

Welcome Sermon: Winchester Cathedral 13th January 2024

+May I speak in the name of the Father, and of the Son, and of the Holy Spirit. Amen

Where would the world be without the Diocese of Winchester? Where would the world be, without this Diocese; without its history and its heritage? Counterfactual questions like that are in one sense idle speculation, because of course we just don't know. But I think we can say that without the Diocese of Winchester, without the Kingdom of Wessex, of which Winchester was its capital, without the cities, towns and villages that make up this Diocese, this world would indeed be a very different place. And dare we to hope and pray, that, the Lord being our helper, in the future, this world, and our own little corners of it, the places to which we are called, might be different and better because of this Diocese of Winchester; because of its churches, schools and chaplaincies – and indeed its great Cathedral? I think we may. Indeed, I'm sure we should.

Today I want us to reflect both on what has been and what might be for this Diocese, with the help of that remarkable passage from the Book of Revelation, read for us by my friend and brother His Eminence Archbishop Angaelos, who we are greatly privileged to have with us today. And I want us to think about what has and been, and what might be, by reflecting on three simple words: heritage; healing and hope.

You cannot be in this great Cathedral – or elsewhere indeed in this Diocese – without being aware of our rich and deep heritage. Here you can see the coffins of the Anglo-Saxon kings, no less (though their bones are rather jumbled up in their caskets). There is a sense, perhaps, in which the weight of history can be oppressive, but I would much rather see it as an inspiration for us: not so much a weight as a wellspring.

So - to come back to my earlier question: where would the world be without the Diocese of Winchester? It would undoubtedly be a very different place. The Kingdom of Wessex was a major engine of Christian learning and education; of church growth and of mission. Think of the Alfred Jewel, housed up the road in the Ashmolean Museum in Oxford. It was almost certainly not a jewel at all but the head of an 'aestel', or pointer, used to follow a text. In other words it was a teaching tool, designed to help people engage with texts, and with the text of Scripture above all. And it was almost certainly commissioned, along with many others, by Alfred the Great, as part of his great mission to spread Christian learning and education; to found churches and abbeys, across his Kingdom and beyond. And the fact that the 'jewel'

was a thing of such value is simply a reflection of the value that Alfred and his successors placed on Christian education, learning and discipleship, a legacy which is still ours today.

Or think of the legacy of Bishop Lancelot Andrewes, many centuries later, who oversaw the translation of the Authorised Version of the Bible, a man commemorated very modestly up in the Choir. The work he oversaw literally reshaped our language. And more than that, it gave successive generations a whole new way of seeing the world and understanding life, through distinctly Christian lenses. So it formed a people of faith and hope and love: a legacy, too, which is still ours today.

And the great Jane Austen, buried down there in the Nave, brought a gentle, ironic, sometimes critical, often sympathetic, but distinctly Christian eye to the manners and mores of her own day - and thereby encouraged others to do the same, as we should in our day too. And she was just one of many amazing women from this Diocese who can fairly claim to have changed the world for the better.

So think too of the founding in this Diocese of the world's largest women's organisation, the Mothers' Union, or Anna Chaplaincy founded far more recently here in Alton, or the inspiration that the tomb of the Hampshire Grenadier provided for the founding of Alcoholics Anonymous, an organisation that has brought such hope to so many across the world.

Or think of Wessex' role in shaping this nation. The relationship between Church and state that still exists today, under some challenge though it may be, owes its existence to this place. Not for nothing does the Bishop of Winchester have a seat as of right in the House of Lords – and indeed a front bench seat as I discovered when I was introduced into the House back in December.

Of course, there is great privilege in such a position – but it is ultimately a position of service, of humility. It's a posture exemplified by Swithun who is remembered for simple acts like restoring a basket of broken eggs, and wanting to be buried outside, under the feet of passers-by where the raindrops might fall on him. (And, as an interesting but otherwise irrelevant aside, the very last thing Jane Austen wrote, on St. Swithun's day, three days before she died in the house on College St., was a humorous poem imagining Swithun at Winchester Races.)

All of that, and so much more, is part of the heritage in which we stand today. It is a heritage which has shaped not just this Diocese, but this country and indeed the wider world. And it's a heritage we should be humbly proud of and value, because it marks for us how our God has

been at work in and through this Diocese; though this place. It's a legacy of grace for us. And it's a legacy, like all good legacies, which should lead us on into the future.

Our reading from Revelation does just that: it leads us into the future. And note that the destination towards which we are travelling according to Revelation is a city. There is a lazy view of Scripture that sees us as, in the end, going back to the Garden of Eden. True, there are features of a garden in this city, as we shall see, but we are not going back to the Garden: we are heading on into the City of God. And that change is significant, from garden to city, because it indicates that the best that we do will endure. A city is man-made as well as God-made. That means that our legacy will last. So we read that *the kings of the earth will bring their glory into the city*, and that *people will bring into it the glory and honour of the nations*. The best that we do will endure. Our legacy will last.

I am absolutely convinced that we should take with utmost seriousness this legacy of grace in which we stand; this heritage of learning and serving and growing, of loving, but not simply for its own sake, for we are not curators of the past. Rather these are wells from which we should draw; signposts to the future that we in turn, in this Diocese, in our churches, schools and chaplaincies, might leave a legacy of grace; a legacy of learning and serving and growing, of loving, a legacy that will indeed last and find its way ultimately into the City of God.

And from heritage, let us move on to healing. It would not be right today, if I did not acknowledge the significant hurt that has been experienced in this Diocese in recent years. I know there are still scars. I know there are still bruises. I would be failing in my own pastoral duty if I were blind to that.

Straight away, I also want to say, that these last two years, have been a very significant time of recovery and indeed of healing, and I want to pay tribute today to Bishop Debbie, and also to many others, Bishop David not least, who have been agents of healing and hope in these few years.

But equally I know that there is still healing to be done. These last few years have been a time of healing, but there has inevitably been something provisional about them too: an in-between time. Today marks the start of a new season, so today I commit myself, the Lord being my helper, to be an agent of healing for this diocese wherever or however that may be needed.

And for us to be healed, there is, I am sure, no better medicine for any of us than the simple business of loving the Lord our God with all our heart, soul, mind and strength and loving our

neighbours as ourselves. I remember many years ago a good friend who is here today pointing out that when Jesus healed the ten lepers, we are told that *in going they were healed*. And I think that might be a word for us today: *in going they were healed*. So let us go and love, as we should, that we may be healed.

To expand on that, if the best medicine for us is *to love the Lord our God with all your heart, soul, mind and strength and love your neighbours as yourself* then that means that the best medicine for us is to bring hope, and healing to *others*, that in going to them, with healing, we too might be healed. Perhaps, indeed, as wounded healers, we might be all the better able to bring healing to those we are called to love and serve, for nothing is ever wasted in the economy of God.

And let us not lose sight of that prime task. However bruised we might feel, we are called above all to be agents of healing and hope for others: for a bruised and battered world. The 'hospital' is not a bad model of what the Church is to be: indeed the word 'hospital' is a profoundly Christian word, as our own Hospital of St. Cross still demonstrates today. So may we be just such a hospital: a hospital of healing for a bruised and battered world.

'Healing' of course is a concept that is central to our passage from Revelation. Here we do indeed have a nod back to the Garden of Eden, for here in the city, on either side of the river of the water of life, we find the tree of life – and apparently not one but many examples of it: and, we are told, *the leaves of the tree are for the healing of the nations*. I don't think it's a stretch too far to say that our task as a Diocese, as the people of God, is so to harvest the leaves of the tree of life and apply them as salve, as balm, to wounded hearts and minds; to wounded communities; to wounded societies, that they may indeed be healed. And again, I don't think it's stretch too far to say that if we are to do that then, like the tree of life, we must stay close to the one true source of water, and of life, our Lord Jesus Christ.

And, finally, before we move on to hope, let me point out that *the leaves of the trees are for the healing of the nations*. The agenda of our God is a global agenda, and so should ours be too. That's why it's so good to have brothers from Burundi with us today. Messieurs, mes frères, vous êtes vraiment les bienvenus chez nous, mes frères, et je me réjouis de votre présence parmi nous aujourd'hui. Ours must be a global perspective because our God has nothing less than such a perspective himself.

For me personally, that manifests itself in an enduring commitment to the persecuted Church and to the search for freedom of religion or belief more broadly. That is a cause I feel our God has laid upon my heart, and to which I remain deeply committed. That is why I'm so glad to have good friends here today who are valued partners in that work, and in particular His Eminence Archbishop Angaelos, whose own church, the Coptic Orthodox Church, has known such suffering in recent years. So do know, my dear brother, that we stand in solidarity with you today.

And I do want to stress that I engage in that work not *despite* the fact that I am Bishop of Winchester, but *because* I am Bishop of Winchester, because this is a place which has shaped the world in the past, and because we are all to be involved in this work of bringing healing to the nations.

And so, finally, to hope. When I first felt a call to episcopal ministry, I felt that central to that was that I should be an agent of hope, for a world – and sometimes a Church – in which that precious commodity can be in short supply. That's why when people ask how they can pray for me I always say, please pray that the Lord keeps my hopes high. And when you pray for me, please pray the same. I would be so grateful.

Of course, there are many things that can kill hope, but this passage from Revelation rekindles my hope. And let's be very clear from this passage that Christian hope is not vague or abstract. It is centred and it is personal. Christian hope is centred on Christ and on nothing, no one and nowhere else.

Why is this city the glorious place that it is? We are told repeatedly: it is because it is the dwelling place of *the Lord God Almighty and the Lamb*, that is, Jesus himself – that is why there is no need of any temple: for our God himself indwells the city. And the water of life flows from where? *From the throne of God and of the Lamb* – for there is no other source of life. *And his servants will see his face: the Lord God will be their light* – for there is no other source of light. *The throne of God and of the Lamb will be in it... - and [his servants] will reign for ever and ever.* And why do his servants reign? Because the *Lord God Almighty and the Lamb* reign; because our God is enthroned in his heavenly city.

We have no hope other than the Lord God Almighty and the Lamb – but in him is all our hope. For he alone is our life and our light.

And we are all of us – not just me, but all of us – called to be agents of hope, as bringers of Jesus' life and light. We are called, indeed, to be a church marked above all else by hope. I love these words of Bishop Lesslie Newbigin: the Church of God is called to be *a sign, an instrument and a foretaste of the Kingdom of God*. And so we are. And so we are: to be *a sign, an instrument and a foretaste of the Kingdom of God*. Our task as the Church of God is to bring the life, the light, the healing and the hope of heaven down here to earth. We're to do that in this ancient capital city; in the great port city of Southampton to which I owe so much; in the burgeoning boroughs of Basingstoke, Bournemouth and Christchurch; in our historic market towns of Andover and Alton and Alresford and Romsey; in innumerable picture-perfect Hampshire villages; in the South Downs, and the New Forest and the Avon, Test and Itchen valleys. In every place in which we are set, and to which we are sent, in our churches, schools, chaplaincies and Cathedral - and whatever other shape our presence may take - we are to bring the life, the light, the healing and the hope of heaven down here to earth.

And how are we to do that? There is only one way. And that is to stay close to the one who alone is the source of our life, and light, and hope: Jesus Christ our Lord. We have no other hope but him, but he is all we need and more. And our task as the Church of God is so to bring the life and light, the healing and hope that is found only in him, down here to earth, that in our midst, as his people, the love of Jesus may be made known, may be made visible, here on earth as it is heaven. And may our God give us grace to be just such a people, for just such a purpose, together, in these years to come, to the glory of his holy name. Amen.