

Archbishop's Inaugural Eucharist of the 900th Anniversary celebrations of the Diocese of Ely

Saturday 24 January 2009

A sermon by the Archbishop of Canterbury at the Inaugural Eucharist of the 900th Anniversary celebrations of the Diocese of Ely in Ely Cathedral

'A city set on a hill cannot be hidden.' (Matt 5.14)

When I first came to Cambridge over forty years ago as a student from the valleys of South Wales, I was amazed by what passed for a hill in these parts! (And, to be candid, I still am.) But if there *is* one, there's no doubt that *this* is it. And here in this extraordinary and beautiful place is one of the most powerful visual images we could have of that great gospel saying. Here *is* the 'city set on a hill'; here *is* the city of God made visible. This building was erected so as to speak to all those around for many miles of the reality of Christ's Church, the 'new creation' set down in the midst of our world. It's a metaphor for the way in which the Church of God has been not only part of the physical landscape of our country for all these centuries, but how it has also been part of the *imaginative* landscape, the history, the storytelling, the literature of this country. And however much people may like to try and deny it, there's no doubt that the Church remains visibly part of the legacy of this country.

And *there's* the problem of course. We might just about get away with presenting ourselves as an important part of the 'heritage' industry; but that's not exactly, it seems, what our Lord had in mind when speaking of a city set on a hill. It's a rather double-edged gift to have this kind of visibility. People know roughly what a church looks like. They know roughly what to expect when they go in there, because they've seen weddings on television in costume dramas. They know something about the fact that people probably used to go there. And the trouble is, that what is visible can so often and so easily seem like the shell of what *used* to be. Not a sign of the new creation, but a sign of something comforting and old.

So here we are, giving thanks for a wonderful past and asking ourselves how we inhabit that city set on a hill so that it may be truly a source of light for the future. Because when our Lord speaks of the city set on a hill, he speaks in terms of the way in which the community gathered around him, casts light upon everything human; that casts light upon the darkest and most complicated corners of human experience. Are we then a community that gives light? Are we a community that manages to open up the depths of human experience to the love and transforming mercy of almighty God? By the grace of God, *we are*. Not because we're good at it; not because we make a spectacular success of mission (sometimes we do and sometimes we don't) but first and foremost because God is God, and where God has promised to be and to radiate his glory, *there he will be* today and tomorrow and until the end of time.

As we've already been reminded once or twice in this service, it's not our faithfulness alone that we've been celebrating; indeed far from it. We're commemorating a history which has had great moments of transparency and radiancy and moments of great failure or dullness. No, we are celebrating *God's* faithfulness: the fact that God has gone on *calling*, and where he has called, he has *enabled*, and where he has enabled, he has *opened doors*, and where he has opened doors he has brought his *transforming grace*. That *has* been true, that *is* true, and *will be* true. This particular city set on a hill is here to say that God is where God has promised to be, and that God's promises cannot be broken.

So although what is visible to the society around may primarily be a picturesque building or a vague memory embodied in stone (as true of any village church as it is of this great building) what *we* want to be visible in God's name is something more, something deeper. What *we* want to be visible is God; God's mercy turning lives around, and God's promise opening up futures we never expected. What *we* want to be visible is in fact what was visible on that other hill - of Calvary. It's impossible to think of that image of the city set on a hill, without thinking of the builder of that city, nailed on his cross on the hill of Calvary. Because what *was* and *is* visible on the hill of Calvary is the love of God, bound by iron nails to the world he loves; the love of God, not abandoning humanity even when humanity thinks it is abandoned by God. What is visible on the hill of Calvary is the stillness of peace, of

reconciliation between earth and heaven at the very heart of turbulence and violence. Perhaps when we turn from thinking about Jesus' image of a city set on a hill to the hill of Calvary; then we may begin to answer the question of how God is made visible among us and casts light upon the world.

God is made visible when *we* are faithful not only to God himself but to one another; when *our* love for God's world is some distant reflection of that divine love, bound as if by nails to the world. Is *our* love for God's poor and deprived, *our* love for the needy, *our* love for the helpless and lonely, as passionate and committed, as *fixed* -- as if by iron nails -- as *God's* is? When people come among us from a troubled and often desperate world, do they sense among *us* that kind of passionate love and deep commitment, that steady refusal to turn away from humanity in its need? If we are asking people to turn their eyes to a city set on a hill, *that* is one of the things we hope and pray will be among us by God's grace: that degree of passion to be there in the midst of need and pain, to speak for love and to act for love.

And what of that stillness of peace between earth and heaven, that message of reconciliation which St Paul says is entrusted into our hands by God through Jesus Christ -- is that what is visible? When people look at our Church as an institution, they very likely don't think of it as a place of very much stillness: they see high levels of anxiety and distressing levels of conflict. They often don't see that stillness where heaven and earth are one, where God's embrace touches the depths of lostness; they don't see Jesus. And so the question we have to ask ourselves for nine hundred years or so ahead, is about how we embody and represent the stillness of peace between earth and heaven; how we show our quiet yet all-consuming gratitude to God for his gift beyond all words; how, in silence and in peace, we open up a space into which people can enter to recognize a God who loves them and longs to be at peace with them.

Passion and stillness: is that what people find in the city set on a hill, or in this building and community, or in all our local communities across this diocese? Please God, it is. But we need to go on working and praying and deepening those two great things which flow from Calvary; the *passion* to be there alongside those in deepest need, bound as if by nails, and the *stillness* of wordless gratitude to a God who has spared himself nothing in re-making our world and ourselves. Passion and stillness: the energy and the quiet. It's been said of God himself that in him is ceaseless, unimaginable movement, and an energy beyond anything we can conceive, yet at the same time an utter stillness, at peace. We can't get our minds around that. We recognize one bit at a time of that mystery. And yet in our own witness and our own service, those are the things we're called to hold together.

I spoke a bit earlier of the culture shock of coming from Wales to the Fens. And I brought with me then a verse of one of the great Welsh hymns etched in the memory of so many of my fellow countrymen. It's a hymn usually called *Bryn Calvaria* (Calvary Hill) about the crucifixion, and it ends with an image which is perhaps particularly appropriate here in this very un-Welsh environment; because while you may not have hills, you do have winds. That hymn ends: *O give me the grace to feel the wind that blows from the hill of Calvary*. That wind blowing from the hill of Calvary is what stirs us to that blend of passion and stillness which shows what God has done. The great preachers and teachers of the faith in this place, as throughout our country have -- when they've been faithful -- shown that mixture of passion and silence. And the lives of all the great saints have both those moments in them.

So as we seek to live out our lives in God's new creation, filled with that promise of reconciliation, may we feel 'that wind that blows from Calvary's hill'. May it fill our lungs; set our blood on fire, racing in our veins; kindle our imagination and our strength to go and bear witness, to be a light to the world; change the landscape, illuminating all the corners of human experience; and remind all those who look to this city set on a hill, of the God who spares nothing to be with us; who when he has promised to be with us, is with us for ever, yesterday, today and always, Jesus Christ the same.