

Cathedrals as meeting place

It's good to be here, and I bring greetings from the Cathedral in Coventry, both to the community here in Ottawa, and especially to those connected with our reconciliation ministry, and also the gathering of Deans from across North America, here for the conference. The theme of the conference this year is Cathedrals as Meeting Places, and it's wonderful to be putting that into practice as we are here together this morning.

Cathedrals are big, on the whole, and offer space, distinctive and also often distinguished, in their contexts. They are symbols of power, which can be challenging when we want to speak of following a Lord who is ready to lay down his life for the sheep - but because of that power, they are able to amplify the voices of the hidden ones, and offer spaces for the powerful and the powerless to meet together. They are, often, beautiful, and their beauty and the beauty of the worship offered in them can lift hearts and minds to God, and serve to open our imaginations ... to the new worlds that God is always bringing about, worlds of new and reconciled relationships with God and one another.

It's never long before someone from Coventry starts speaking about reconciliation - many of you will know our story, of destruction leading to both resurrection and reconciliation, two sides of the same coin for us in Coventry. (In this Easter season, I often have the chance to preach on the resurrection appearances as paradigm examples of recovery of relationship.) Our Cathedral was burnt out in the Coventry blitz of November 1940, but that became, by the grace of God and the courage of our leaders, a springboard to new, deeper, reconciled relationships with our former enemies, and ultimately to a worldwide movement, the community of the cross of nails, of which this Cathedral, along with many others represented here, is a member. Taking its name from crosses originally made from roof nails gathered following the fire of destruction, symbols of God's love and hope in Christ forged in the midst of destruction, to joins some 250 partners across the world in the work of reconciliation. I describe that as journeying from a fractured past towards a shared future, and we pursue it by addressing our three priorities of healing the wounds of history; learning to live with difference and celebrate diversity; and building a culture of justice and peace.

There is a cross of nails in this Cathedral, brought by my colleague Sarah Hills in 2017 - and I am carrying one with me to take to St Paul's Cathedral of the Diocese of Huron in London Ontario next weekend. It's a wonderful symbol for those who want to place a sign or a symbol in their midst to say, we believe that we are called to the ministry of reconciliation as the heart of our identity and vocation. God was in Christ reconciling the world to Godself, and has committed to us the ministry, and the message of reconciliation for the world. 2 Cor 5 18 and 19.

Cathedrals are places which are well suited to this ministry of reconciliation. We are places of encounter, places of meeting - for the bishop and their people, which is what they are created for, but also today for so much more. To take forward enriching relationships for the good of all. Starting with hospitality, at our best we are there to nurture honest encounter without pressure to conform to particular norms of belief or behaviour, offering space for people to make their own, personal journeys alone or in community with others. And the ministry of reconciliation is there to help us to offer, and them to draw on the resources of God to address their history, present and future. The Holy Spirit enables us to discover ways of meeting together, and to draw us on journeys of reconciliation, which are often beyond anything we might imagine possible.

So how do our lectionary readings today speak into that image of Cathedrals? Well, It may be tempting to see our Cathedrals as rather up market sheepfolds. There are sheepfolds, and then there are sheepfolds ... we are responsible for the sheepfolds that are the mothers of all sheepfolds. The folds that the more intelligent sheep - those sheep with aspiration - might hope to be gathered into. The sheepfolds that, if we are deans, we might be reasonably proud of being charged with.

Of course, you can immediately see the dangers of this line of thinking. The point of the gospel parable is really not the fold at all, it's about Jesus. And if what we are about in our Cathedral ministry starts to be about the fold, and not Jesus - or those he came to serve and to save - then we have made the same mistake as if we had misread the gospel. That is underlined by the slightly mysterious line, which has no generally agreed interpretation, about "the sheep not of this fold": our job is to focus on Jesus, not to concern ourselves with whether ours is the best, or even the only fold for the sheep. In fact the First Nations translation we used for the gospel this morning introduces another qualification - it doesn't even use the word 'sheepfold', but instead simply speaks of 'other flocks' - placing the emphasis more clearly on the sheep themselves and not the structure in which they gather.

I've had this story of the sheepfold, and the good shepherd, very much in mind throughout our gathering these past few days. That's one of the advantages of being a preacher, that you get to chew on the Bible passages looking for what God may be wanting to say. And whilst it's true that the point of the parable is to understand who Jesus is, the good shepherd, there are other characters in the story who may be worth reflecting on - and where we might see ourselves in the parable. Those of us called to be Deans, or licensed ministers of one kind or another, may well instinctively see ourselves as one of those charged with the care of the sheep - and so our choice is whether we identify with the good shepherd or the hired hand. But first, we are sheep - those who find themselves part of the messy jumble of bodies bleating and jostling one another in search of food. A smelly, noisy crowd of life.

One of the first lessons you have to learn, and then relearn time and time again in ordained ministry is that you are not Jesus. We are ourselves sheep, needing to know God's care and forgiveness ourselves - vulnerable and a bit of a mess. Sheep, just like those we are called to care for. That's important in the ministry of reconciliation, and it's reflected in the Coventry Prayer, the Litany of Reconciliation, which has as its refrain the words carved into the apse of the ruins of the old Cathedral, Father Forgive. There is no 'them' in that phrase ... we stand to shoulder with those for whom we pray God's forgiveness. Recognising the truth of my favourite line from the passage from 1 John 3 this morning - that there are times when our hearts condemn us, even us, and we need to turn alongside everyone else to the God who is greater than our hearts.

So, we are not Jesus, we are sheep - but as the church we are not only sheep, we are also called to share in the ministry of the shepherd. Those of us who are ordained need to know that our calling us not to make ourselves like Jesus, but to make the church like Jesus (or to enable the Holy Spirit to do that). What does that look like? For the church, as the body of Christ, to take on the ministry of the good shepherd? It looks like Psalm 23: being with the people in times of joy, in fields and by pools, and in times of desolation, in dark valleys ... journeying with them through life offering hospitality - spreading tables and inviting the people to come and sit down and be served.

This is the calling of the church, to embody the ministry of Jesus. To know the people so that we can recognise them, call them by name. We heard yesterday a beautiful address about belonging. It started with this sentence - I was not the only who wanted to hear it again, and I hope I've got it right: "The degree of openness and trust makes it more or less difficult to belong in our families, our churches, our world and ourselves."

Sheep are really known by the shepherd. The shepherd - as opposed to the hired hand - lived with the sheep, knew them and was known by them. The sheepfold was a place of close encounter - a place of safety ... How well do we know ourselves and know one another in our cathedrals? (We've moved beyond the assumption that people coming to Cathedrals want to be unknown ... although that can sometimes still be true.)

To know ourselves and know ourselves known. This is the heart of the matter. Sheep, knowing one another, knowing the shepherd, and known by him.

Now to the one who by the power at work within us is able to accomplish abundantly far more than all we can ask or imagine, to God be glory in the church and in Christ Jesus to all generations, for ever and ever. Amen. Eph 3. 20,21