

Pavilions of Grace
Installation of Peter Vannozzi and Tony Robinson
as Residentiary Canons of Wakefield Cathedral

Trinity III

Sunday 12 June 2005

‘The Kingdom of heaven is at hand.’ Matthew.10.7

Some of you, I am sure, will have been to Barcelona. It is a really exciting city for dozens of reasons. First of all, it is the capital of Catalonia. Secondly, it is perhaps the most vivacious Spanish city. But most amazing of all is the great unfinished basilica of the Sagra Familia. The masterpiece of the architect Gaudi, it is a cathedral of cranes and scaffolding, of lonely *pinnacles and incomplete walls* – but the vision of the finished church is all around you.

What was it like, I wonder, when this great church was being built? Well, here’s one picture of the building of this place, and of all our mediaeval cathedrals. The lines are by John Ormonde:

‘They climbed on sketchy ladders towards God,
With winch and pulley hoisted hewn rock into heaven,
Inhabited sky with hammers, defied gravity,
Deified stone, took up God’s house to meet Him.
And came down to their suppers and small beer;
Every *night* slept, lay with their smelly wives,
Quarrelled and cuffed their children, lied,
Spat, sang, were happy or unhappy.
And every *day* took to the ladders again;
Impeded the rights of way of another summer’s
Swallows, grew greyer, shakier, became less inclined
To fix a neighbour’s roof of an evening.
Saw naves sprout arches, clerestories soar,
Cursed the loud fancy glaziers for their luck,
Somehow escaped the plague, got rheumatism,
Decided it was time to give up,
To leave the spire to others; stood in the crowd
Well back from the vestments at the consecration,
Envied the fat bishop with his warm boots,
Cocked up a squint eye and said “I bloody did that”!

That feels to me like a pretty authentic picture of what it was like. It’s earthy, its warm, it’s enthusiastic and most of all it’s rooted in our common humanity. Cathedrals can easily become hopelessly romantic, and not a little grand. As a survivor of two, who has been on the periphery of two more, you can take my word for it! But Ormonde shows that in cathedrals, as in everything else, all human life is there: ‘Smelly wives – and doubtless *husbands* too, fat bishops – and *deans*, magnificent architecture – but some of it almost happening as much by luck as well as by judgement.

In Wakefield, we're more fortunate than in many a cathedral. Packed into the heart of a northern city, we've no space for arrogance. Choc-a-bloc with BHS, Dollond and Aitchison, Burger King and everything else – there's no avoiding the reality of everyday life. And, finally, mixed up like raisins, currants and sultanas with night clubs, pubs and the seedier bits of contemporary life, we are uniquely placed. In many ways we have the opportunity to be the most dazzling cathedral in England. We proclaim the love of God by whom we are and where we are.

And today's readings set out this agenda, both with great inspiration and fearful clarity. First of all, *we* do nothing to receive God's love. In unique generosity it is given in Jesus. Listen to Paul once again: 'God's love has been *poured into our hearts* through the Holy Spirit which has been given to us.' And moments later: 'God shows his love for us in that while we were *yet sinners* Christ died for us.' Or, again, in that snapshot from the gospel which was my text: 'The Kingdom of heaven is *at hand*. We do nothing to bring it. God has established it right in the midst of us, for us to work with it.

And so then, what do we say today here in Wakefield, and of Tony and Peter? What will their presence here tell of cathedrals? First of all, neither of them is a *cathedral person*. Peter – a Londoner through and through – no harm in that – believe me! School in Hanwell, early ministry still in West London. Then Fleet in Hampshire, and recently in the midst of South London. Peter's heart has been fashioned by the pulse of a great city, and he has been warmed by God's grace as a pastor. That generosity of God, of which I have just spoken, is here among you in Peter – he will be for us a walking sacrament of God's redeeming and healing love.

And so to Tony. Tony needs no introduction – you have taken him into your hearts these past eight years, as he has also done to you. Tony's warmth, humility, and extraordinary energy and passion for justice and peace is in itself another sacramental token of God's remarkable generosity. Alongside George as your dean, Tony will now bring a real sense of the wider diocese with him. Separate foundations though they must be, ultimately cathedral and diocese are inseparable. It is not unique for a bishop also to be a residentiary – but in our day it is unusual and intriguing. It gives an opportunity for us all to work together for the development of this great building.

So, there is a brief snapshot of both Peter and Tony. It is not Peter and Tony alone, but rather as part of the college and community which is this cathedral, that we celebrate this morning. The earthiness, warmth and everydayness of this cathedral is mirrored in what they will bring through God's grace to this place. As we give thanks for those who have served here, so we celebrate too the beginnings of this next chapter (excuse the dreadful pun). We celebrate some new beginnings. Remember – the Kingdom of heaven is *at hand*, at the very doors!

In that first reading from the Exodus, we hear the Lord say to Moses: 'I bore you on eagles' wings and brought you to myself'. May we all respond as Israel did then: 'All that the Lord has spoken we shall do'.

Amen

Readings:

Exodus 19: 2-8a; Romans 5: 1-8; Matthew 9: 35-10:8

+Stephen Platten