

Sermon for the Installation of the Archdeacons of Rochester and Tonbridge

Based on the readings: Isaiah 55: 1-13 and Matthew 6: 25-34

In the name of the living God, Father, Son and Holy Spirit. Amen.

Well, good afternoon and welcome to this very special service. Welcome especially to Sandra and Nick and their families, and to many friends from the Dioceses of Rochester and London, and indeed from the wider Church and community. It is very good to have you with us today.

Sandra and Nick are taking up their new roles at an exciting time in the life of our Diocese. We launched our new Vision and Strategy at our Diocesan Synod in December, where it was unanimously endorsed by the members of Synod. Our three Archdeacons will have a key role in implementing that Vision and Strategy in their respective Archdeaconries and across the Diocese as a whole.

You may have seen the sentence that summarises our Vision in the opening pages of today's order of service: *Seeking first the kingdom of God, we are called together by God to change, serve and grow with compassion, courage and creativity.* I would like us to focus this afternoon on the first phrase of that sentence, "*seeking first the kingdom of God*" as we look at today's Bible readings under three headings: *Our context, God's invitation and God's promise.*

The *context* of our reading from Isaiah is the long years of exile in Babylon experienced by the people of Israel – so long that the people were beginning to lose hope and their sense of connection with the land of Israel and with their spiritual home in Jerusalem. And the context of our reading from Matthew is the Roman occupation of the land of Israel, following on from generations of occupation and control by foreign powers. In Jesus' day, the people were again losing hope, or if not, they were plotting against the power of Rome, leading to rebellion and the destruction of Jerusalem in AD 70.

The context of these two very familiar readings – which we often overlook – is that the people of Israel were experiencing oppression – oppression which was leading them either to despair or else to attempting desperate and futile measures to try to regain their freedom. In both cases, their context was one of fear and anxiety mingled with desperation.

And in so many ways, that experience and those emotions mirror what many people in our own context are feeling and experiencing. The presence of the Mars installation was not intended to have a particular significance for this service, but it does help to focus our attention in these rather anxious times on the themes of war and peace! We are facing massive political uncertainty on the global stage – once again quasi-imperial powers are making choices that profoundly affect smaller nations, not least in the last few days – whether in Ukraine or the Middle East or in the many other conflicts raging or threatened around the world. All this is contributing to huge economic upheaval, allied to the rise of new technologies, including in the field of AI; and the same time it is becoming even more difficult to achieve any sort of coordinated and realistic response to the climate crisis. Not forgetting the wild west of the Internet, with its extraordinary reach into our lives and the dreadful impact it is having on the mental health and well-being especially of our children and young people.

For us this may not as yet involve physical oppression by political and military powers (though of course it does for the people of Ukraine and the Middle East, Sudan and the DCR) – but the pervading sense of anxiety and fear, even of anger and despair, is very real – and it is driving many people to look for strong leaders to rescue them from chaos, leading to the rise of populist movements in many parts of the world.

I attended this week an event at the German Embassy to mark the 80th anniversary of the destruction of Dresden – and was invited to be there again today to discuss the outcome of the German elections. There is a real concern that history may be in danger of repeating itself.

But there is an alternative – and it is one which I believe we are beginning to see as more and more of a possibility – and that is for people to seek and to find *spiritual* answers to their deepest questions. I think that is in part why so many of our churches and cathedrals saw significantly larger attendances than for many years over the Christmas season. There are so many similarities between our context and that of our readings from Isaiah and from Matthew – and therefore much that they can speak into our situation.

So, let's move onto our second theme – that of *God's invitation* as we hear it in Isaiah and in Matthew. There are two key words that resonate powerfully in these two passages – words of invitation that are more than requests – they verge on being commands – and they are the words *come* and *seek*. These are strong words and there is a sense of urgency about them: "Don't miss out, do it now, *seek the Lord while he may be found.*"

The image Isaiah portrays is one of generosity and grace – "*come and buy without money or price*". It is a picture of God offering a new future for the people of Israel, a new hope, a new way of life – a return from exile and freedom from oppression. This is about returning home, restoring agency, rebuilding their nation once more in their own land.

This is a vision of shared, corporate redemption for the whole people – and it starts with their coming to God, drinking the wine, eating the bread – being fed and refreshed and renewed. And please note that this does not start with human schemes and revolutionary plotting. It starts rather with a divine initiative, which opens up new possibilities for the people of Israel as they respond to the sovereign action of God that brings about their liberation and return from exile.

And in the Sermon on the Mount Jesus invites his followers to *seek first God's kingdom and his righteousness* – not to acquiesce to the oppression under which they live *or* to plot rebellion against Rome by violent means. That of course is what would happen a few years later and resulted in disaster and destruction as Jerusalem was razed to the ground.

Seek first God's kingdom and his righteousness – this is about a different way of being, the shape of which is spelled out in the Beatitudes and the rest of the Sermon on the Mount. This is how God calls his people to live. This is how we help his kingdom to grow here on earth as it is in heaven. And this is God's invitation to us as Christians – *we are called to seek first God's kingdom.*

This is about the way we are, the way we behave in our dealings with one another and with the world around us, about our hunger and thirst for righteousness, for justice and for peace. And it has to start with us humbly seeking God's will and ways in worship and prayer, day in and day out, because it is God's Spirit who alone can guide and equip us for what we are called to do.

This must affect profoundly the way we go about the Church's life. Within our Vision and Strategy, we have identified six key objectives, which start with our commitment to *growing safe and healthy cultures for all*, not only through our safeguarding processes and structures, but also in how we treat one another with generosity and respect and compassion and care.

And let's be honest, we aren't always very good at that, are we? As was illustrated by some of what we saw at the General Synod last week and also all too often see in our own church communities!

Our *culture* matters – because as I said elsewhere recently, *culture eats strategy and structures for breakfast every time!* And poor culture will get in the way of our fulfilling the other five key objectives that are part of our Diocese strategy:

- Growing younger and more diverse
- Growing spiritually and numerically
- Impacting our communities for good
- Releasing resources for mission, and
- Planting and growing new missional churches

Seeking first the kingdom of God, we are called together by God to change, serve and grow. How? With compassion, courage and creativity. This is about our *culture*, and that culture matters deeply, if we want to see God's kingdom grow amongst us. And that is after all what God wants to do. He wants to grow his kingdom in us and amongst us and through us – and that brings us to our third and final theme – *God's promise* – and the outcome he wants to bring about and that we long to see.

For the people of Israel, it was to be a return from exile, the rebuilding of their towns and cities, the reestablishment of their life as a nation. It's a story with a very contemporary ring, in the Middle East and in many other parts of the world.

For Jesus' disciples, it was to be a new way of living that was not defined by the oppression under which they lived, but rather a way of living that subverted and ultimately reshaped the wider world like yeast in a lump of dough. A people who were to be the salt of the earth and the light of the world.

And that too is our calling – to embrace the future that God has in store for us, offering to the world a new way of being, one that is not caught up in materialism and self-assertion, not shaped by the will to power and the need to dominate others, whether personally, spiritually or politically, but that is content with food and drink and clothing and that is committed to seeking God's righteousness, God's justice for all the people of the earth, and most especially for the weak, the vulnerable and the oppressed.

Despite all the chaos we see in the world around us, I believe God is at work in a new way in our generation, to bring about renewal in his Church and a rekindling of faith and hope in our culture and society.

Let's be clear, it is not our job to bring this about, or somehow to force God's hand. There are great dangers in leaders with a messianic complex, whether in the Church or in the world of politics.

But it is our calling to *play our part*, to read the signs of the times, to interpret the context in which we live, with all its current anxiety and fear; to hear God's gracious invitation to come to the waters, to buy without money or price; and *to seek first God's kingdom and righteousness*.

So, let's pray that we and all God's children may yet live to see God's promise fulfilled – the Church revived, our culture renewed, and faith and hope rekindled in the hearts of a whole new generation.

Sandra and Nick, welcome to the adventure into which God is calling us:

Seeking first the kingdom of God, we are called together by God to change, serve and grow with compassion, courage and creativity.

And so, let us pray: Lord, may your kingdom come, may your will be done, and may your name be glorified in us and through us, on earth as it is in heaven. Amen.

Jonathan Gibbs
Bishop of Rochester

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