful people

It's been a great privilege and pleasure for me to share this celebration with you. May the ministry which flows from this building grow and prosper in the years to come