

Boating for Beginners

Saturday 3 October

2 Chronicles 7:11-16 and Mark 13:32-end

Before we share God's word together, may I briefly thank you for your presence here today, whether in person or online, and for the many prayers and warm wishes that have surrounded us through the past days and weeks. In particular, I want to thank Michael Johnson, who cannot have known what he was agreeing to when he took on the role of Acting Dean, for his exemplary leadership of the cathedral community, and Bishop Viv for her welcome and encouragement.

It is good to see so many faces here in the cathedral today that are already becoming familiar and I look forward to working with you for the flourishing of this city and its communities in the months and years to come.

So now, let us take a moment to reflect on God's purpose for us and for the city...

May I speak in the name of God, who is Creator, Sustainer and Redeemer. Amen.

Boating for Beginners

Jeanette Winterson's second novel is a fantasy reworking of the story of Noah, in which Noah runs a thriving pleasure boat company called "Boating for Beginners".

The Ark has been just one of the biblical boats that has been on my mind as I contemplated taking up my role as Dean of Bristol and embarking on my own journey of Boating for Beginners.

Perhaps it is not surprising that ships have been on my mind, linking, as they do, this trading city with an ancient image of the church.

On the wall of my study is a little drawing I made when I was praying about my future over a year ago. It shows a crescent shaped boat under full sail bowling along powered by the wind of the Spirit.

The boat reminded me of the story of Noah so I drew a little black raven, being sent out to search for landfall and to bring back a sign of what the future would hold.

I've thought often in the intervening months of the Ark floating over a silent world, holding within it the promise of a fruitful future and of its inhabitants, fearful and uncertain as they waited for the flood to abate.

In the months of lock down and beyond, many of us and those in the communities we serve have experienced fear and uncertainty in the face of the Corona Virus. We have been forced to reassess our priorities and to find new ways of living and working.

During that time much of what we thought was important has been impossible, and so much else has been given new life and significance.

Many people experienced a great sense of loss as our cathedrals, so long the custodians of a historically continuous stream of prayer remained empty and the ancient rhythms of daily worship were disrupted.

God was not absent, as he promised to Solomon "I have chosen and consecrated this house so that my name may be there for ever; my eyes and my heart will be there for all time."

God was here, secure as the Ark, waiting for a time when a new future could be revealed.

But in the meantime, God was busy elsewhere too and we were more mindful than ever of God's presence in our hospitals and care homes, alongside our supermarket workers and bus drivers, and in countless dining rooms and back bedrooms where prayer, work and study continued day by day.

As we gather this afternoon, although the rain may have ceased, the flood has not yet subsided.

We cannot yet clearly see the new landscape,
or the extent of the wreckage we will find washed ashore,
We do not yet know how we will steer ourselves safely into harbour.
We can anticipate that there are more storms to come.

Let us not deny the reality of suffering at the hands of this pandemic,
much of it yet to be fully comprehended.

It is not simply the headline suffering of those who have died,
but the suffering of those who have endured loneliness, abuse
or chronic illness exacerbated by lack of access to services,
and the suffering of so many whose livelihoods and life opportunities
have felt the impact of the actions necessary to preserve life.

We know that the impact is disproportionately felt
by those who always bear the greatest burdens of suffering in our
society,

women, young people, people of colour,
people already dependent on low paid and insecure work.

The second biblical boat that has been on my mind is the fishing boat
that took Jesus and his friends back and forth across the lake in Gaililee.
When a storm blew up, the disciples were unsettled and afraid,
while Jesus remained asleep in the stern.

When the disciples finally turn to him for help,
Jesus restored tranquillity
not only to them,
but to the waves.

Noah did not know what he would find when the flood waters receded,
the disciples had no idea what God had planned for them
after the death Jesus,
they all experienced uncertainty and suffered loss.

St Paul tells us (Romans 5:3-5) that suffering produces endurance,
and endurance produces character,
and character produces hope.

Hope does not deny suffering but does not fear suffering,
knowing that God's future is more important.

Christians know that there is a big difference between sunny optimism
and faithful hope.

Hope is the gift that God has to offer us, as a cathedral, as a diocese and as a city.

As Christians, we inherit God's promise
from our ancestor Noah, from the disciples,
from all who have been sustained by the faithful prayer of this cathedral,
and we share the call
to speak God's word of hope into the world, by word and action.

My sense is that we need to be awake and alert looking towards a horizon to see landfall that has more characteristics of God's Kingdom and fewer signs of our own past failures simply repeated.

This is not the anxious scanning of the fearful,
but the thoughtful gaze of the seasoned sailor
who can read the sky and the waves
and adjust the course ahead accordingly.

I should perhaps warn you, dear friends, that I am not actually a very good sailor!

While I love to be on the water, I am frequently sea sick,
and as a bookish child, unlike my siblings and despite growing up on an island, I never learned to sail.

However, one of the joys of the Summer was to spend a week on the Brecon and Monmouthshire canal in a narrow boat.

Firstly, let us be clear that the name of these vessels is a misnomer – when you are trying to steer 50 ft of sluggish steel under a bridge with less than 6 inches of clearance on either side, narrow is not the word that comes to mind.

But, after a few days, I learned some valuable lessons.

I learned to look ahead and to read the curve of the canal,
so that the boat could be pivoted at just the point when it would not go aground at the stern or crash into the blackberry bushes at the bow.
I learned to adjust the tiller very slowly and gently round the long curves, and with much greater force round the tight corners,
so that we could eventually slide under those bridges
without bouncing off the ancient stone work.

As time went on, I became less anxious and more confident that the boat would survive and continue to slip gently through the waters despite my faltering efforts at control.

We do not know what the future holds for our city or for our church, but we have been here before.

I come to this task humbled by the faithfulness of my predecessors; those who maintained the streams of prayer through the dissolution of the monastic way of life; through plagues; through economic downturns; through two World Wars; and through unprecedented change brought about by emigration.

The months ahead will be necessarily months of experimentation as we explore new ways of navigating the waters ahead.

In the cathedral community we have the inheritance of history to provide stability in stormy seas.

In the city we share the energy and creativity that has shaped new industries and new communities and, I pray, will do so again.

Steering this particular ship of the church through the next few years will not be my task alone, but that of all who chose to sail in her.

I'm so delighted to be joining a crew who have demonstrated already that they have the creativity and flexibility to respond to changes in the weather.

We look forward to joining others in the flotilla looking to the horizon on this journey of hope.