

The healing guidance of God alone. May my words be faithful to the written word, and may the written word lead us to the Living Word, Jesus the Lord. Amen.

Around 700 years ago a certain master craftsman named Thomas travelled from a place in Oxfordshire called Witney, to Wells and is acclaimed to have built the Lady Chapel and the tower¹. Today in this space of international significance as a “prodigy building”, I come with joy - and with my friends from Witney - as Witney once more travels to Wells to start a new future. This is a sacred space whose historic design innovations transformed any identifiable prototypes beyond recognition.

As today I begin as your new Dean, our Old Testament reading comes from the final unit of exiled Isaiah, who anticipates a joyous homecoming and the offer of new life in God – a transformation beyond recognition. We hear the powerful words ‘Ho, anyone who thirsts’ - the free water of life is available for all. This passage will continue to expand the prophet Isaiah’s vision as we see emancipation offered to all. The tag lines of ‘thorn and briar’ - a description for diminished life in God’s judgement - will be replaced by signs of life and beauty – ‘the Cypress and Myrtle’. Here we see the healing of all creation. And key to this is the cry that anyone who is thirsty is welcome to come and drink. What powerful words as we come together in this place of ancient wells and water, with the springs said to have healing properties all around us in this space.

This theme of healing water is picked up in our New Testament reading, as we see the Christological interpretation that Jesus is our source of living water. This is an interpretation that goes back to at least the Second Century in the patristic writings of Justin Martyr².

In this passage from John, we see what Westcott calls ‘the refreshing energies of faith’. And we see these refreshing energies at work in this place through art, music and welcome. This is a place of theological enrichment and a convening space for the public square which can help to enable a place of articulation of the common good and a place - like a well - which convenes people around it, and refreshes them.

This is a space which takes seriously protecting human dignity, embracing diversity and standing out against tribalism. For, as Augustine noted in his commentary on our passage from John, the river only flows when the river flows from the belly of the one who drinks³.

¹ *Wells Cathedral: Architecture and Conservation* by John H Harvey and LS Colchester: The person brought in to erect a central tower ‘...was Thomas of Witney, already employed to build a Lady Chapel east of the cathedral. Witney, from the town in Oxfordshire, had trained on the royal works of St. Stephen’s Chapel, then worked on the new presbytery of Winchester Cathedral, and at Exeter Cathedral by 1312. He was an outstanding and inventive designer and his highly individual style appears in the Wells Lady Chapel, begun about 1310 and finished certainly by 1326.’

² Dialogue with Trypho Ch 69: ‘The spring of living water which gushed forth from God in the land destitute of the knowledge of God, namely the land of the Gentiles, was this Christ’

³ Augustine, *Commentary on John* Tract 32.9: All these things, then, are not what He promised us when He said, He that believes in me, let him come and drink, and out of his belly shall flow rivers of living water. He has promised us eternal life, where we shall have no fear, where we shall not be troubled, whence we shall

Augustine goes on, that it is our duty to know whether we drink from the fountain of Jesus, and whether we live by what we drink.

As I reflect on these words, I am intrigued by what it means to be the people of God in this place? Do we drink from the fountain that is Jesus, and do we live by what we drink? From my learning so far, I discern a vocation to support the ministry of the Bishop, working with the county, the City and the life of our parishes and chaplaincies across the diocese.

Saying our prayers in this space of holiness; where imagination, truth, forgiveness and beauty lies at the heart of who we are and what we do. Which is why to those of you connected to this space, I want to thank all of you who volunteer, or work here, for all that you do to keep this amazing place in its vibrancy.

Yesterday as we celebrated the 30th anniversary of our outstanding girl choristers, the Church remembered the mystic Evelyn Underhill (1875-1941). In the epitome of patriarchal thinking, her first headstone at her grave read simply “wife” and “daughter”, where her new stone, placed a couple of years ago now reads: Christian — Scholar — Spiritual Guide. And has a quotation from her writings: “*A Christianity which is only active is not a complete Christianity.*”

As our readings remind us, we need the water of Jesus to refresh us. If we neglect our spiritual life in the midst of our busy lives, it is like confusing diamonds with pebbles and throwing them away.

For friends, these walls around us have been forged by geologic action over millions of years, these walls contain the ‘energy of the earth’⁴, and the divine energy which shaped and formed that, continues to shape and form us, as we follow the truth of the life, death and resurrection of Jesus.

Here in these walls we share a space where people can speak relevantly of the good news of the Kingdom of God, sharing values of Welcome, Care, and Respect. A place enabling others to catch a glimpse of God’s love for them personally, and for all creation, as God guides us towards the Cypress and Myrtle.

Now, some of you may know that at the foot of the stairs in our new family home in the Dean’s Lodging, there hangs a portrait of one of my predecessors, George Henry Sacheverell Johnson who was Dean from 1854.

In one of his sermons preached in this space, he stated that the weakness of our reason and judgement is that ‘we cannot see before us even, as it were, a stone’s cast; and that the guidance of God alone can secure us from year to year, from day to day, and hour to hour.’⁵

As I follow in the steps of the craftsman Thomas of Witney, and countless other ancestors in the faith, including Evelyn Underhill, and in the steps of pilgrims and visitors who have blessed this house of prayer with their presence, I commit to the guidance of God alone.

For this is a place for everyone who thirsts. It is a place for *you*. And for all those who visit here, and all who walk past thinking they are not good enough, or holy enough, or sufficient enough, to come into this space.

have no migration, where we shall not die; where there is neither bewailing a predecessor deceased, nor a hoping for a successor.

⁴ As notes Russ Eanes in *Pilgrim Paths to Assisi*, 2023.

⁵ George Henry Sacheverell Johnson, Sermons Preached in Wells Cathedral, 1857 Sermon 3 *Humility*, p40

Friends, pray for me, as I shall for you, and may the wells of Wells continue to develop the 'refreshing energies of faith', as we seek signs of the Cypress and Myrtle, and as we reaffirm our commitment to 'the healing guidance of God alone'.
Amen.

Toby Wright

Dean