

## Sermon

Feast Day of St Woolos

St Woolos' Cathedral

13<sup>th</sup> April 2018

by the Rt Revd June Osborne  
Bishop of Llandaff

Sirach 2 v7-13

Philippians 3 v7-14

Luke 9 v23-27

Thank you, Bishop Richard for your warm welcome, and to your wonderful Dean for his kind invitation to preach.

He may not remember this, but it was on 8<sup>th</sup> February of last year that the Dean first invited me to come and join your celebrations this evening and I was delighted to promise to be with you over a year ahead.

Little did either of us know – that we would both have just returned from the Governing Body of The Church in Wales, having secured a whole new Constitution for this Cathedral. This is a great achievement. It brings your governance structures into a modern era of proper accountabilities, fiscal disciplines, team working and all undergirded by a sense of purpose, values and ambition.

So, I'm thrilled to be with you at the end of this auspicious week for the new constitutional launching of Newport Cathedral and to have the chance to offer congratulations to all who worked on it.

In February of 2017, little did your Dean, or I know that I would be preaching for you as the Bishop of Llandaff. And just as unlikely, that Salisbury Cathedral where I'd then been Dean for 13 years, should become world famous for the violation of that Cathedral city by chemical weapons.

If there was ever a reminder that Cathedrals inhabit a complex and changing environment, it's contained in what's been happening to Salisbury.

The threats and challenges will come differently for the city of Newport and the people of the Monmouth Diocese but come they will. All of us are having to capture and interpret the complexity of our social and cultural developments, for us here in contemporary South Wales knowing that religion and irreligion are both evident and potent forces. For your Cathedral Church that means finding a confident expression of religious faith whilst its legitimacy to speak at all is routinely being contested. The call of a Cathedral, as that of all Church life, is to respond to the agenda of the world, to seek the welfare of the city and the flourishing of its people.

But I haven't finished yet with the unpredictability of this Eastertide Patronal Festival for little did your Dean or I know that Sir Simon Jenkins, one-time Editor of The Times and Chairman of the National Trust would celebrate Easter by calling for the nationalisation of Church buildings, including the likes of this one.

Now this may be where we need some of the political acumen and warlord spirit of St Woolos, as well as his piety and sense of providence.

You may know Simon Jenkins best from his books on the architecture of Britain's heritage, churches, castles, stately homes and even railway stations. He's a self-confessed lover of Church buildings, though admits he doesn't worship in them. He began his Guardian article like this:

*“Lonely this Easter, depressed, in need of company or just escaping Facebook tyranny? Why not go to church? Or rather go not to church but to “a church”, one where no-one preaches or expects you to pray?”*

He goes on to accuse the Church – admittedly the Church of England, but since he's also published a book about Welsh Churches, we have to assume we're implicated in his criticism – of under-utilising these buildings and of our heart not being in 'reaching out', of a 'resolute refusal to serve the nation'.

*“Churches have gone from being beacons of a universal faith to the domain of a minority sect”.*

Having once described parish churches and cathedrals are ‘the museum of the UK’ he now calls for Church buildings to be taken into State ownership. Responsibility for them would be transferred to Local Councils who might set up local trusts and it would be these secular bodies who would then sublet churches either for community use or for Christian worship.

As you might imagine, I take issue with Simon Jenkins. Firstly, about the facts. He should know what a terrific record Church communities have, just like the congregations which care for this building, in maintaining historic fabric. And I’m sorry he has such a poor estimate of how such buildings are used in service of their communities. But what I really want you to note is how he asserts as self-evident three cultural assumptions which colour his view of our future.

One is his utilitarian approach to buildings like this cathedral. His questions are all about what *use* is made of it. The justification of this structure is seen in terms of its function and usefulness.

*“We are saddled with these fine buildings. At least we should try to use them.”*

Here, in this cathedral, you tell an ancient story and convey eternal truths – that the Lord of all creation is compassionate and merciful and saves in time of affliction. That God is good.

You do not validate your life by the functions of what goes on here. You do not justify this place by how useful it makes itself, though it is very nice to see the practical, adaptable and comfortable chairs!

You tell an ancient story. It’s important to be clear about which story you tell. If I can illustrate again with Salisbury – the dominant story told about Salisbury Cathedral when I became Dean was of the bucolic quietism of John Constable and his views of rainbows over the famous spire set in Wiltshire Meadows. Whereas when I left, the dominant story had shifted to the Cathedral’s relationship with Magna Carta and a quest for social justice.

So, what is the story of this Cathedral which defines its mission and its future? Know that story and tell it boldly and loud. In the 1500 years since St Woolos walked this land, no-one has ever asked you to justify your existence in terms of how useful you are. Don't start now.

Secondly, Simon Jenkins for all his authentic concern for historic buildings and landscape seems to have little sense of the sacred. He is, of course, not alone. Our society increasingly finds it difficult to distinguish the sacred from the merely solemn or traditional. He may have a keen eye for what is beautiful, but he doesn't seem to find in it the divine. He admits that worship is an unfamiliar, alien experience.

I don't need to tell you that above all else this place is a place of worship. Cathedrals are thin places with low thresholds. Thin places meaning that heaven connects with earth. Low thresholds meaning that we make it as easy as possible for anyone and everyone to access what's on offer here. We are deliberately not a spiritual version of the National Trust, offering the perks of membership. What we do offer – as Luke described in our gospel reading is a radical alternativeness. You want to save your life? You want to profit and maximise your interests? You want to avoid crucifixion at all costs?

But the way of Christ is not like that. If any want to become my followers and triumph – 'let them deny themselves and take up their cross'.

Cathedrals are not places which exclude but they, primarily through their worship of a self-offering God, will always look alternative in their culture. Be not ashamed at proclaiming this to be serious earth, sacred ground on which everyone is welcome to tread.

And finally, Simon Jenkins rehearses the commonly held falsehood that religious institutions cannot be trusted to get it right. I'm frankly amazed to hear him claim that he thinks the State would do a better job of caring for and utilising these buildings. Has he never visited French churches, where precisely that system is in place and seen the unloved nature of them? Whereas this Cathedral – with all its limitations of resources and location, exhibits the marks of being in extraordinarily good hands.

Our New Testament reading from Philippians spoke of us all pressing on towards the goal of the heavenly call of God in Christ Jesus. It urges on us that we're in the business of creating the future. You have an ever-unfolding future to create here in this place. These are challenging institutions to run and you can only succeed by telling a strong story, offering godly worship, and inhabiting a shared vision for what lies ahead.

I'm delighted to discover that St Woolos is not only the Patron Saint of Newport but also the Patron Saint of Pirates because there must be a bit of pirate in every dean of a cathedral, and all of you in Newport Cathedral. Now that you have this splendid and I'm sure highly effective new Constitution, don't forget that occasionally a cathedral should hoist the Jolly Roger and do the unconventional and unexpected.

Tonight, that means we resist the calls for nationalisation. We declare that in this place and in the blessed memory of St Woolos, we are Easter people, people of green growing hope, whose song is Alleluia, whose sign is peace, and whose name is love.