



Read the Archbishop of Canterbury's sermon at Canterbury Cathedral today.

It's Church, but not as we know it. But it is time for the bells to ring. It is time for organs to play. It is time once again for holy places to be filled with prayers. It is time for a new start.

Now we have choices, possibilities that did not exist. For the Lord whom we serve is the Lord of resurrection, of new life. God has conquered death, although death still claims sovereignty on earth. The Revelation of St John pictures death riding out with pestilence, famine and war. He pictures the fall of the mighty City of Babylon - an image of all that is self-sufficient and does not acknowledge that security and hope are found in God alone.

So where is God when all this is happening? What do we do to put our trust in God? Where was God when Becket cried out, "Unbar the doors! throw open the doors! I will not have the house of prayer, the church of Christ, the sanctuary, turned into a fortress. The Church shall protect her own, in her own way, not as oak and stone; stone and oak decay. Give no stay, but the Church shall endure. The church shall be open, even to our enemies. Open the door!"

Or was he wrong? As we remember the translation of his shrine 800 years ago, was it simply a vain attempt to sanctify a politician who misjudged the moment and the determination of a king?

We might ask today, where is God in a Covid ward? Or among the millions without their future, worried about their work? Or as the economic downturn smashes its way through the global economies of the south? Or as I read recently in one East African country, when a parent sold their child to anyone who can feed them? Or when people have not been able to stay by the bedside of a dying parent?

The list is endless as the clouds of darkness have risen in the last months. The list is endless as we seem overwhelmed with the avalanche of injustices. The paper has been stripped from over the cracks of the wall in our societies and our structures. We have seen the long forgotten, the left behind. We have heard the voices of the powerful, and we have recognised the struggles of the essential workers and the fact that they work on inadequate pay.

But will we remember that taste – that fleeting taste of how we would like to be?

You know, Becket's cry of "throw open the doors" may well have been answered, in our current crisis, by lockdown: church buildings were closed to keep the church in - in the world and out of the building. They were closed in order to keep the church in the community.

I am so grateful, so privileged to be part of God's church in this time, as it seeks to reach out to the hungry and the isolated – as it hasn't done for decades. We owe such thanks to the clergy who have enabled people to work out how to put things online.

But we have been a shepherd church, because the buildings have been closed. And the shepherds have gone out across this land. The church has gone out. Closed buildings were not what we wanted, but as we joyfully reopen, we are called not to retreat behind our walls.

Beckett was right – that is not the way of the church. Rather, we are to come in and feast on God so that we may go out and feed the world with hope and life. The French have a saying, *“reculer pour mieux sauter”*: step back in order better to leap forward. Today we can say *“entrer pour mieux sortir”*: come in so as to go out better.

We come together to feast, on the presence of Christ in the Eucharist and on the presence of Christ in the word; in the common study of scriptures. The good shepherd is a theme running 1,000 years back before Jesus, and half century after. Peter is its last exponent in the bible in 1 Peter 5.

In our gospel reading Jesus makes a declaration and presents a type. The declaration is clear: he takes the role that is for God alone: “The Lord is my shepherd” (Psalm 23). The type is picked up by Becket when he first meets the knights in Murder in the Cathedral: “Never again, you must make no doubt, Shall the sea run between the shepherd and his fold.” Eliot explicitly puts in his mouth the claim to be like Christ, as a shepherd, just as the apostle Peter does.

This is the task of the Church, in scripture and in our understanding of the Church. Not to simply gather in its buildings but to go out from our buildings as shepherds go out to work. The Church is now the word made flesh, the image of the living God - when it acts in humility, gives its life for the life of the world, when it serves and washes feet, when it looks like Jesus.

And when we go out, what do we find? Isaiah’s words speak to a nation that is outwardly prosperous; a nation that is paralysed with uncertainty and fear; that fears its enemies and seeks help in its own strength and cleverness.

Isaiah’s prophecy has revealed that its own resources will not save the nation. Yes, God Himself, Immanuel, will be with them, not in power and might, but with a small remnant that has escaped the ravages of plunderers and conquerors.

These famous verses are the culmination and summation of chapters 1 to 11. In them we see the nature of the salvation God will bring. At the time it may have been seen to apply to Hezekiah; later to the returning exiles. For Christians that salvation is made real in Jesus Christ.

See what a Christ-shaped church looks like! It delights in God. It sees beyond what is simply visible and hears what others do not. It has the heart of God. It is the very presence of God, the hand of God, the wisdom of God. It is hope that springs out of what looked to be utter despair.

This is what we aspire to be and do:

In repentance, to reform and look more like Christ, in bearing the image of God in all its diversity.

In generous service, to bring life and hope.

In faithful witness, to model trust in God.

In courageous compassion, to draw people together.

For we look around our world, and around our country, and we do not just retreat into church buildings. We go out and we build the society for which we long - which we've had a fleeting taste of.

The society that has heard the voice of George Floyd and says, "We will not tolerate this."

The society that has looked at the difference in life expectancy for those with Covid depending on their class or background or poverty and says,

"We will not live with this." We will build and that means actions, not only words.

For the last year, I've been chairing an extraordinary group of people as they formed a steering group to start a campaign called Together. It's being launched today. And it seeks through arts, sport, business and every other part of life to make it possible for people to recognise injustice and division, and work for healing. Today, this evening at 5pm we are called to pause and thank the NHS, thank God and pray as we celebrate this next step in reducing lockdown.

Today we thank God for the faithfulness of Thomas. For he saw that to build a better country there must be great sacrifice. Today we come in and rejoice in order to go out and renew, with all others of goodwill, and to rebuild a more just, more humane, and more Christ-like society from the struggles we have faced, and have yet to face.

Given the hope of resurrection we proclaim, given the solace and comfort of the risen Christ, we go out to bring solace and comfort to those we don't know, those who are different. To go out and give the love of God. Today, as every day, we can say with the church around the world, using the chant of the East African revival, where amidst war and suffering they started every service, and many times through the service, by stating, "God is good", and the people replied, "All the time." And the archbishop replied, "All the time", and the people replied, "God is good."

7 min read

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