

## **Civic Service Sermon – Sunday 12<sup>th</sup> July 2009**

**Canon Barry Naylor**

We are known as a city of festivals and celebrations celebrating our diversity and our unity– e.g. festival of South Asian Arts and Culture today in our city centre.

This Civic Service is an annual gathering, a celebration, when we give thanks for the life of our great city. We pray for its wellbeing, acknowledging, also, things that may not have gone as well as they might and we look forward to future joys and celebrations, as the life of the city moves on into exciting and challenging times.

Each year this celebration takes place in a particular context, in the life of our city, our nation and the wider world. Nationally there is a widespread sense of disillusionment with traditional politics, following recent expenses scandals at Westminster – the fallout of which has, unfortunately, affected the way the whole body politic is perceived, as we saw in the recent local and European elections and hear in daily conversations. Respected financial institutions, have crashed, in this land and throughout the world and there is deep economic uncertainty and instability. Some believe that both these situations could combine to create dangerous and volatile political times – in the recent elections we saw, for instance, two EMPs elected, representing the British National Party. A party whose leader suggested, just this week, that the most appropriate way to respond to people searching for a better life for themselves and their dependents in Europe was to shoot them out of the sea, as they attempted to cross the Mediterranean.

Here in Leicester there have been many developments over the last twelve months – including the opening of Highcross, the much awaited Streets and Spaces project in the city centre, CURVE and other projects; we have recently seen the appointment of a new City Centre Director. We have also been hit by global financial problems –

reflected partly in the depressingly large number of empty premises we see, as we walk around our city centre.

As we look to the future, we are preparing, before the end of this month, to welcome thousands of people to city, and the wider county, for the Special Olympics, we are hoping the Walkers Stadium might be part of the UK World Cup Bid. We trust that the great advances already made in the regeneration of our city will continue, supported by the work of the City Council, Prospect Leicestershire, and many other partners, committed to ensuring that the Leicester will truly grow into a wealthy, healthy, environmentally sustainable city – a good place for all its citizens to live in safety and where all our lives can be enhanced. Social regeneration is as vital as the regeneration of the physical environment and this must embrace the young and the old, all members of our diverse cultural jigsaw, long established residents on our outer estates, whose families have lived here for generations, as well as highly valued more recent arrivals. We must continue building bridges between the City and the County for so much of what goes on in the City affects the lives of those in the County and vice versa. The Church and other faith communities play their role in many ways – providing, for instance, thousands of volunteer hours each year and our Cathedral Square Project, on this very site, will address issues of social regeneration at the heart of the city and county.

There is much on the agenda – we are a city on the move but it is always important to stop and reflect as to where we are going and how we are getting there. What are the values we embrace? What is the soul of our city? This is particularly necessary at a time when there is so much cynicism abroad about the body politic, when change is all around. “Semper eadem” may not be the best of mottos as we adapt to a new world order.

Our first reading today was from one of the great Prophets of the Hebrew tradition – Micah. The prophets were the ones who constantly reminded the people to be faithful to God and to the Covenant he had established with his people – they spoke of a God

who demanded justice, faithfulness, mercy, and those things necessary that people might know that deep SHALOM, SALAAM, which is the experience of life in all its richness and wholeness. The peace of which “SHALOM” speaks is not merely the simple absence of violence; it is a much deeper and more all-embracing experience, encountered by those whose are truly focussed on what enables “individuals in community” to live in peace and know life in all its richness. In the words of Micah, those things that once wreaked destruction will be turned into tools for nourishing and enriching life, for banishing fear.

Leicester City Council's key objective is:

“Making Leicester more attractive for our diverse communities to live, work and invest in” – many initiatives are in place to work towards this goal.

We must offer real hope that people, here in Leicester, can experience life in all its richness and fullness – real hope based on concrete proposals – not just spurious optimism and fine words.

We need to ensure that the aspirations we have, concerning the future, are actually put into effect – different solutions will come from different party political perspectives but, underlying all we seek to do, what better guide could we have than those words from St. Paul that we heard in our second reading?

“whatever is true, whatever is honourable, whatever is just, whatever is pure, whatever is pleasing, whatever is commendable, if there is any excellence and if there is anything worthy of praise, think about these things”.

In this context “Semper eadem” may indeed a commendable motto, as we honour these words written centuries ago. These words must not just be platitudes, which so

easily roll off our lips, but words we regularly reflect on, as we examine our motives, formulate our visions and decide on appropriate policies and actions.

Truth and integrity must be seen to be what we are all about – in church and in society. There is nothing so guaranteed to undermine the credibility of any institution, or individual, if we say one thing and are seen to do another.

Being honourable is a concept that may appear outdated – but here again it is something which people look for and hope to see in each other, especially in those responsible for leadership. If acting dishonourably is seen to be acceptable amongst leaders – how soon that can spread like an infection throughout society. We must strive to be men, women and children of honour.

Justice was one of those words that were often on the lips of the Prophets. Micah, whom we read earlier, said that God required three things of us:

to

“act justly

love tenderly,

walk humbly” .

Acting justly towards all, with no partiality, is vital for building healthy communities and justice must be transparent.

Purity has something of transparency about it – it is not murky, not hidden away; it is there for all to see. This too encourages confidence and respect when decision making processes take place. Corruption and suspicion can thrive when transparency is not a priority.

St Paul speaks about “whatever is pleasing” – this is not to resort to base populism; it is about aspiring to what is best and is closely linked to acting honourably, and in

commendable ways, in the light of our most noble aspirations. It is about striving for excellence in all we do - in the visions we have and in the delivery of those visions.

As people of faith, we pray for the wellbeing of our city, that all our citizens, and those who visit us, may know that deep, deep Shalom. Salaam, which we believe is God's desire for each and every person irrespective of their age, gender, class, sexual orientation, race, cultural background, religious views or whatever. Every single person has an indescribable dignity, as someone created in the Divine Image, and we not only pray for a city in which this truth will be honoured but we commit ourselves to working with all partners in our city who share this goal and vision, that we may build relationships and environments, by which, and in which, all may flourish and experience life in all its fullness,  
“acting justly, loving tenderly and walking humbly with God and with each other”

**Amen**