

Salisbury Cathedral

29 September 2018

St. Michael and All Angels

Annual LLM Admission Service

Wow! What an amazing place this is. Look around you. Go on – look up at the ceiling with its slender ribs; and above it a vast barn of roof space; look at the pillars, apparently so delicate but supporting so much; look at the windows, so light and sharing so much information. And, outside, look at the carved saints and the decoration and, above it all, look at the spire held together by the engineering of both the Middle Ages and the Twentieth Century and, as every Russian knows, 123 metres high. The whole place is quite fantastic. No wonder so many people from across the world flock here to admire and be moved.

But this is not the first cathedral for this Diocese. There was another, Norman building on a hill not far away. The Diocese, and its cathedral, were part of William the Conqueror's message to the people of Wessex. A message that said, 'I'm in charge! Everything is different from now on. The Church is an arm of the civil power to subdue this whole country.' And so it stood at Old Sarum for a hundred years: a message of authority and control.

Then one day the Bishop gathered his chaps together outside the old Cathedral and said, 'See this great, strong building, with its rounded arches and monumental pillars? Well, we're going to knock it down and build a new one, down there, by the river!' (There was no English Heritage to stop them then!)

'And,' he went on, 'it's going to be the most modern building anyone round here has ever seen. The most up-to-date materials, the newest technology. Everyone will be astonished.'

'Why?' they asked. 'We like it here. We like doing what we've always done.' 'Because', said the Bishop, 'It's time to change the message. We are no longer part of the king's statement of power. We should be getting on with what we were called to do.'

'Which is?' enquired his chaps. 'Praising God, spreading his Gospel and serving his people. But we've got to do it in new ways; ways that speak directly to folk; ways they will understand and in the language they use and in new places. And to make it clear, we are going to have new architecture'

So they did and this is the result. The message it gives me in its vastness is one of freedom; from its light, one of joy and from its beauty, an image of heaven. For our new Dean this cathedral is 'a message of hope that is visible for miles around'. When you go home, think about the message this place gives you.

Today is the Feast of St. Michael and All Angels. The Bible doesn't tell us much about angels, but they do seem to have two jobs.

The first is to praise God and we heard about that in our Second Lesson from John recounting his vision. The other job for the angels is to be God's messengers, as we heard in the First Lesson from Daniel's extraordinary prophecy.

Worship God and tell people his message. That's what angels do. Come to think of it, isn't that what we're supposed to do? We, Bishops and Clergy and Lay Ministers and everyone who calls Jesus 'Lord'. Just like the angels we are called to praise God for what he is and what he does and to share God's news, the Good News, the Gospel, wherever we go, whatever we do – in deeds and in words.

Today, we Lay Ministers of this Diocese have come to renew our promises to do that. To be faithful in worship, in prayer and the sacraments, in service to our fellow human beings and in reading the scriptures and learning from and about them. And, perhaps especially in sharing the Gospel, God's Good News.

So as we welcome those newly admitted and those who have transferred here, as we make afresh our promises, as we share our stories, as we worship God, we are reminded what we are licensed to do. A friend recently pointed me towards a quotation from Bishop Michael Perham's recently published book, *The Unfolding Story*. Bishop Michael, who came from the Diocese, said, 'Your commission is not to chat about Jesus or give a talk. It is to preach Christ, the eternal Word of the Father, and that's an awesome ministry of words well chosen'.

So, let us remind ourselves what this eternal Word of the Father is. That each one of us, the woman sitting next to you on the bus, the man in the checkout queue, the beggar in the street, the paedophile in his prison cell, even you and me, is so important to God that he is prepared, willing, to come to live among us a human being, to set an example of a life of service, to reveal

the Creator's love for his creation and to take on himself the responsibility for what we have got wrong so that we may live with him for ever. And he has done so, by becoming one of us as Jesus.

For that, and everything else that God has done, and still does, we must praise him. And to be faithful to our promises we must share his message: today, in the places we are, with the people we meet and those who hear our well-chosen words and see our living out that message. As the Bishop of Leeds said in last week's *Church Times*, 'The Church is drawn by a gospel that sees God at work in the present circumstances, but works for a better future'. That's what was intended by the building of this great cathedral. And likewise in the circumstances in which we find ourselves, we must share the message of God's creation, incarnation and love in new ways, with new words, building new architecture – working for a better future. Praise God and tell people his message!

Bet you didn't know you were an angel, did you? Amen.