**FAREWELL CHORAL EVENSONG FOR BISHOP CHRISTOPHER**

**24th April 2021**

What a contrast in these two Bible readings. Superficially I might be attracted to the first as it’s about priesthood, and Aaron’s robing in the symbolic vestments of his role reminds me of how I entered this church in a simple white robe in September 2010. I was anointed and was one by one clothed with the particular robes not of OT priesthood like Aaron, nor of a generic bishop, but of the Bishop of Portsmouth. My last act will be to lay down the most significant of them as I hand the crosier, the pastoral or shepherd’s staff to Debbie to be passed to my successor, as at the culmination of my installation Lucy gave it to me. Whatever the significance of oil, of cross and stole, ring, cope and mitre, that shepherd’s crook is a constant reminder to me and to you of our calling to care for God’s people and to draw more people into the church, the flock of the Good Shepherd. How many times have I said that it is not a hook to draw in those who stray but properly held horizontal to keep the flock together.

The trouble is that Aaron and his male descendants claimed a monopoly of priesthood. Theirs was the exclusive right and responsibility to make the required offerings, to determine the holy from the common and the clean from the unclean ‘by perpetual ordinance.’ By contrast the Gospel reading speaks to us, shouts indeed (though through the no-doubt quiet words of elderly prophets that we may strain to hear) of a new, open and redeeming future for everyone. It speaks memorably of the passing of one person, like this occasion, but it proclaims salvation for all people, a light for revelation to every nation.

Jesus is brought, eight days old, to the Temple in Jerusalem. Some of you have stood with me in that place or looked over the vast plaza from the Mount of Olives. Temple Mount, the Dome of the Rock, covers 37 acres. Its spaciousness is important not just in its dimensions but because it welcomed the young, like the baby Jesus, as well as the elderly Anna and Simeon, and indeed a host of other people and activities of varying and sometimes questionable type. There was not only physically room for them but there was space in a deeper sense, as there was twelve years later for Jesus with the scribes and teachers.

Throughout his ministry, as Simeon foretells and which enables him to celebrate his death, there is space for the unlikeliest, the least attractive, those of no reputation, those with questions and hesitations, those who are ill, the ostracised and the disliked or hated; there is space for all in the kingdom which Jesus comes to proclaim and herald. There is indeed a wideness in God’s mercy, and so there must be in the church.

The calling of every Christian, every friend and disciple of Jesus is to make and give space for others and for the Kingdom. It’s specifically the calling of a bishop, this bishop, to ensure space in the church for the richest and fullest variety of Christian expression and worship, to enable the thriving of all – from birth to old age – to have time and room in our hearts (and not just as paying users of our buildings) for the people, groups and institutions of our communities. We are proud to speak of parish, but God forbid we do not mean congregation when we refer to our parish.

Today we read of Anna and Simeon spotting and affirming the potential of Jesus to change everything, and to be the most significant of all God’s continuing actions in the world. By their words and their faithfulness, their prayer and fasting, they enable not a clinging to what they have known for eight and more decades but God’s new thing. It is about Jesus; the favour of God was upon him, and Jesus is our light and salvation as he does a new thing.

After all the excitement, perhaps the shock (but they were perhaps getting used to the unexpected!) we read that Mary and Joseph were amazed at what they heard in the Temple and then return to their own town Nazareth. We shall do the same in half an hour, and that is where most of you sharing in this service are now. That is where we live, pray and serve as fellow disciples of Jesus. There we are called to be spacious Christians, giving opportunity to outsiders more than insiders, young more than older, black more than white, gay more than straight, women more than men, refugees and asylum seekers more than those settled and comfortable, those whose learning or health is impaired or thwarted rather than the educated and well-to-do, not because any one of them or us is more precious in God’s sight but because there are very many whom we, the church which claims to be the church of God, continues to treat as different. We make God’s love too narrow by limits of our own, and we must not.

Over recent years I and we have said a lot about growth in depth, impact and number, and so we should. That’s the way to grow the Kingdom. The child Jesus ‘grew and became strong, filled with wisdom,’ we read. We too need spiritual deepening and physical growth to share with Jesus in transforming the world and making an impact where we are. From this pulpit at my installation I encouraged us to grow in confidence. Sometimes I fear I have found us needing to bolster our confidence, but the last year has enabled us to review and recommit to what we know is most important. Circumstances, sometimes tragic and frequently challenging, have shown we are a collaborative, courageous, generous, resourceful and pioneering church and, in strange circumstances, our faith and confidence have been transformed so that we may not only continue but thrive as a spacious church for others, for God, for the Kingdom.

At my installation I declined to approach closed doors at the west end and bang on them, as tradition suggests, asking to enter, preferring the doors to be wide open. Our doors should be open for all to enter and also so that we can go out. So,

Go forth and tell! the doors are open wide:

share God’s good gifts – let no one be denied;

live out your life as Christ your Lord shall choose,

your ransomed powers for his sole glory use.