

Centenary Sermon for the Uniting of Bedfordshire and Luton with Hertfordshire and parts of Barnet to form the Diocese of St Albans

Haggai 1. 13 - 2.9 and 1 Cor 3. 10-17 (the lectionary readings set for the evening)

4 May 2014

When a large congregation gathered here in this Abbey exactly one hundred years ago to mark the uniting of Bedfordshire and Luton with Hertfordshire and parts of Barnet into one diocese, little did they know what the future held or what momentous changes were in the pipeline.

Within weeks the country was mired in what came to be known as the First World War. Nor did they know, as they knelt here in prayer, that within six years the flu pandemic would kill fifty million people worldwide. Nor did they foresee that within a few years the country would be plunged into one of the worse recessions the Western world has ever seen.

Yet, a hundred years ago they met in faith and expectation – just as we do today - to pray and to commit ourselves anew as the people of God. Our forebears in this place were faced with the same mixture of challenges and opportunities that every generation of Christians have: how do we build the church and witness to God's love in our generation?

Our predecessors did not fail in that task, but gladly and joyfully lived out the good news of Jesus Christ despite all the crises that they were to endure.

It is not dissimilar to the situation that we find in our Old Testament reading from the Book of Haggai. The date is around 521BC, the second year of the reign of King Darius of Persia, the ruler of the biggest power bloc in the Ancient Near East. Darius had conquered Judah and the temple in Jerusalem, one of the great wonders of the ancient world, lay in ruins with its huge stone blocks lying around in heaps. Haggai encourages the people of God in their despondency to have faith and to re-build the temple. We read: *Take courage, says the LORD ... for I am with you ... my spirit abides among you; do not fear ... the latter splendour of this house shall be greater than the former.*

God promised them, as he assures us in our generation, that He is with us, that His spirit abides among us and that the latter splendour of this house, this diocese, will be greater than the former.

Back in 1914 when our two counties came together our predecessors responded to God's call with gusto. That very year two new church buildings were opened: All Saints in Bedford and St Francis, Hammerfield.

As the next 100 years unfolded, a further sixty churches were opened with the result that today we are a diocese with no less than 411 churches, 292 clergy and 173 Readers. In a typical week 38,000 people worship in our churches, including more than 9,000 children.

We have more than 130 chaplaincies across the diocese, and our 135 schools and academies educate nearly 28,000 students. We employ more youth and children's workers than any other organization in our two counties. I don't know if you realise but last year the churches of our diocese gave away to more than £2.2 million to charity over and above their donations to our churches. By any stretch of the imagination that is a tremendous witness to our desire to be a transformative presence in our two counties and to make a difference to people's lives.

Our forebears made an amazing contribution to the world in which they lived and they have bequeathed to us a wonderful heritage. But what are we going to bequeath to our successors? How are we going to live out the good news of Jesus Christ? How are we going to build the church in this generation? If we do not ask ourselves these questions and look to the future, then today's celebration will be little more than a self-indulgent trip along Memory Lane.

Well, God is still with us. His spirit still abides among us and, in the words of the prophet Haggai, God promises that the latter splendour of this house will be greater than the former. However, our New Testament reading stops us in our tracks if we become complacent. We can build on firm foundations which will last or we can choose weak foundations that will fail. This is how St Paul put it: *Each builder must choose with care how to build on it. ¹¹For no one can lay any foundation other than the one that has been laid; that foundation is Jesus Christ.*

So when our successors look back on us in 100 years time what will they say?

Will they say ‘Unfortunately that was a generation of Christians who lost the plot. They didn’t build on the foundation of Jesus Christ. How tragic that

- They retreated into victim mode, persuading each other that they could not make a difference, and hid behind their church walls;
- How sad that they were seduced by the culture of celebrity and preferred spin to substance;
- What a shame that they ignored the environmental challenges of their age and what a mess they have left us in;
- What a pity that they shrugged their shoulders at the growing inequalities in society, convinced they could do nothing about it;
- How could they have adopted a little England mentality and ignored the riches that can come from people of other cultures?
- Why on earth did they collude with the ridiculous idolatry that human fulfilment is to be found in choice and consumerism?’

Or - or will there be a very different celebration in 100 years time? Will our great grandchildren look back at us with a sense of gratitude and say

- How amazing! That was a generation that led the way and inspired a whole society to become generous givers again;
- That was a generation that confronted self-interest and pioneered a fairer world, sharing out the earth’s resources;
- That was a generation of Christians that didn’t give a fig for celebrity and outward appearances but really cared, glimpsing the face of Christ in the unlovely, the sick and the dying;
- That was a generation that led the way in integrating different colours and races and produced a gloriously rich rainbow people;
- That was a church that learned to live simply and contentedly with thanksgiving.

Wouldn’t it be wonderful if in 100 years time they were to say about us ‘If only we can build on the foundation of Jesus Christ as they did!’

As a diocese we have embraced a vision of *Living God’s Love* but the only way it is going to make a real difference to our two counties is if it is built firmly on the foundation of Jesus Christ, rooted in worship, serving others, witnessing to God’s truth.

During this anniversary year we want to deepen and renew our life of faith. We've produced a special centenary book to tell the inspiring stories of our predecessors. It is called *Saints and Pilgrims* (hold up a copy of the book). We've produced a booklet *Celebrating one Hundred years of Service and Worship* (hold up the magazine) which describes where we are today – copies of both publications are available for purchase after the service.

But also in this service we dedicate a specially commissioned icon which is going to travel around the diocese, stopping off in schools and churches, inviting people to reflect on God's call to re-build the church today. It will arrive at the Equestrian Centre in Keysoe on August Bank Holiday Monday, 25th August, where thousands of people will gather for a day of fun, celebration and worship as we commit ourselves to God's service for the coming one hundred years. We hope to see you there.

So on this great centenary, as we gather in the cathedral today, please join with me in praying that we may be renewed in faith and hope and obedience to build God's church in our generation on the firm foundation of Jesus Christ. And to Him be the glory unto the ages of ages.

+Alan St Albans