

LEICESTER CATHEDRAL
23 September 2007

“The Environment of Change”

The queues forming outside branches of “Northern Rock” this week pose many spiritual – as well as financial – questions. In what or who do we place our trust? What or who is our Rock? Here are “Northern Rock” investors asserting their individuality over and against the financial institution they have hitherto trusted. As we think about “The Environment of Change”, we apply the implications of inevitable change to our experiences and knowledge of Leicester Cathedral and the Diocese, City and County of Leicester we serve.

Two main questions arise. How do we best belong to this Cathedral, Diocese, City and County as individuals and together? Secondly, with the inevitable prospect of change, can we trust one another, can we trust the institutions we belong to and serve, as individuals and together? There should be a creative tension between how we feel as individuals and how we work together as Leicester Cathedral to accomplish achievable, Holy Spirit-led transformation so that Jesus Christ can be glorified in the human life of the twenty-first century – not just within the Cathedral but outside for the service of the Diocese, City, County and even Nation. There are stark choices: working together or fragmenting, trusting or faithlessness.

Lots of things work on trust and we scarcely think about them. Simple things like waiting for the bus and it arriving; queuing with the faith that everyone will do so; showing up for work; expecting people to acknowledge you gladly. The conventions of British society are built on trust. This may explain why so many people today are disappointed with the institutional Church. They find the inherent kindness and tolerance of society more readily offered to them in the secular sphere to enhance their lives than what the Church is perceived as offering with its current admixture of highly publicised “Christian” bitterness.

In Cathedral life we automatically expect our Cathedral, its staff and volunteers to be there when we turn up for a Service or when we want them to be helpful to us. Sunday “regulars” come in weekly, fortnightly, monthly or less frequently, and expect it to be the same as ever. Visitors come in and, despite its small scale, are “wowed” by the building and location – by this oasis of prayer and peace at the heart of this mixed City and County, largely dedicated as ever to individual wealth and gain – with the motto “Semper Eadem”, “always the same”.

As the diocesan Church of the City and County and as one of the Cathedrals of the Nation, Leicester Cathedral is called to conduct public worship in the English Cathedral tradition, but also to be “the Church for All”. This is where each of us is key to this Cathedral’s future viability. Without our solidarity and trust as faithful Cathedral people – what we now call “Leicester Cathedral Community”, this local Cathedral, this little “Anglican Arcadia”, will become increasingly deceptive and untenable. The risen Lord Jesus Christ calls us by the Holy Spirit to do much more than maintain a building. He calls us by the Holy Spirit to experience, communicate and share with others the timeless things of God.

Using the words of St. Paul, we have to recognise the “earthen vessels” we rely on – our cherished attitudes inculcated up to 50 or 60 years ago, the fragility of the assets and ways of working of our Church on Earth. The situation is far more precarious than we like to think.

Throughout the twentieth century the social forces that used to feed religious recruitment and religious life in Britain have been drying up. There was the massive exit from the hierarchical churches and institutional religious belief after the human, social and spiritual devastation of the First World War. British people continued to vote with their feet. Following the Second World War, with growing individual wealth, compulsory education and the Welfare State, much of the Churches’ day-to-day activity towards and in society started to cease.

Intellectually and emotionally as the end of the twentieth century approached what Matthew Arnold described in “Dover Beach” as the “melancholy, long, withdrawing roar” of the “sea of faith” has individualised – even privatised – a corporately sensed Christian faith that once validated the Church of England as the “National Church”. No longer can we trust that people will simply “turn up” through our door – which has been the expectation of Christian religious institutions for many centuries. There is no lack of interest and enthusiasm for “spirituality”, but no appetite for hierarchical ways of living and working, no appetite for people and places of ungenerous judgements – all of which I believe Jesus campaigned against in his time. So, in this “environment of change” we need a reality check, individually and corporately, looking to Our Lord for his call to renewed discipleship.

Where do we start? I believe it will begin in our solidarity and sacrifice together. We are to raise our aspirations and raise our “ecclesiastical game” as the key Christian household of faith, committed and active within and from the heart of the Diocese, City and County. Raising our aspirations means we can no longer carry on expecting our religion on the cheap. Raising our “ecclesiastical game” means ditching defeatism and squaring up to those who habitually talk us down. We are called to work to ensure that the future of Leicester Cathedral is no longer subject to the eye-watering privations it has endured until recently. Consider recent benefits: the Cathedral Centre and the Cathedral Visitor Centre – all due to the generosity of the Leicester Cathedral Millennium Appeal. Consider the restoration of the tower and spire, the rebuilding and improvement of the organ, even the chairs you are sitting on! Leicester Cathedral is becoming the gathering-place for all around us. But eye-watering privations remain.

The Cathedral Church is small with outdated and inadequate facilities – a building partitioned into even smaller rooms. Everything appears fenced in. Access to this ancient building is grim – and I am not just talking about the parking. Look at what surrounds it on your way to and from this place. The Cathedral’s profile is low, mirroring the City and County profiles. Many locally and in our nation do not realise Leicester is a Cathedral City and Leicestershire a Cathedral County. A significant aspect of my work as Canon Pastor as I mingle with congregations here and people in parishes, in the Diocese and in society and institutions of all sorts, is “reputation risk management”. People appear to find it easier to be detrimental towards Leicester Cathedral than to become supportive of it and enthused by the Cathedral Chapter’s vision and planning for the future. When inaugurating “an environment of

change”, that environment is not just material and financial. It includes the human mindsets within and beyond the Cathedral.

What can we do? There are two ways that point to an optimistic and glorious future materially and spiritually: Leicester Cathedral as “the Church for All” and Leicester Cathedral as “the Gathering-Place for all around us”. As the Cathedral Community, the household of faith called by God to develop and accomplish these twin aims day by day, we need to change our over-accustomed Cathedral environment for the better. We are already learning and experiencing how to be a distinctly Christian community in inclusive ways. We should not be derailed by anyone from that spiritual and pastoral track. This is the substance of our calling in Jesus Christ. Also, as Cathedral people we should take more readily into our hearts and minds that belonging to the Cathedral Community entails sacrifice and application spiritually and socially – appreciating, understanding and sharing the common life it leads and offers to all day by day. Above all, we should try to trade on our strengths instead of our weaknesses. We shall never be an ancient cathedral foundation with constant streams of marvelling visitors and tourists. Our “footfall” is limited and always will be.

We therefore need to trade on this City of Faiths and this County of Social Variety and Pleasantness in relational rather than hierarchical ways – to invite and encourage visitors, pilgrims and disciples for good reason. To share with them what we as the Body of Christ are about spiritually, pastorally, musically, educationally and socially. This increasingly will mean school visits, but what about other avenues of Christian expertise and sharing? Like starting to attend to the souls of people in business and commerce, in the parishes of the Diocese and in the institutions that might love an invitation? If we all believe that the most authentic and fulfilling human identity and hope is being incorporated into Jesus Christ, then our primary aim is welcoming all kinds of people for clear purposes and then glorifying their lives.

To achieve this “Value for Visit”, Leicester Cathedral has to change its material and spiritual environment radically. In ultra-modern jargon, the Cathedral is poised to become a “hotspot”. Such hot spots are moments when people are working together in exceptionally creative and collaborative ways. Hot spots occur when the energy within and between people flares up – when customary, often mundane, activities trigger off engaged work that is exciting and challenging, when ideas become contagious and new possibilities can be planned and realised.

Hotspots soon burn themselves out to nothing if they are disconnected from the real world around them. The Cathedral's very environment is challenging us to change our attitudes and our ways. Can we become much, much more than a Sunday drive-in, city-centre church, and instead connect with the exciting and challenging regeneration of this Cathedral in the middle of Leicester? Can we connect more and more with all sorts and conditions in Leicester and Leicestershire? We should develop the Cathedral to give to all who gather the challenge and love of Jesus Christ, to their spiritual comfort and to the heartening of body, mind and spirit. It will not come cheap. Can we, and our associates and allies in Leicester and Leicestershire raise our game for the sake of Jesus Christ's twenty-first century?

Canon Michael Wilson.