**Installation of the Dean of Southwark**

**The Very Rev’d Dr Mark Oakley**

Lord Scarborough once said that ‘Deans are like pigeons. They rather like to leave their mark’. Well, as I look around now I can see so many people who have made a mark in my life and for whom I’m hugely grateful. I’m thrilled Caroline and Bishop Richard Chartres are here. I was chaplain to Bishop Richard for four years. He once introduced me to a visiting archbishop. ‘Have you met my Chaplain?’, he asked. ‘He’s called Mark – mainly because he tends to overstep it’. And of course, many of you know that through all of my life there has been a faithful and loving rock, who stepped in when I was a baby to care for me and never stopped. My grandmother is sitting in Shropshire watching this right now online, aged 101, and I’m sending her this day of all days my love and deepest gratitude for everything she has given me, as I do to all of you. And to those who do not know me yet, but are entrusting me with this ministry, I promise you, with your help and, I hope with a lot of fun on the way, that I will do the very best I can. If that doesn’t work, I take comfort in the words of Quentin Crisp that ‘If at first you don’t succeed, failure may be your style’. Seeing my name in the service order just now made me feel as I think Pontius Pilate might feel about the creed - delighted to get a mention, but a bit struck by the implications. But as Shakespeare looks over towards this pulpit, I’m energised today by his words in the Tempest: ‘what’s past is prologue’.

I have just held in my hand the Bible that belonged to Bishop Lancelot Andrewes. As you know, his tomb is in this cathedral. In 1619, on Ash Wednesday, he preached over at Whitehall, and in his sermon he told his listeners that preachers should preach to people: “not what for the present they would hear, but what in another day they would wish they had heard.” This is a truth I shall hold close. It is a reminder not just to preachers, but to this cathedral and diocese, that we continue being a place that:

- engages with what matters, what really matters, and do it in such a way that plausibly and imaginatively contributes to public life and debate, that partners with people - creatives, charities, schools, community leaders, residents, politicians and local government, businesses, those of world faiths and of none – with any who share with us the values of the common good, because this world badly needs some kindness (it’s starting to sound an old fashioned word),

- is a cathedral that always wants to nurture and deepen the faith and learning of the congregation in all their stages of life

- is a cathedral that allows those with honest doubts and questions to be open and welcome.

Andrewes reminds us that we are not to pursue *relevance*, here today and gone tomorrow, as much as *resonance*, that which is perennial in the human search for truth and meaning and relationship. A cathedral is a sacred place and common ground.

To do all this, I believe the cathedral must always be at least three things: poetic, sacramental and just.

By poetic, I mean of course we must take language seriously, both that which we use in the worship of God and our teaching, also being mindful of the way we use words with each other and of each other. But a poetic cathedral will also relish music and the arts, will want to deepen the mystery of God not resolve it, will distrust bumper sticker theology, and like a poem, will not be afraid of human ambiguity and the space on the human page, taking the search for distilled truth seriously, not as mere information but as formation, part of human, spiritual growth. God is not the object of our knowledge but the cause of our wonder, and *revelation always entails re-evaluation.* As this season of Advent knows, somewhat reduced by a thin materialistic imagination and a globalised superficiality, we find we are not complete in ourselves but need to be addressed and animated by a Love transcendent, that sees us as we really are and comes to repair. Lovers are never literalists. They use the richness and acrobatic potential of words to recognise, connect with, and deepen their love. So it is with a community that is seeking to love God and neighbour. ‘Poetic’ will mean us being patiently attentive – because pay attention and attention tends to pay you back. It will mean not closing down others’ insights, seeking the beauty of our transition that pierces mind and heart, and resisting the porridge of the prosaic, putting the odd back into God. Sometimes the institutional language of the Church of England can slip into sounding as if we are running Toyota, it can sound tribal, corporate, compromised, too much like the things we want to be free of. What an irony – a spiritually hungry people finding the Church to be too secular. No. God is in this world as poetry is in the poem. A cathedral is witness to the fact.

This cathedral is unapologetically sacramental, a school for loving better. We learn in this school as we are questioned and calmed by the scriptures, reading the love between the lines. And we learn that love is never content just to sit in the corner and read, because love has to have a voice and reach out, so this community is sacramental, full of signs, hints, participation. Love does stuff – love says life should be like bread being shared equally, being a body. Love splashes water and says its like graceful rain refreshing our parched ground and this water to the Christian becomes thicker than blood, it makes us belong to each other; and love takes the hands of people who have found their harbour and places them together for a future, love lays hands on those being called to serve in ministry and puts them in clerical collars to show the world that on the whole we are up to our necks in it, but we’re home too, and love anoints our last breath as we finally surrender all we have become and are. A sacramental community is rooted in these daily, endless, fresh beginnings and no matter what people may say or do from time to time, God is in communion with all his people, everyone, and it is our baptismal privilege and our spiritual adventure to celebrate this in our lives and worship.

Finally, as Micah reports, God asks us to love justice. Southwark cathedral has a long history of believing that Christian spirituality at the end of the day is a standing up with, and for, those who are bruised, marginalised, oppressed or simply being made invisible. I’m greatly looking forward to discerning with this community how we will continue this tradition in our own hardened days where, as has been said, if you’re not at the table you are probably on the menu. Justice is simply the social outworking of the love of God we celebrate, not least justice for children and the vulnerable, those living with disability, racial justice, and for the planet and the life it sustains. A cathedral today must stand for something, not fall for anything. And stand, I know, we will. Being just will also mean this is a cathedral for all the people of the diocese, a place for some barefaced integrity and therefore some honest and sometimes difficult conversations, but a place for all of us. The cathedral will of course have its own values as it converses, values we will hold very dear. And, forgive me, but I think this might need saying at this moment in time, but Southwark cathedral has known for a long time now that God is already blessing same-sex couples, and has been continuously blessing in every generation the Church and the world through them, through both their love and their courage. The love of the creative God always shapes goodness out of diversity, a goodness that is beautiful and lifegiving. The challenge of God’s grace to the Church is whether we can embrace the large opportunities of being generous instead of the small opportunities to be mean.

As we heard, the blessed ones in the kingdom of God have come home to their senses, and are the humbled not those who humiliate, those with a heart with some mercy in it, those who carry and share peace, mindful of the hurt we can do, those who hunger to see what is right come about, by facing their fears and doing it anyway, those who mourn and have experienced loss, those who know their need of God and relationship that deepens our living. To love mercy and to do justly and to walk a bit more humbly sounds about right at the moment. And here Cathedrals are never to be an ‘example of power’ but a place that believes in the ‘power of example’.

Finally, talking of walking a bit more humbly, I know in many ways this is a hard time for the Church. Our public voice is often feint, our leaders are often heavy with so much placed on their shoulders, money is short, clergy morale can be low, our people can be exhausted physically and emotionally. It’s hard, as it is for many others at the moment, and we should be honest about this. But mentalities can become self-fulfilling. Martin Luther King Jr never once said, ‘I have a nightmare’. He had a dream, and poetically and with a love for justice, he invited people to the promised land of who they might yet become. Every time we meet at this table, we are asked, with the same soul as was in him, to ‘lift up your hearts’ and, if I have one vision for this cathedral over the coming years, it is that we will help hearts to be lifted, with a poetic energy, with sacraments which remind us we are not alone, and by social justice, hearts lifted out of despondency, lifted to face our current illusions without becoming disillusioned, to be encouraged, to be helped to hope, lifted to the presence of God. So, let’s do it:

The Lord be with you – and also with you

Lift up your hearts! – we lift them to the Lord.

Then, please God, I think we’ll be ok.