

**Sermon for 750<sup>th</sup> Anniversary of Armagh Cathedral**  
**23 September 2018**

*“You have come to Mount Zion, to the city of the living God, the heavenly Jerusalem. You have come to thousands upon thousands of angels in joyful assembly, <sup>23</sup> to the church of the firstborn, whose names are written in heaven. You have come to God, the Judge of all, to the spirits of the righteous made perfect, <sup>24</sup> to Jesus the mediator of a new covenant.”*

- Hebrews 12. 22-24

Can I say first of all, what a great joy it is to be with you today. I want to thank the Dean for his invitation and to bend the knee to your Archbishop whom I consider a friend. Our paths seem to have crossed several times in the past few years, not least the work we do together as members of the worldwide Anglican Consultative Council. And I’m slightly embarrassed to say that this is my first visit to Armagh Cathedral. This may, of course, render me supremely unqualified to speak on such an occasion: the 750th anniversary of your building, though I have done enough homework to know that considerable work has been done on the building since 1268, and that there was a considerable and inspiring history before it, dating back to Patrick himself. Indeed, for any Christian in these islands, it is profoundly moving to be standing and proclaiming the gospel in the footsteps of Patrick. But since I have been asked to think about the future life and witness of this cathedral church and its part in the mission of God’s Church in this land *in the years which are to come*, then I hope you will be able to find yourselves able to tolerate an interloping Englishman suggesting how the spirit of Christ may lead us into the next chapter of our life together.

It also feels significant to me that I arrive in your cathedral today having spent time this past week at the first national cathedrals conference for the Church of England where I had also been asked to speak about the mission of cathedrals. Don’t panic. You’re not going to get my fifty minute keynote address rehashed here. But there are two critical points I wish to make and I hope they are both relevant and inspiring for God’s Church here.

In September 2001 I was appointed as Vice Dean and Canon Pastor of Peterborough Cathedral in the East of England. Having been collated, inducted and installed on the Sunday afternoon, on my first Monday morning I stood outside the cathedral facing the great west front of this imposing Romanesque edifice and imagined that I knew nothing about the Christian faith except that it was something to do with someone called Jesus and that this building existed to embody and perpetuate his life and teaching. Thus, I went inside seeing what I could find out about this man Jesus.

And what an interesting visit I had. Most educational. I discovered much about Tudor England, particularly Henry the Eighth’s first wife, Catherine of Aragon, who is buried in the cathedral and who was obviously very significant to the place. There were information boards telling me all about her. Fresh pomegranates – the symbol of the house of Aragon – were on her tomb.

I found out a lot about mediaeval building techniques. Diagrams and scale models showed me how this vast and impressive building had been constructed.

I found out about monastic, Benedictine life including many amusing anecdotes about what various monks had got up to over the centuries.

But of Jesus of Nazareth, the building was strangely quiet. Apart from a prayer in very small print at the bottom of the leaflet I had been given to point me in the direction of all the important things – like Catherine of Aragon and how cathedrals are built – which ended with the words, “through Jesus Christ our Lord”, there was nothing.

Charged by this experience, I went, the following week, to my first chapter meeting and asked the Dean whether I could bring up an item under any other business. I told my colleagues on the chapter the story I have just told you. They peered over their spectacles at me with that look of crushing and urbane superiority, much affected by a certain sort of Englishman, and said to me, “Stephen, my dear fellow, don’t you know, the stones themselves ring out the glory of God.”

And of course they are right. I believe this. The stones of Peterborough Cathedral and indeed the stones of Armagh Cathedral, and even the memory of the stones that were here before, and the very ground where Patrick himself first proclaimed the gospel in this land, sing out. For we Christians believe in the scandalous particularity of the God who in order that he might be known everywhere, chooses to be somewhere. This is the meaning of the incarnation. God empties himself of what it is to be God in order to know what it is to be human in the very particularity of a single human life. So it is God that himself was present in those cells dividing into life in the flood tide of Mary’s womb. And that presence of God that was in Christ reconciling the world to God was hung upon the cross for our salvation, and risen bodily from the tomb and given to the apostles, and is made present to us in the sacramental life of the Church and contained and communicated through the word of scripture, and given to Patrick and passed down the generations. What an inspiration, simply to stand at the plaque in your Cathedral with the name of Patrick at the top left-hand corner and the name Richard at the bottom right. This alone demonstrates the continuity and the particularity of our faith. The God who is everywhere has chosen to be somewhere. And when we find God somewhere – even here in this cathedral this afternoon – we can then find God everywhere. The very stones sing out.

But there is a big challenge. As I told the Chapter of Peterborough Cathedral all those years ago: the stones that sing out the glory of God are speaking in a language that fewer and fewer people understand. People growing up in Ireland today have less and less knowledge of the Christian tradition and less contact with the Christian church. Therefore, when they do encounter the Christian faith and when they come into our great buildings, they are not able to read or understand what they say and they are not able to interpret the stones. Therefore, the first task of mission for this Cathedral Church and for every church is to translate the Christian faith into the languages and cultures of the people we are called to serve. I’m sorry to spoil the party: but we can no longer imagine that the building or the tradition can do the job for us. We cannot sit in our buildings waiting for people to come to us. We need to translate the Christian faith and we need to bear it in loving service to the world.

There is nothing new in this. It is the same missionary task that we read about in the Acts of the Apostles when the first disciples took the faith of Christ from a Jewish to a Gentile culture. It is what Patrick and the first missionary saints in these islands did. No, the only thing that is new is that we forgot and neglected the missionary task to translate the faith afresh in each generation. In our liturgy, in our teaching, in the outward appearance of our service, in simple but significant things like the signs and information boards we put around our buildings to the profoundly transformative ways we turn our churches inside out and make every church a school for disciples where we are formed in our Christian faith by worship, fellowship and teaching in order to be sent out as ambassadors for Christ in the world.

Which leads to my second (and final!) point: a cathedral is a cathedral not because it is the biggest church in town, or the oldest, or the poshest, or the most beautiful, but because it is the place which contains the bishop's chair. There is a clue in the title! It is the cathedra – the chair – that makes a cathedral a cathedral. This is the place where the bishop gathers the church together. It is the centre of the bishop's ministry, and a bishop's ministry is to energise and instruct, cajole and provoke the ministry of the whole people of God. The bishop is chief pastor and chief evangelist. So here, in the place where Patrick showed us what being a missionary bishop might look like, I pray God will not just raise up missionary bishops, but missionary disciples.

This is the way we will really engage with the world. It will be through the beauty of the gospel, and the beauty of Christ, reflected and communicated through the beauty of our own lives. Whether the church grows or not is of course a matter for God. He is the Lord of the harvest not us! But in the scriptures, fruitfulness always flows from faithfulness. Therefore I can think of no better way to celebrate the 750th anniversary of this cathedral than by asking you, the people of God in this place, churches together in this land, and people of goodwill from all walks of life who care about the life of this nation, these islands and this continent of Europe, to give yourselves to the task of translating the unchanging gospel of Jesus Christ into the languages and cultures of today; and into your own life, so that your life may speak of the beauty of the gospel and sing out; for the very best way of communicating the Christian gospel is through a Christian life and you are called to be living stones. So listen carefully to the questions and challenges of today; attend devotedly to the disciplines of the Church, principally the life of prayer; brood upon the Scriptures and be faithful in receiving the sacraments. Then something truly beautiful and astonishing can happen: the life of Christ is translated into your life.

Those words that we heard read in the Letter to the Hebrews about coming into the very presence of God, and Jesus himself, are realised in our lives. Paul says this: we can be transformed into the very likeness of Christ. His glory can be reflected in us (see 2 Cor. 3. 18). Then, the Church will grow. Then, the world will see Christ.

*Stephen Cottrell*  
*Bishop of Chelmsford*