Bishop Michael’s Installation Sermon

Wonderful people of Somerset. From Yeovil, Bath and Bridgewater, and residents of Weston-super-Mare, Wincanton and Burnham-on-Sea, Keynsham and Taunton, Langport and Clevedon, Frome and the parts of Exmoor around Dunkery Beacon, and visitors from abroad, both Zambians and Londoners, Midlanders and Home Countyers – listen to God’s deeds of power.

For in this Cathedral this afternoon we are the inheritors of the people who gathered in Jerusalem and were spoken of in our reading from the Book of Acts. They came from every part of the known world. Just as we are gathered from Somerset, and everywhere else. The people who listened to the Acts message, and those who spoke it to them went out from Jerusalem to transform their world. Their message, their witness, their legacy handed on to us today.

So what were they doing in that city? Who were they? What enabled them to turn the world upside down? And if they could speak to us, what would they say to us here in Wells today?

The people had come to Jerusalem for the Jewish festival of Weeks. It happens 50 days after Passover – which is where its Greek name comes from – Pentecost. Pentecost was when the first gatherings of wheat were presented in the Temple in Jerusalem. So you might say it was the equivalent of our harvest festival. First century singing of ‘we plough the fields and scatter’. As much as Pentecost was about thanking God for the gifts of the harvest, it was also about thanking God too for his Word, the torah, the law given to enable God’s people to live God’s way in God’s world. So yes, the people gathered in Jerusalem were there to give thanks for the harvest. But they came too in longing for a bigger harvest – for God’s life, God’s way, to be present in every part of their lives. A world transformed into a place of peace, fairness, service, justice, loving-kindness.

A specialist job for a highly trained team of change management specialists, organisational consultants and communication experts? Hardly. Look at the main speaker in today’s reading. Peter – fisherman, follower, denier and sinner, recipient of forgiveness and reconciliation and restoration. So apart from the really skilled bit of being a fisherman, pretty much like the rest of us.

How did Peter find words to set in train a movement that spread from Jerusalem, to all the known world of his time, to the whole of our globe today? It wasn’t by his own ability or strength. Peter speaks and acts out of pure, sheer gift - God’s life, bestowed on to him through the Holy Spirit. Exactly the same gift that was given to each of us at our baptism.

Peter invites those who hear to share in God’s vision for what the world is called to be. This isn’t a task just for the chosen, specialised few. It’s for everyone –sons and daughters, young and old, women and men. All together pointing towards a day, a life, a world where we can live in right and reconciled relationship with each other, with the whole of creation, with God.

The rest of the Book of Acts sees this vision unfold. After his words in today’s reading, Peter tells his hearers the extraordinary story of Jesus. Of Jesus death and resurrection. Of the unstoppable power of his life showing God’s plan for the world. A new community is created that lives with authenticity and integrity the story of Jesus. They devote themselves to the apostles teaching, the breaking of bread and the prayers. They act in economic justice, fairness and concern for the common good. They embody generosity and joy. From Jerusalem the new movement fans out from the Holy Land, across boundaries of ethnicity and identity, shaping the values and culture of the whole known world and changing it forever.

Our task, our challenge is to live this promise in our time, our places, among our people and our communities. How might we go about it?

First let us be people who long for a harvest - a world transformed into a place of peace, fairness, service, justice, loving-kindness. Let’s to be people who commit ourselves to being those who say to God with all our hearts ‘Thy kingdom come’. God we want to join your way of living in our world.

Next let’s realise that we don’t do this in our own power, but in God’s alone. What happened in Jerusalem didn’t come from people’s effort, but through the gift of God’s spirit alive and at work among them. That same power is offered to each of us today and everyday – changing us, enabling us, equipping us.

Not only did those in Jerusalem experience the gift of God’s power. They must also have recognised the gift that they were to each other. Imagine the different perspectives that group contained. The ideas they encompassed, the insights they had. It takes the whole world to know Christ. We need the gift and difference of each other if we are to know and serve the Lord.

Those who heard the message went out from Jerusalem to change the world. Back to Pontus and Asia, Phrygia and Pamphylia, sent and enabled by the message they’d been given. Our task is just the same today. To return to Wincanton and Burnham-on-Sea, Keynsham and Taunton and everywhere else, ready to change the world around us for the good of all its people.

As a symbol of our commitment to turning these words into action, there’s a gift for each of you that you’ll be offered as you leave the cathedral today. As we’ve heard so much in the last few days, amongst the biggest challenges we face as citizens of the earth is the climate catastrophe that advances upon us. So as an example of just one of the things we can do to bring about the harvest of God’s life into God’s world, I invite you to take home from this place - a sapling. A hazel that will grow, offer shelter to birds and creatures, capture carbon, hold moisture in the soil. Our world has so many needs – of poverty, of hunger, of disease, of hardness of heart. As a way of marking this day will you plant a sapling as a sign that under God each of us, in every place, can play our part in working for change, for transformation, for life. Small actions that when we undertake them together make a big difference.

Because we are called to be living signs of God’s life in the world. To live and tell the story of Jesus. Together let us be sons and daughters who prophesy, young people who see visions, old people who dream dreams, men and women, young and old, upon whom God’s Spirit is poured. Amen.