

Sunday 6 March 2016

This is the first opportunity I've had to preach here in Windsor, so indulge me, if you will, if I don't stick with the theme and preach something pink and fluffy for Mothering Sunday, or comment on the Old Testament reading's model of good mothering practice – give birth to a fine baby, hide him for three months, and then set him afloat on the River Nile in a waterproofed basket. Instead, I want to reflect on a couple of things I believe to be important.

A little while ago, I was a Rector, living in a Rectory in Church Square, Melbourne – but not the one in Australia. Now, rather to my surprise, I find myself being a Canon, and living in a Cloister within a Castle.

So, I want to talk about three things – I want to talk about castles, I want to talk about cloisters, and I want to talk about canons. Castles, cloisters and canons – three things.

The British countryside is liberally sprinkled with castles, many of them in ruins. One of the most important things about real, intact castles like Windsor, is that they have walls. Those walls are for protection, for security; they are defences against all sorts of enemies and their onslaughts. But those same walls also delineate a community contained within them. The castle isn't just a garrison where defending troops live; it is also a community where many other people live together.

One of the things that has struck me most about this place is its sense of real community. But it's a community far wider than its castle's boundaries – it's a community not limited to those who live within the walls. Many gather here to work and to worship, to reflect, be awe-struck and pray, and to live together as an extended community. And such a community takes hard work to maintain, for all of us must endeavour to live in harmony and mutual respect. My image said that a castle's walls define its community, but in some ways it's a poor image, because walls are the very things we can't afford to have in true community. A community needs to be open to others, welcoming and hospitable, not sealed within the walls

of a fortress. And I speak of that openness and hospitality, not as a challenge or a criticism, but with a sense of gratitude for all that we have found here.

And that practice of hospitality isn't limited to new residents in the castle, or new regular worshippers; it extends to the visitors, pilgrims and tourists who come here. A host of volunteers and staff show hospitality and openness in action, welcoming the best part of a million people a year to St George's Chapel, responding to their needs and helping them to understand this building as something more than an historic artefact or a museum – something more than an old chapel in an old castle.

Scripture, in both the old and the new testaments, calls on us to love our neighbours, as the key to successful and fruitful community life. The Old Testament law laid out all manner of practical interpretations and examples of what this means, some more helpful than others. The New Testament offers the story of Jesus as a model of life governed by love, perhaps easier to follow than a book of regulations. And we are bombarded with scriptural images of community life – images of a corporate rather than an individual nature – branches of a vine, sheep in a flock, grains in an ear of corn, seeds in a pomegranate, organs in a body.

It's a good thing for us to live together in community. Some people may be called to a more solitary life, but most of us live with and among others. Today's second reading gives us an example of love and hospitality in action – key aspects of community life. The crucified Christ says to his mother "Woman, here is your son," and to John the beloved disciple, he says "Here is your mother." The soon-to-be-bereaved mother will need to be cared for; the loving disciple responds to that need. "And from that hour the disciple took her into his own home."

So, castles remind us of the importance of community.

Now cloisters. Cloisters are things you associate more with abbeys and cathedrals than with castles – they are part of religious rather than secular

structures. Here we have the Dean's Cloister, the Canons' Cloister and Horseshoe Cloister, just to emphasize the point.

At the heart of this castle and college, just like communities all over the place, there lies a sacred space, a chapel. Those communities are rooted in prayer and worship – the chapel is a place where people gather to pray and a place where prayer is offered for all the community. At least three times every day, people gather in large and in small numbers in the chapel. Services are offered with prayers for the Queen, the world, the church, the community and all in need. This is a place where people can draw near to God, perhaps in quiet reflection or in the reading of scripture. And remember that scripture in worship isn't limited to the two or three readings appointed – much of the rest of the liturgy is scriptural – psalms, canticles, sections of the Eucharistic Prayer.

The life of the chapel, its daily pulse, immerses us in Scripture and in an experience of God. And that experience is something that should change us – it is transformative, it makes a difference. We might reflect on our shortcomings – we certainly ought to in the season of Lent – and we might resolve to do better, to be better people. We might catch hold of a vision of what God might do through us – through our lives and our community interactions – we might resolve to do something to relieve poverty and injustice or to bring a glimmer of light into the dark places of the world and its people's lives.

People far more erudite than I have said that prayer is about changing us, not changing God. "Leaving everything in the hands of God" may sound like a pious philosophical response to the troubles around us, but it can also be an excuse for bone-idleness. The cloister reminds us of God at the centre of our lives and at the heart of our communities, and it challenges us to respond to God and be transformed by him.

So, castles to remind us of community; and cloisters to remind us of our spiritual heart.

Finally, the canons.

In Derbyshire, I was governor of a junior school and regularly went there to lead assemblies. My last visit, just before Christmas, coincided with the first day of the school play. So I led assembly, standing on a stage in front of a large back-drop on which someone had painted a castle. After I'd done my bit, the Head Teacher told the children that I was moving away to live in a real castle, and invited me to tell the children which castle it was. They, of course, were duly impressed, but seemed to think I'd be having breakfast with the Queen on a regular, if not daily, basis!

I asked the children if they could tell me what a canon is. I was pretty sure of the response I'd get – they told me all about cannon sticking through the battlements of castles, firing on marauding foes – and about pirate ships and cannonballs! And then, to show what a fine stand-up comedian I am, I told them I'd got a job as a canon in a castle. Much mirth ensued.

Now, if I were to ask you what a canon is, given our present location and given the nature of the employment of the person asking you, then I suspect you might be more likely to explain about canons as members of the clergy, priests in this chapel. Artillery officers and members of the Royal Navy might, of course, stick with the alternative definition, siding with the schoolchildren.

But, sadly, with the possible exception of the said artillery officers and the Royal Navy, you would be wrong, just as the children were wrong, but for precisely the opposite reason. Perversely, on **this** occasion, I am talking not about clerical canons, but about cannon and cannonballs.

It seems to me that the important thing about a cannon is that it fires a projectile from inside a castle or from on board a ship that makes an impact somewhere else.

Our life as a community and our worship must make that same impact somewhere else – on the world outside the castle walls, on the world outside our community. Just as our experience of God should be transformative, so also our life as community should make a wider impact;

it should make a difference somewhere else; it should contribute to the world's transformation for the better.

It might be through the education we offer at the school for generations of children; it might be the impacts made by the work of St George's House, especially in the areas of social and ethical reflection; it might be the beauty of these buildings, the music and the history and heritage that we share with those who come to this place from all over the world; and it might be the money that we raise for all sorts of good ventures and charities. And it might simply be the act of praying for the world day by day and making visitors feel welcome.

If I, as a Canon of Windsor, and each of us as members of a community, fail also to be cannon – artillery pieces – and fail to make an impact somewhere, then we have missed the point of the life that Christ calls us to lead.

Castles for the importance of community life; cloisters for the spiritual centre; and cannon for the need to make an impact on the wider world outside the real or allegorical walls that surround us. Amen.

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