

Birth of John the Baptist 2018

I bring you greetings from the Archbishop of Canterbury. The deans were with him on Thursday for a day of retreat at Lambeth Palace.

Archbishop Justin asked me about the completion of Project Pilgrim, and I was able to describe our thank you launch last week and the public launch today. He sends his congratulations for such a major and disruptive project, but also rejoiced in the gift of access throughout the cathedral and the sense of value that we have placed upon being open to all, for everyone without distinction, as St Paul says in our Galatians reading, for here, there is a new creation.

Justin is an interesting person. It was good to spend a long day with him on retreat at Lambeth Palace, praying, working and eating together. He is shy, very bright, and purposeful. He is not naturally warm, but he cares deeply. I sense he feels pain deeply, especially the pain of the genuinely dispossessed and marginalised. He has a vision of a church that serves and is not self-serving, even if much of his time is taken up with managing problems and polarised positions across the Anglican Communion. I wouldn't want his job for all the tea in china so to speak, but I'm glad he is our Archbishop, and I hope that you, like we do here, pray for him daily.

So at this time when we celebrate the completion of Phase 1 of Project Pilgrim, exhausted though we are, it is a good day to reflect on what being a cathedral means to us. Justin gave us three names for the work and life of a cathedral.

Firstly, he described a cathedral as a home of worship and prayer. The key word here is home but I'll come back to that. Being the place where worship and prayer is as much of the fabric of the cathedral as the stones and the wood sums up what a cathedral is for on a daily basis. It is our main task, providing public worship for those who come and for those who don't, knowing that in small numbers or in great occasions, we are here to speak to God, so that he can speak to us. This is not to say that cathedral worship is better or even a matter of taste, but it does stand the test of time, and it can be supremely flexible because of its structure and form. We must always be careful never to worship the worship, especially

when we are blessed by such incredible music, but we must remember who and what our worship is for, and that it is to be shared.

The image of the home is an interesting one for cathedrals. Most of us will have a good picture in our hearts and minds of a home, a place of welcome and security, of love and refreshment, somewhere we return and speak of. Archbishop Justin can't sign up to that, for much of his home life when young was full of anger, alcohol and sadness. There are homes like that, but that should never be true of a cathedral. We are to provide a home for organisations and groups who may never see themselves as regulars, and for whom we regulars sometimes wonder why we bother. Carved in the new commemorative stone in Cathedral Green are the words Sacred Space and Common Ground, a slogan nearly as important for us as the Baptist's call to repentance. This was never more true than last Wednesday, when Celia hosted the tragic double funeral of mother Laura and daughter Ella who were murdered in Gloucester recently. With no connection other than the need for a big venue, our job was to say yes. We were a home that day, a place to return to, a place of unconditional love and a place different only in size and scale to the home in Nazareth that Jesus knew.

The Archbishop then spoke of the cathedral as home of mission and witness. We are not here for ourselves, we are here for the city, for the county and for the diocese. Here he gave us a challenge; How does our cathedral look outward? It is easy not just for cathedrals but for the whole church to look inward. We have our problems, our divisions, our divorces from unity. Some recent research has found that 70% of church attenders have personality types that resent change, so how does that encourage growth? The only exception to that rule in the research is cathedral communities, where that figure falls to 40%. When Dean of Liverpool, Justin described the cathedral as a safe place to do risky things, and that badge has stuck.

So as we take a short breath before renewing the cathedral Vision & Strategy later this year, we already know that one pillar of that plan will be for us to be even more outward looking with more community engagement, more interaction with the parishes of the diocese, and more service to the lost.

Thirdly, a cathedral is a home of the bishop and for the community. This is the place, the cathedra, from which springs the bishop's ministry. We should provide a place where the bishop can pray and be prayed for and prayed with, and we are to be mindful that when the people gather around the bishop, as they will in such great number next weekend for the ordinations of new deacons and priests, we are providing the home for bishop and people alike.

And as for community, well we are both one, shaped by the Rule of St Benedict, and a community with a shape that can provide shelter for others. For a cathedral, the church is not our only community, our community is the Kingdom of God in its broadest sense as we give ourselves away as a home for all.

This afternoon at Evensong, the Bishop will move around the new parts of the cathedral, re-dedicating them after so much upheaval and disruption by the sprinkling of Holy Water. We should feel congratulated by many for what we have achieved together. Fed up with it all as we have been, we have made it, and now we shall learn how best to make a difference with it.

John the Baptist would not have made a good dean or a good Archbishop, but his message was clear. Make the paths straight, get ready, and repent, for the Kingdom of God is at hand. The task remains, and unlike John, we have a cathedral with which to do the work of God. Ever stable, ever changing, a home for God and a home for all. Welcome home.

Stephen Lake, Dean of Gloucester