

“Jesus, The Cathedral and Us...”

23/9/18

I speak in the name of Jesus the Christ, in the power of the Holy Spirit, to the glory of God the Father.

Amen.

Firstly, I bring you the warmest of greetings from the Rector, the Revd Reeva Mulder and all of the parishioners at St Paul’s, Rondebosch.

Then, a genuine thank you to the Dean, the Very Reverend Father Michael Weeder, for his invitation to preach here at the Cathedral this evening.

I regard it as a massive privilege to stand here in the very same pulpit that greater and more humble minds than mine have stood in, over the years, including Emeritus Arch Bishop Tutu, as well as our current Arch Bishop, Thabo Makgoba.

This Cathedral, St George the Martyr, holds a special place in my heart, as it was on these very steps that I was ordained as Deacon in 2012 and as Priest in 2013. I also have very fond memories of sneaking into evensong back in 2012 when I was an ordinand at St Cyprians, Langa, in my shorts and sandals during summer. I loved taking off my sandals and letting the cool Cathedral floor cool my spirit and thoughts...

But I digress...

When I received the invitation to preach from the Dean, I took time out to reflect upon my message for you this evening. I knew that I wanted to explore the idea of the role and life of the Cathedral in our lives, but was not sure how to approach the concept. Luckily, I had been in touch with the Very Reverend Dr Sarah Rowland Jones, once advisor and researcher to Arch Bishop Thabo, and who now is Dean of St Davids in Wales ... Sarah played an instrumental role in my formation in terms of my Anglican Studies prior to ordination. Interestingly, when I chatted to her about some ideas around cathedrals, she just so happened to be attending a National Cathedrals Conference in Manchester and so was able to provide me with some interesting insights about cathedrals, which I would like to share with you this evening.

I am reminded of the reading taken from the Gospel of Matthew, “Be careful not to do your ‘acts of righteousness’ before men, to be seen by them.” (Matt 6:1)

Cathedrals are often called ‘mother’ churches. What can we learn from this and what does this mean for us as Christians? Furthermore, what does this mean for the life of our cathedral, in this place and at this time?

This cathedral means so many different things to so many different people from all walks of life. Think for a moment of you, the parishioners of St George’s the Martyr, think also of those who come as pilgrims from afar, as well as those who are tourists, inquisitive and interested yet distant from the faith... How are we to continue taking the message of the Gospel to the poor and needy, as well as living a life that is continually conscious of the presence and love of Jesus Christ?

Perhaps a little bit of history to start with? The word “cathedral” comes from being the place of the bishop’s seat, so in essence reflects and symbolizes the authority and leadership of the bishop. Yet, cathedrals are also more than this. Cathedrals are also, by tradition, places of learning, love, worship and perhaps most importantly of all, a place where often secular society looks to for the kerugma of Jesus Christ in society. Nothing could be closer to the truth in terms of the history of this cathedral in terms of the struggle for freedom here in South Africa. This cathedral and her various leaders, especially during the Apartheid years, always stood for equality, democracy and freedom, no matter the cost. This cathedral, born out of the age of colonialism and all that this period stood for (I am mindful of the various British regiment flags flying in this cathedral and the history that they represent, which was not always peaceful), progressed through the age of Apartheid under a oppressive regime and eventually through the struggle, found freedom. This cathedral has lived through it all, yet she still stands, beautiful, timeless and proud, still a sign of the love of Jesus, the authority of the Bishop and most of all, hope for the future.

Perhaps we occasionally need reminding that cathedrals link Christian communities of every time and place. Consider this idea for a moment in terms of forced removals and illegal displacement of peoples. St Georges always

stood firm and solid in the face of turmoil and change so that her people could in effect, always “come back home”. In some ways, every priest of this diocese is also a priest of the cathedral. As Sarah says so poignantly in her installation sermon, “Lay or ordained, all of our lives are bound up together...” in the life of the cathedral.

Dame Fiona Reynolds, a keynote speaker at the recent conference in Manchester suggests that our cathedrals occupy space where beauty, contemplation, worship and reflection are valued in their own right. She continues by saying that cathedrals are also not in bubbles isolated from the mainstream – they exist precisely to have meaning for those communities outside, for pilgrimage, worship, curiosity, learning... a place where people get their own sense of meaning. She would agree with my idea that cathedrals live as a symbol of the love of Jesus Christ through all times, for Reynolds writes that the “... mission of cathedrals is about reverence and relevance; moving with the times as well as being timeless...”

So in essence, our beautiful cathedral is not only a mighty symbol, firstly of the love and grace of Jesus Christ, but also a symbol of the power and love of the church acting out the love of God in the real world around us. She provides hope and relief, joy and sustenance, shelter and healing and most of all assisting us with the belief in something greater than ourselves – God.

How do we do this?

We pray. We continually pray for the Dean and his clergy. We pray for the people of the cathedral. We pray for our Bishop and Arch Bishop.

We continue to cherish the cathedral and look after her health, yet simultaneously keeping her doors open for reconciliation, negotiation and progress in society. By doing this, we make a difference, in the real world around us as Christians. ***For the cathedral may remind us of the beauty and power of the Kingdom of God, but she would be meaningless if she failed to engage with the needs of the people in the city that she occupies.***

We continue to look forward and plan for the future so that we remain relevant and meaningful in the changing world around us. This is challenging, for ultimately, the life of the cathedral is more than beautiful music and liturgy,

it is also about taking the actions of Jesus into the world. This is why we need to continually pray for the Dean and his team, as they continually seek the will of God in their ministry.

Interestingly, the Arch Bishop of Canterbury, challenges us even further by suggesting that we need to keep our cathedrals fun. Really? Well, Justin Welby suggests that cathedrals are places where people gather to be united, and that's beyond their Christian role... they are not just Christian centres; they are centres of life, hope and works. They are also places of fun where people can celebrate the Good News and I quote,

“Cathedrals are fun; have fun...God has given them as places of celebration and joy and Good News – you’re Good News in your communities, for the church, you’re places that do exciting, imaginative things, you heal clergy.....,you lift our eyes from the immediate and the difficult to the hope that only God can bring,”

In conclusion this evening, I would like to take the opportunity to thank the Dean and his staff at the cathedral for doing all of the above... spreading the Gospel, maintaining hope in the city for all people, in spite of the odds and for setting an example of love in action.

I am reminded of the Canterbury Cathedral prayer where prayers have been have been said for more than 1400 years...

*Loving God,
in all that we do today
make us mindful of your presence close beside us.
Inspire us to live and work for justice,
to honour all with whom we spend our time
to stand beside the powerless,
to speak for those who have no voice,
that your kingdom may come and your will be done
in us and through us to the glory of your name.*

Amen.

May God empower you to live for him and to be a sign of hope in our world.

Amen.

May God bless you in the week ahead as you continue your Christian life in the shadow of this beautiful cathedral which brings us hope, joy and fun in the name of Jesus Christ.

Amen.

(I acknowledge sermon material from the Very Reverend Dr Sarah Rowland Jones, as well as various readings from the Cathedral Conference, Manchester, September 2018)