

Sermon for Installation as Dean, 8 July 2023

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Mounting this pulpit, I feel at least as nervous as I did when delivering my very first sermon. Then – at a service of Matins on a winter morning – the congregation was small. Today, I am immensely touched – and somewhat overwhelmed – that so many of you have come to mark this occasion or are watching online. I am, indeed, surrounded by a veritable cloud of witnesses. I know that you will all assist and support me in running with perseverance the particular race that is set before me, and keep my sight fixed on Jesus, the pioneer and perfecter of our faith.

When I first preached, as now, I had history on my mind and the weight of responsibility of being the first woman in an historic role. Then I reflected on a figure from the distant past, one whose role involved reading and teaching, praying, preaching, and ministering to the laity as well as high-level administration: the Mercian princess, Frithuswith, known in modern English as Frideswide.

Having escaped an unwanted marriage, Frithuswith established a religious community on or near this site; she led her congregation in worship, while running their affairs and landed estates. As a new member of the prayerful community at the heart of Christ Church, I found it profoundly humbling to reflect that prayer had first been uttered here by women. And by lay women, some of whom, like me, had once known something of the world, of marriage, and of family life. Even more humbling is the thought that it is about 1200 years since a woman was last in charge.

Frideswide is just one of many figures from Christ Church's long past commemorated in this building and its cloister, people whose faithful, prayerful witness to the gospel continue to serve as examples and models for us today. Among the 350 memorials are several to past canons, including previous holders of the chair that I have just laid aside, and to many of the 45 Deans who preceded me. Some of those had previously ministered as canons, most recently Cuthbert Simpson, who was Regius Professor of Hebrew before becoming Dean in 1959. Two of my predecessors in the Ecclesiastical History chair were later Deans, but neither of them here: A.P. Stanley (Dean Stanley) went from Christ Church to Westminster, and the philosopher, Henry Mansel, became Dean of St Paul's.

This building also bears witness. It reflects shifts in architectural and ecclesiological fashions over centuries. The unusual design of the nave, chancel, and transepts, built between 1160 and 1200, ingeniously attempts to create a sense of height by using a so-called 'giant-order' elevation. The columns rise over two stories, encompassing both nave and the gallery above under one overarching arch. Only a few other surviving churches – Tewkesbury, Romsey, and Jedburgh Abbeys – use the same technique. This is often seen as the last expression of Norman architecture before its replacement with the pointed arches and slender columns of Gothic forms.

Just one stained-glass window now testifies to another innovative period in the 1630s, when the Laudian dean, Brian Duppa, tried to create the beauty of holiness in a major reordering of the building. Sadly, much of his work, including a new organ, was ripped out during the

Protectorate. Of three splendid windows that he had commissioned from the Dutch glassmaker, Abraham van Linge, only one survives: the Jonah window at the end of the north aisle. When a decree in 1651 ordered the removal from church windows of all glass depicting 'God, good or bad angels or saints', an outspoken Puritan canon, Henry Wilkinson, appointed to the Chapter by Parliament, jumped on the glass as the windows were taken from the stonework, shattering them into fragments.

It is helpful to think about the history of Christ Church across the *longue durée*, to see in the fabric of the building and its monuments the palimpsest of earlier centuries. There have been periods in the past when the institution has gone through extremely difficult times, but it has always recovered and restored itself. Everyone here is aware that Christ Church is just emerging from a notably painful period. Many who care deeply about this place have found the events of recent years profoundly distressing. Yet we, too, shall recover and restore ourselves. The governance review presents us with exciting opportunities to fashion Christ Church afresh, preserving our unique status as both a College and a Cathedral under a different sort of leadership, and with some new internal structures. I am proud and honoured to play a part in this process.

The readings for tonight's service are those prescribed by the Lectionary, but those of you who know me well will appreciate how deliberate were the choices that I made about tonight's music – from the psalm to the setting for the canticles (*Collegium regale* for this royal foundation), from the hymns to the responses. Looking to the future, the words that I chose for tonight's introit, and those of the anthem, caution us to be mindful of how we approach the task set before us. These texts are among a group of fifteen psalms labelled 'Songs of ascent', traditionally understood as intended for liturgical use by pilgrims travelling to the temple at Jerusalem. This is perhaps most obvious in 'I was glad', with its expression of delight at approaching the city and anticipation of entry into the temple: a place of beauty and divine encounter, where peace and safety lie within its walls.

Nisi dominus, 'Except the Lord build the house', is typical of these songs of ascent. In that repeated phrase 'Except the Lord', the poet moves upwards, constructing a cumulative argument. He describes three sorts of labour – building a house (a family or a building), guarding a city, and anxious (obsessive) toil, all of which are futile without God's direct involvement. For a new Dean, with a tendency to overwork and a poor work/life balance, this is notably sound advice. But this isn't about me.

Unless the Lord build the house, their labour is but lost that build it. What is the house? In a sermon on this psalm St Augustine reminds us. 'The house of God – the house of Christ – is the temple of God', he wrote, and quoted St Paul to the Corinthians: 'God's temple is holy, and that you are that temple.' Augustine continued: 'This house of [God] Christ comprises all the faithful, not only those alive today, but also our predecessors in the faith who have fallen asleep, and those who will come after us, those to be born into this human life, even to the end of the world.' Remember that great cloud of witnesses who are part of the very fabric of this House.

In his address to those about to be ordained deacon in this place last Saturday, the Bishop spoke to the candidates of the weight of their calling. He asserted 'you cannot bear this in

your own strength, but only by the grace and power of God'. So, he urged the congregation to 'pray earnestly for the gift of the Holy Spirit'. The weight of my calling to this charge is also too great for me to bear in my own strength. But I know that God works through human agents, and that he works here through you, this congregation, this community, *this* great cloud of witnesses. This is not about me. It is about all of us. It is together as a community that we will go forward and continue to build this house of Christ as a temple fit for God and for all his saints. As we will sing in our final hymn: Christ is our cornerstone, on *him* alone we build.