

LEICESTER CATHEDRAL
21 October 2007

“The Bishop’s Church”

2 Timothy 4:5 – “But you, keep your head in all situations, endure hardship, do the work of an evangelist, discharge all the duties of your ministry.”

This is what we expect the Bishop always to do, isn’t it? Cope with everything flung at him. Work himself to exhaustion each day. Be spokesman for all of us about everything. To be on our level but yet elevated above it. To agree with what we agree with. And, above all, to do everything on our behalf. With such unrealistic expectations of the Bishop as the pinnacle of a church hierarchy, his postbag will have a constant stream of complaints, his filing cabinet will be stuffed with reports and position papers he has speed-read, his diary overflowing with meetings, gatherings, and appointments one after the other – some pleasant, some unpleasant.

Weaving a tangled web through all this are manifold relational considerations. What is the Bishop’s identity to be? Pushy people think he (from a minority of one) knows them because (from the majority of the world’s population) recognise him – and immediately call him “Tim”. Circumspect people go along with the recent convention of referring to “Bishop TIM”, and so appear to domesticate the Bishop. Those who like a bit of hierarchy look to him as “the Lord Bishop” – a peer among their peers, “one of us” implying “but not of them”. I personally cannot make up my mind and resolutely pray for “Timothy our Bishop”.

Among other aspirations, Leicester Cathedral is meant to be “the Bishop’s Church”. Our vision statement refers to two vital aspects of Cathedral work that need to be recognised far more by all of us than has been the case in the twentieth century: Leicester Cathedral is constantly committed to “supporting the mission of the Diocese and Bishop of Leicester”. Leicester Cathedral is constantly engaged in “strengthening the partnership between the Cathedral, the Diocese and the Bishop”. How is all this best expressed?

For 80 years of this Cathedral’s life and witness, “the Bishop’s Church” has been expressed unsatisfactorily. The layout of this Cathedral Church makes an early twentieth-century statement of clear hierarchy that must be deeply questionable at the start of the twenty-first century. The Diocesan Bishop is meant to process to the main Sanctuary in the East and occupy his Throne at a distance and even out of sight. Then, also in the East but slightly lower down and a bit towards the West sit the relatively few that make up the Bishop’s “court”. The Dean and the Canons are meant to process to their Stalls in the Chapter House Chancel (it is not meant for the Choirs), with the Dean as “gatekeeper” of the Screen. And the rest are left to congregate in the Nave. By this series of hierarchical divisions and this social rigidity it has been assumed that liturgically, theologically, spiritually, socially and ecclesiastically the glories of the crucified, risen and ascended Lord Jesus Christ will become mightily and universally effective in Leicester, Leicestershire and beyond.

“Supporting the mission of the Diocese and the Bishop of Leicester” in this inflexibly ordered architectural pattern no longer achieves much – if it ever did. The major breakthrough that was achieved in 1927 at the hallowing of Leicester Cathedral was the admission of lay people as Canons alongside ordained people as members of the Bishop’s “court”. The mobilisation of this “social capital” of lay and ordained people of quality and influence has however rarely been perceptible in Diocese and Cathedral working together, particularly with the rise of Synodical Government. Hence we are called to enact the intention from Leicester Cathedral’s vision to “strengthen the partnership between the Cathedral, the Diocese and the Bishop”. Interestingly there is no place provided for those people of quality and influence appointed since the Cathedrals Measure 1999: lay members of Chapter and members of the Cathedral Council who are not Canons.

This introduces relational aspirations that, if taken seriously and enacted, challenge a complexity of boundaries to be overcome, power-bases to be shared and wounds of recent history to be healed. Most important of all, this common task insists on a shared appreciation of what the Kingdom of God means for Leicester, Leicestershire and beyond. It also calls on all involved - every one of “us and them” - to grow far more cohesive and sacrificial, to release for God’s use all the combined resources, material and spiritual, to accomplish this pilgrimage and goal for the sake of our Lord Jesus Christ. Dispersed authority instead of hierarchy – all looking to Jesus as Lord.

Such a calling means a reordering not just of the Cathedral Church – “the Bishop’s Church”. It means the reordering of how we relate to each other. Instead of seeing it “vertically” as hierarchy, we should come to it “horizontally” and interactively. So the many-layered, hierarchical, “flaky pastry”, gate-keeping structures we are used to in the Church of England that frequently stop things happening, become simpler, more dynamic and far more enabling. This calling means a reordering of how we think of the Cathedral and one another. The Bishop’s Church is Our Church, too. It is also the Church for All, the Church always looking towards the “big picture” for the sake of Jesus, and the Church always open to all.

Adding to the spiritual expectations we have of the Bishop, never forget that those expectations apply to you, each one of you, and to me. So what about the Cathedral and you in fellowship with the Bishop? Heed the commands of the New Testament Reading today as a checklist for yourself: “Keep your head in all situations”. Cathedrals can be places where feelings run high and resentments are recharged rather than dumped at the foot of the Cross. This command, with the Holy Spirit’s help, is usually far more effectively accomplished by prayer rather than argument, confrontation and stand-offs.

To perform well in the pilgrimage ahead means clear, resolute goals that we share with calm, mutual encouragement and gladness, even when “the devil is in the detail”. “Enduring hardship” means owning the Cathedral’s daily life and ministry with a generous spirit, financially and in all other ways. It also means weathering change – not for change’s sake – but moving ahead for the right reasons, instead of always coming up with reasons why something can never be done.

“Do the work of an evangelist” means knowing what the Bishop’s and the Cathedral’s priorities to commend Jesus are. Among other aspects of the Bishop’s mission is

Christ's longing for people to bond together, "that they might all be one". Then the ministry of the Bishop as "pontifex" or bridge towards many and varied groups and interests means supporting important services and events that are not strictly "congregational".

Evangelism in this sense for Leicester and Leicestershire within and outwards from the Cathedral requires each of us to have a personal attachment to Jesus Christ as Lord and Saviour, but not in those rather old-fashioned, dogmatic – at times unhealthily intense, manipulative ways. Bishop/Cathedral evangelism is much wider and farther-reaching. Just think what Leicester Cathedral is in business for and poised for further development: Deep appreciation and enactment of liturgy, high standards of musicianship and singing; deep prayerfulness and sensitive pastoral care; work with children and young people; regeneration in spiritual ways as well as social and economic; the quest for better cohesion among groups that differ; the development of comradeship and understanding between people of all faiths, outlooks and none; education work with schools and colleges; care of asylum seekers and refugees; advocacy for and empowerment of those who cry out for justice, fulfilment and inclusion but cannot voice their needs. The ministry of a twenty-first-century Bishop is to be on the move, sometimes at the centre of things, sometimes at the margins of Church and Society, linking to each other groups that differ, all for mutual benefit and the glory of Christ. Linking groups that differ can often apply to parishes and benefices in the Diocese that, like the Cathedral and the City Centre Churches, are having to learn to partner one another in mission.

The Bishop's Church cannot flourish if the unrealistic expectations of all are inflicted on him. Being the Bishop's Church means serious engagement by each one of us to further the Gospel in Leicester and Leicestershire and farther afield. It boils down to "Leicester Cathedral and you", "Leicester Cathedral and me".

Finally, this Reading calls upon all to "fulfil the duties of your ministry". Bonding, bridging and linking. The Dean leads the Bishop's Church on behalf of all – but not alone! Understand how her constant care that everyone bond, bridge and link could become a breaking point without our care and co-operation. Take more ownership of this Bishop's Church. Bond more closely and consistently with one another and with the Cathedral Community. Become a bridge so that our shared vision and life streams outwards into groups and communities by your commendation, enthusiasm and conviction. Link the Cathedral and its life to those who share your daily living, at home, at work, at leisure and in friendships, Leicester Cathedral is open to all but commends and shares Christ's vision and values under the Bishop's care and cure.

The writer of the New Testament Reading today was "on the way out". "As for me, I am already being poured out as a libation, and the time for my departure has come. I have fought the good fight, I have finished the race, I have kept the faith." WE, young and old, are still at the start. The starting whistle is about to sound! The Bishop and the Cathedral Chapter cannot run without each one of you giving your utmost as well.

Canon Michael Wilson.