

Tuesday 28 April 2020 – A service of Thanksgiving on the 800th Anniversary of the laying of the Foundation Stones of the Cathedral Church of New Sarum

The Very Reverend Nicholas Papadopoulos, Dean of Salisbury

I'm speaking in the garden at the rear of the Deanery, set in this favoured plain of New Sarum, where the Cathedral community moved 800 years ago. This beautiful plain, where five rivers meet; the move that was first and foremost an audacious bid for Liberty. Anyone who has walked around the footprint of the old cathedral up on the hilltop will know how close it was to the royal castle. If the Bishop or any of his clergy so much as sneezed, then the soldiers would have known all about it straightaway, and when parishioners wanted to come and worship in the cathedral on Maundy Thursday or Ash Wednesday, the soldiers of the Castle would often deny them entrance, saying that they presented a security threat. That was acknowledged by Pope Honorius when he wrote his Bull, allowing for the move to be explored.

Closeness between church and castle was not only inconvenient, but for the priests of the late 12th century it was positively dangerous. In 1170, Archbishop Thomas Becket was murdered in his own cathedral by four knights who believed they were acting on the king's instructions. So the move from Old Sarum to New Sarum was a deliberate attempt to distance the house of prayer from the house of power; a deliberate attempt to distance the cathedral from the arbitrary exercise of unchecked power. And when the cathedral community made the descent, they brought their treasures with them, of course, and among those was a copy of Magna Carta: only five years old; the ink on it barely dry. Magna Carta remains the most potent icon of human liberty that has ever been written. For eight centuries the community of Salisbury Cathedral has preserved Magna Carta: the community which once moved itself beyond the reach of tyranny has preserved that precious icon for the benefit of all. Liberty runs in the bloodstream of this place.

Liberty.... but the move also allowed a prodigious explosion of human creativity. The hilltop was windswept and there was no water. How different was the plain below, how different was this place where the fertility is evident all around me, and the birds sing. Here the Cathedral community set about the construction of a new Cathedral, yes, but also a new Close, and a new city. It was deliberate, intentional, conscious curation of the environment they found here. New water meadows allowed for controlled irrigation. Commerce was given a Market Square to mirror the sacred enclosure around the church. New streets and new squares for artisans and traders were built, the chequers which persist even today. And at its heart the cathedral was raised, an endeavour which (as we know) was completed in only 38 years. It's scarcely imaginable. It's what one generation can achieve if it sets its mind to it. Gifts of human creativity are nurtured here still in the mason's yard, in the song school, in the glaziers' workshop, on the computer screens of our offices.

Liberty, creativity.... and the move was principally always, always, about eternity, about the eternity which people of faith call God and which Christians believe assumes a human face in Jesus. The spire may have been built later than the body of the building, but the spire just completes an irresistible sense that everything in and about the building is straining upwards, heavenwards, pointing us unambiguously to the divine, the eternal. The worship offered here became famous, and by the time of the Reformation, 300 years later, it was normative for the Church. The daily rhythm of prayer has not ceased in the 800 years that have passed. It was then and it is now, what we might call our core business.

Liberty, creativity, eternity: these are the values that the re-foundation of Salisbury Cathedral on this site embody for the world, and they remain our values today. The journey that this place began from the hilltop at old Sarum has not been derailed by plague, or by war; not by prosperity, or by adversity. It was not derailed by the nerve agent attack on our city in 2018 and it will not be derailed by the COVID-19 pandemic of 2020. Yes, it's true that we can't celebrate the anniversary as we had planned to, but there are even good historical precedents for that. In 1220, King Henry III and Archbishop Stephen Langton missed the ceremonies here because they were in Shrewsbury, negotiating with the Welsh, who were in revolt. At the very least that's one problem we don't have.

Liberty creativity eternity: these founding values - our values - have questions to ask of the time we are living in, and reflections to offer upon them:

- The pandemic is teaching us how greatly, how absolutely, we rely upon one another, how connected we are, and how greatly we rely upon those institutions which act on behalf of us all - the institutions that we applaud every Thursday night. So we're learning that Liberty is not, not, about "me, me, me". We're learning that a community which values Liberty must also value solidarity
- The pandemic is reminding us how profoundly creative we human beings are. Look at the virtual storytelling and online singing that is burgeoning in these days; look at the cookery and the painting; the ingenious physical exercise done in small spaces; look at the technological wizardry that is enabling us all to keep in touch. We could not put a price on these creative gifts. We think, we innovate, we make: it's what we do, it's who we are
- The pandemic is compelling those of us who call ourselves Christians to work harder at our faith. All the props have been taken away: no buildings, no music, no company of worshippers, no sacramental encounter. So what is left? The answer is - everything of course. The God of all eternity, who needs no props to make himself known to us, if only we will let him
- And maybe, just maybe, the pandemic is requiring all of us to get serious about truth once more. The truth about the virus, the truth about our preparedness for it - of course - but also the truth about what really matters to us. The truth about what is

ultimately significant for us; the truth about how we want to live; the truth about who we fundamentally are. Good questions, welcome questions. For we believe that the truth will set us free

May God bless Salisbury Cathedral richly: and may Salisbury Cathedral continue to be a blessing to the world, building up its liberty, nurturing its creativity, and honouring God's eternity. Amen