

*See I am laying in Zion a foundation stone, a tested stone, a precious cornerstone, a sure foundation: 'One who trusts will not panic.'* (Isaiah 28:16)

Amen.

It was my eldest daughter's first day at school. I remember her looking all grown up in her uniform – burgundy cardigan, white shirt, burgundy and grey striped tie, grey skirt and shiny patent leather black shoes. Perfection. After her first day she sat on her Daddy's knee and told me about her day, and I asked her: 'what was your favourite thing?' 'Swimming!' she replied excitedly. She sat on my knee again at the end of Day Two and I asked her the same question: 'Sally, what was your favourite thing today?' 'Swimming' she said, again. I said, 'Oh, I don't remember you taking your swimming costume to school today. 'They provided one Daddy' was her reply.

The same conversation happened on Day Three, so on Day Four when I picked up Sally from school I thanked her new form teacher for the school's comprehensive swimming programme and asked her where the school pool was, to which the teacher replied: 'Actually, we don't have a school pool, Mr Archer. And we haven't done any swimming at all this week.'

Later that day, as Sally sat on my knee again, I mentioned, very gently, what her teacher had told me, and asked her why she had told me all about enjoying swimming each day. She said 'I don't know Daddy' and burst into tears.

Did Sally lie to her father? Was it the cruellest of deceits? Or was it a four and a half year old's imagination having a bit of fun? Sally is now 28 and she works in London in advertising, so I'm inclined to believe that lying at an early age rather goes with the territory.

Lies lie at the heart of our readings today from the prophet Isaiah and St Paul. In Isaiah it plain obvious, external, advertised; in St Paul it's far more subtle, internal, conceptual. Interestingly, the remedy is exactly the same in both texts. Our first hymn this morning was a clue.

The prophecies of Isaiah are often immensely beautiful, mystical, comforting, and they are still inspiring us thousands of years later. The people walking in darkness will see a great light in our Advent readings in just a few weeks. But Isaiah 28 is not really like that. It begins with the word 'woe', that's always a bad sign, and when we hear the phrase 'covenant of death' in our passage, well we've clearly not got the Prophet on one of his tender days. And Isaiah's issue with the people of God is this:

'The LORD would be your refuge and your shelter, we sing about it in our psalms often enough, but you will have none of it. You have made lies your refuge, you have made falsehood your shelter.'

Lies, right at the very heart of the people of God. And no, just because we're not making alliances with the Assyrians or the Syrians doesn't mean that we can hold this text at arm's length this morning. Our societies, certainly our presidents, our communities and sadly our churches can sometimes collude with that which is utterly false.

People in robes in pulpits have said that God prefers white skin to that of another race. People in parliaments have said that women shouldn't vote and Californian hi-tech companies think that they shouldn't be paid equally. Heads of state have instigated and applauded violence towards the press. And people in synods have said that God values straight marriage more than he values gay marriage.

So what is Isaiah's remedy when the people of God are colluding with that which is false? Look to your foundations. Let the LORD once more become your precious cornerstone. Get your foundation right, and your behaviour above will be corrected.

I'm not sure if you've seen the Order of Service for Bishop Viv's enthronement last week; you can read it on the Cathedral website. In it our new Bishop publishes the charge given to her by the Archbishop of Canterbury, and he based his words to her on the observations of the Crown Nominations Commission that selected her. I find it an encouraging insight into our Diocesan life in the next few years, and I mention it because it addresses our foundations. If both the Archbishop of Canterbury and the Bishop of Bristol say our way forward together is going to be as a holy, diverse people grounded in theology and prayer I suspect it will be. We are about to corporately check that the precious cornerstone is beneath us. And what lies beneath us will shape who we are.

The lie that St Paul addresses in Ephesians is more subtle, implied not explicit, and personally I've found it more challenging. (Incidentally, if you think you're about to get a lecture on capstones, cornerstones, cement and building, not a chance - I feel physically sick when I attempt DIY.)

So let's look, very simply, at the building process from the bottom up: St Paul tells us that Christ is the Cornerstone of our foundation. It is unashamedly Jesus that makes the lines straight and true right at the bottom of our communal life.

And interestingly the Apostles and Prophets have the same postcode as Christ. Simon & Jude, who we remember today, Isaiah who continues to instruct us, and many others - they too are our foundation. Here at the Cathedral we begin each day of worship with the words of St Augustine; we remember our foundation.

And then above that foundation is built the household of God, our daily interconnected living. But there's more. Our foundation for life is so glorious that we are not to consider ourselves aliens or strangers drifting through this world, but fellow citizens of the saints, or to borrow from Philippians (3:20) 'citizens of heaven.'

And here is where the lie creeps in, certainly in me anyway. We get buffeted by the world, life presents new complexities and challenges, relationships fail, jobs frustrate, money runs out and our doctor's prescription gets so long it is delivered on the back of a lorry. And the lie that creeps in is this: *'I am a citizen of a broken and fading world.'* Whereas the eucharistic banquet we are about to share and the words of the St Paul are crystal clear: I am a citizen of heaven, we are citizens of heaven, you are a citizen of heaven. And we are to live on this earth as citizens of heaven, with the saints.

Some of you will know that I work as Chaplain just up the road at the Royal Bristol Hospital for Children. There are 160 beds, each occupied by somebody under 16. I accompany families when matters of life and death are very present, and I pray and speak about God and heaven quite a lot – I'm used to it.

But the greater challenge for me at the moment is in a nursing home a few miles in the other direction where I accompany my mother as she slips away peacefully at the end of her life. Human frailty and beauty are both visible, and sadness is the overwhelming emotion. But St Paul is on my case. Neill, you are not looking at a victim of dementia, you are looking at a citizen of heaven. And so is she.

*May God grant to each of us the grace to look beneath, to consider our lives, to renew our foundations. And may each us live with the saints as citizens of heaven, this day, and always. Amen.*