

Yn heddwch Crist, hoffwn eich croesawu chi a'ch cyfeillion i Eglwys Gadeiriol Sant Ioan yr Efengylwr, Aberhonddu. In the peace of Christ I'd like to welcome you and yours to the Cathedral Church of St John the Evangelist, Brecon. Please forgive me for not being bilingual for the rest of the sermon: there are two good reasons why I won't: the sermon would be too long and I can't do it.

Last week's forwarded mail from Wrexham included a mission society newsletter with the headline: "Speak only if you can improve on silence ..." Mmm. I was tempted ... but not for long. There are a lot of you here aren't there? Thank you so much for coming to welcome us; or thank you for coming to check we've really gone. Some of you have come a very long way – I can see friends and family from both Kent and Northumberland and from every parish I've served in over 35 years. Those who've sent apologies include a number of people from my days at Derby Cathedral; they're getting a new Dean today; he's called Jeff; we pray for him as he is asking the Derby congregation to pray for me; and I thank him for making me Britain's junior dean for only half-an-hour.

Ever since I first met Bishop John, which was only this Leap Year Day, he was insistent that my Installation be this weekend. That takes the pressure off me because it means that this wonderful over-the-top occasion is not about the person of the new Dean, but about this Cathedral and the people who worship and work here who I have come to serve. I'll come back to the date.

If you've never been here in the Brecon Beacons before let me tell you something we've learned about this beautiful area in the last couple of weeks: it rains; and this is the biggest umbrella in the National Park. I'll come back to the rain too.

"Can I have a nice joint of Welsh lamb please?" asked the Archdeacon of Brecon. The shop assistant looked at the Venerable Randolph Thomas and asked "Are you Welsh?" "If I asked you for Irish sausage, would you ask me if I was Irish? Or if I asked for bratwurst, would you check if I was German? Or if I asked you for a Kosher hot-dog, would you ask me if I was Jewish? If I asked you for a Taco, would you enquire if I was Mexican? If I asked you for roast beef, would you accuse me of being from Yorkshire? What about bacon, would you ask me if I was Danish? Would you? Would you?" The assistant said, "Well, no Archdeacon." "And if I asked you for some Bourbon whiskey, would you ask me if I was American? Or, if I asked you for vodka, would you ask me if I was Russian?" "Well, no, I probably wouldn't." With self-indignation, the Archdeacon said, "Alright then, why did you ask me if I'm Welsh just because I asked for Welsh lamb?" The assistant replied, "Because you're in Mothercare." Remember where you are. You're in a Cathedral Church.

What is a Cathedral Church for? It is the seat of the Bishop and a centre of worship and mission; other churches have a seat for the Bishop and they too try to be centres of worship and mission. Like them a Cathedral should be maintaining a daily pattern of corporate prayer and worship, giving glory to God and holding before him the needs of the Church and the world, and particularly the Diocese. As a focus for the Bishop's ministry, I trust the Cathedral can be a resource to him and a place where prayer is offered for him. I'm sure the Cathedral should preach the gospel of Christ and nurture Christian learning, hopefully in collaboration with other churches and traditions. It must extend hospitality to pilgrims and visitors of every kind. Like other churches too, I believe it must demonstrate the concern of Christ for the poor. It should be engaging with the town of Brecon and with community institutions in other parts of the diocese, in the complexities of contemporary society and culture, exploring spiritual values with all people of goodwill. As the mother church of the diocese I trust that it will share with the parishes in every aspect of the Church's vocation, which is why I'm particularly pleased to have been asked by Bishop John to have some responsibility for the care of our Readers.

From time to time people associated with cathedrals meet to discuss their joys and fears, their plans and budgets, their musicians and virgers. They say silly things like: 'Our Cathedral is really friendly' – fine, but for friendship I might recommend you go to the Miners' Welfare. 'Our Cathedral serves wonderful snacks' – fine, but for fast food I might recommend you go to McDonald's. 'Our Cathedral has beautiful flower arrangements' – fine, but for fantastic flowers I might recommend you go to Bodnant Gardens. 'Our Cathedral has superb music' – fine, but for a good concert I might recommend you go to St David's Hall. 'Our Cathedral has a quaint walled Close' – fine, but for really strong locked gates I might recommend you get sent to Cardiff prison. What is this Cathedral's speciality, its added value, its USP – unique selling point? I hope it is Jesus – Crucified and Risen. The empty Cross is even more important than the welcome, the sandwiches, the vase, the anthem and the grounds.

Of course you don't have to come to a building like this to find the empty Cross; an old and beautiful church isn't compulsory – what's compulsory is other people. In fact the only good reason for spending huge sums of money building and maintaining a church like this in the first place is because the Christian community which wants to worship and work together can no longer fit in someone's sitting room. Once you've decided to build a church you do it to the greater glory of God. If you look at the memorials around the walls of this one you might get the impression that it was built to the greater glory of some dead men and women; I know they tend to be only of the great and the good (which can be two quite different things), but at their best they are witnesses to the long history of Christian faith in this place. Actually this place was built to the greater glory of the living God; it wasn't built to protect one flavour of Christian from other flavours of Christianity or from people of other faiths or none; the only defence we build against is rain.

One good thing about Cathedral buildings is that they're normally open. Do you ever visit churches when you're on holiday? They're cheaper than castles or theme parks, even if they shouldn't be. I wonder how many of you this summer (remember August 30th) have tried to explore an unfamiliar church to be greeted by a rusty padlock fastening a heavy dark door – if you're lucky bearing a scruffy notice about where and when you might find a key. If you're a casual visitor with your camera at the ready, or even someone with a particular interest in Norman fonts or Victorian stained-glass, your frustration probably won't be more than a ten-minute disappointment. But if you're wanting the comfort of a quiet holy space to help you consider your future or come to terms with a family tragedy, then I believe your frustration casts a large question-mark-shaped shadow over the purpose for which the church was built. A locked church is a contradiction in terms; it needs selling or demolishing; locking it against vandals is admitting the vandals have won. If it's locked because of treasures perhaps it's got too many treasures. Anything which makes it more difficult to get into a church makes the empty Cross less familiar; then the church just becomes the private possession of the priest and the congregation; and our only defence was supposed to be against rain.

My predecessor and Bishop has had a wonderful ministry as Dean, aided by a couple of legacies and lots of volunteers, getting this building into a better state of repair than it has probably enjoyed for many hundreds of years – he has really tidied and cleaned it up. I see it as my job to untidy it, even dirty it a bit; I hope some deaneries and schools and soldiers and others will help me do this. And whilst this must remain a place where those sheltering from the rain have every chance of making new friends, getting well fed, seeing beautiful flowers, hearing lovely music, walking in the peaceful Close, it must first and foremost be a place where they may meet Jesus crucified and risen. I trust this will continue to be a place which can be an example, even a bad example; a place of experiment and risk, even of failure; a place where a tourist may become a pilgrim and a pilgrim may become a disciple; a place whose regular congregation has to recognise (as does the diocese) that the rewards will usually be someone else's in another church, but that that is a price worth paying.

Back to the date: Why the Eve of Holy Cross Day? In the 15th century this great Benedictine Priory was known as the 'Church of the Holy Rood' or 'Holy Cross' – the golden cross which then stood on a massive screen separating the monastic chancel from the parish nave, was greatly esteemed by pilgrims who believed it to have healing properties. But Holy Cross Day? 14th September, tomorrow, is an important day for me as a leader of pilgrims to the Middle East and for this and at least one other Cathedral – the oldest, ugliest and noisiest cathedral in the world. On May 3rd 326 St Helena, the mother of the Emperor Constantine, found three crosses in a Jerusalem pit and so reckoned she had discovered the site of Calvary and the resurrection tomb nearby. Most of us pilgrimage leaders have been

satisfied by her geography ever since. The old Queen Mother, after her son had forced his Empire to adopt Christianity, had gone on pilgrimage to Jerusalem to find, preserve and build on sites associated with the ministry, death and resurrection of Christ. On top of the place where she had found those crosses Helena had a simple chapel built; this Church of the Holy Sepulchre or Basilica of the Resurrection has been rebuilt several times, but it was first dedicated on 14th September in the year 335. 1,588 years later to the day, on 14th September 1923, this great Benedictine Priory of the Holy Cross then Parish Church of St John the Evangelist was dedicated as the Cathedral of the new Diocese of Swansea and Brecon; tomorrow is our 85th anniversary Dedication Festival.

How a Holy Cross? That question has haunted the Church from the beginning. The first hearers of the gospel regarded a crucified Saviour as a perverse contradiction. But in spite of the offence of the Cross the New Testament and the first Christians didn't shrink from declaring that Jesus' death was God's chosen way of doing things. Certain people were obviously to blame: priests who plotted, disciples who betrayed, religious who ignored, politicians who acquiesced, soldiers who obeyed; yet from the very beginning the Christian view wasn't to point a finger of blame at any of these. 'No': they said in effect, 'We're all guilty.'

Theologically I don't think I'll ever fully understand the Cross. How is it more than an inspiring example of patience when I reckon I'm suffering unjustly? How is it more than a model of someone fighting against the forces of evil and winning? How is my guilt and sin forgiven by being nailed it to the Cross of Jesus? Luckily I don't think God requires us so much to understand the Cross as to experience it, that is, to discover its benefits. A cross-less Christianity is a cost-less Christianity and will be anaemic and insipid and won't be able to change the world.

The Eve of Holy Cross Day at the end of a summer of rain: A pilgrim finding the Cross and a building in which tourists sheltering from the rain may become pilgrims and pilgrims become disciples: I pledge myself today in my years as Dean to be a Cross-finding pilgrim, a Cross-finding pilgrim whose Cathedral Church thereby serves the Bishop and Diocese by being a place of hospitality, prayer, nurture and mission. So help me God.

Geoffrey Marshall, 13.9.08