



The Archbishop of Canterbury has preached about the importance of religious communities in a special sermon in New York City. On Sunday (24th September, 2023) Archbishop Welby visited the Cathedral of St John the Divine in the neighbourhood of Harlem, which is described as the world's largest Gothic Cathedral.

Archbishop Welby travelled there especially for the inauguration and vesting of the first group of people who will be part of a new religious community in New York called the Community at the Crossing. It builds upon the model of intentional contemplative communities worldwide, particularly the Community of St Anselm based at Lambeth Palace in London and the Chemin Neuf Community. Thirteen young men and women committed themselves to a life of prayer, study and work in the community for one year.

Read his sermon, as delivered, here:

Come, Holy Spirit of God, and fill our hearts afresh with the burning fire of your love. Amen.

Please do be seated.

It is an enormous privilege to be here at this remarkable service. And thank you, bishop, very much indeed for inviting me and permitting me to be here. Thank you, Mr. Dean. This cathedral is fractionally bigger than Liverpool Cathedral, where I was Dean. It used to be fractionally smaller, but you added a bit. Not that I'm remotely competitive, of course. But it is absolutely extraordinary. The architect of Liverpool Cathedral said don't look at my pillars, look at my spaces. And I think one should say the same here. As we look around, it is in the spaciousness that gothic architecture calls us to recognize the grandeur of God. So, thank you.

So, God asks Elijah: "What are you doing here?"

I can't quite work out how he said it. What are you doing here? What are you doing here? What are you doing here? What are you doing here?

[expressed in different tones] It all sounds rather like my mother when she found me somewhere where I shouldn't really be.

But it's a question for you, the first cohort of the Community at the Crossing. It's a question that you'll be asking yourselves having come across from all over the country, from different denominations, from different backgrounds and perspectives, and now here, living in New York. You will ask yourself, what am I doing here? Perhaps at some point, you will ask yourself that when you're feeling a bit homesick wondering if you've made the right choice. Finding community life difficult and community life can be difficult.

Hannah will confirm that to you that community life is one of those places whereas outside someone can, you know, down the street there someone can knock you over and bump into you or steal your purse or your wallet or something like that and you think, hey. The person who always pauses at the wrong point in the Psalm, you want to kill. But there are differences, I hope, between the circumstances in which you find yourselves and in which we find ourselves. And the circumstances of Elijah in today's reading, because Elijah is running away, he's running away from God's school. He's doing a bit of a Jonah.

I hope that you are not doing that, but that you are running towards this wonderful opportunity. It's an opportunity that comes in numerous ways. It's an opportunity, as the bishop said, to have a community of prayer. It used to be said of Lambeth Palace, that it was a bunch of offices with a chapel at one end and an Archbishop living in a flat. Now people talk about it as a community of prayer with some offices attached. Your challenge in this community and your challenge as a cathedral, and this is true for most cathedrals, is that you demonstrate that in the life of prayer, the world is changed and transformed and that in the life of prayer, people find who they really are, they know their identity.

Perhaps there are things you're running away from, perhaps you are fearful of the unknown, of the future, but I hope you are also here because if there is one thing that we can all put our trust in it is that God is faithful. God is truly faithful, and God's faithfulness does not depend on our faithfulness, but on God's faithfulness. We can't make him love us less or love us more. He just loves us with every particle of what it is to be God. God will meet you here, and as God meets with you here in the community, then among the busyness and many other things in this cathedral, people will meet God more often and more powerfully. He calls us, God calls us to be the ones who point to a different place of finding our resilience not into ourselves but outwards to God, who calls us and searches us.

I know that you will recognize God's hand when there are storms. And that you will meet him in the quiet moments where he will ask you again, what are you doing here? You've chosen to live in a community together, that's what you're doing here. You've chosen to be present to God and present to one another. That is a huge challenge.

How many of us are truly present to those we meet, even in the family, those we love most? And Jesus says in John 15, "If you love me, you'll obey my commandments." And he's just in the last couple of chapters given them two commandments. Not ten, but two. Love one another and wash each other's feet. Love and serve. How can we love as Jesus loves? We've not held lightly to the power that comes from Jesus being God and with a self-sacrificial love that is poured out lavishly as Jesus takes the form of a slave. But we live in a world of quid pro quo, of financial markets, particularly in New York, of transactional relationships that derive from our addiction to exchange in equivalence. We understand who we are because we have the power too often to compel people to relate to us, to be a force in the world. The pattern of Jesus's love is that he doesn't mind about that. He does not make himself a force in the world. He does not insist on exchange in equivalence. He comes and points to the abundance and grace of God which we experience.

That's why we have communities and that's why the church cannot flourish without a religious community. I really mean that. It's impossible to find a time of the church renewing its life when it hasn't got vibrant communities of prayer within it. They may be home groups, they may be in intentional communities, they may be the old-fashioned monasticism or new communities, whichever it is, they are the ones who say to the rest of the church, we are betting our lives on the truth of God, and we believe that as we do that, we will find that God is not only true for us, but God is true for every person, and we're able to draw others.

How can we love as Jesus loves? And how do we begin to love as Jesus loves? Well, first, maybe this is the year when you realise and live out the reality that to abide in God, we have to abide in each other. You can't do one, but not the other. What do we need in clergy in the church? We need people who love God and love people. You can teach everything else, but if there's no loving of God and loving of people, you can't teach anything at all. So, being in a community is how we begin to love God. Being in a community of a cathedral, being in a community of a parish church, being in a community like the Community of the Crossing, we learn to love each other.

The person who accompanied me for many years, and still does, in the spiritual life taught me the importance of the adoration of the sacrament. He commented that as we contemplate our present to God in the host, so we become more filled with the love of God. And he said the test of whether you're present to God is when someone butts into the Chapel and says, "Excuse me, I've just got to ask you something." You're not irritated, but you love. I'm still working on that. I'm sure he's right, it's just proving longer than I thought. Saint Francis tells us to see God in the poor. That is challenging, hugely challenging. But as I said earlier, not half as challenging as the person who always says the Psalms wrong and with whom you live.

With the poor, those of us like me sometimes, can be selfish, frightened and divert our eyes. It's a sin we all fall into. But in community, well, as I say, you begin to think of ways of murder. It was an English joke. One of my predecessors was visiting the US. It was said to be Archbishop Fisher and his wife was asked in New York, "With your husband away so much and after 40 years of marriage, were you ever tempted by adultery?" She replied, "After 40 years of marriage, adultery, never. Murder, frequently." By the way, that is an English joke, not to be taken literally.

To be present to each other, we must be present to God. To be present to God, we must be reconciling with one another. Note the tense of the verb, not reconciled but reconciling. We must be growing so much present with God that we cannot help but be part of the breaking down of the walls that divide us, that we cannot help being part of the vine. And that is so important for the church at the moment, it is indispensable.

I spend as much time trying to wrestle with the problems within the churches than anything else I do, much more than the problems outside the church, with people who are entertained by power, entertained by the idea that their theology is better than the next person's, and it may well be. But God does not say, yes, that's why you've got to dominate them. He says, love one another. Unity with God and with each other are gifts of grace in baptism, but they are also a call to the church to grow in them so that we bear fruit. Verse 16 of John 15.

We flee to God like Elijah and discover that we are accompanied by those who pour out the love of God to us. We are present to God as God meets us in silence and apparent fragility, the still small voice, and we discover our life calls' next stage. As we are present to God, so like Saint Paul, everything in our lives becomes rubbish, discardable, but other people are to be treasured as we go together towards God.

To remain in God's love is to be present, which brings me finally, to some practical advice for living together, which I take from the Difference

Course, a course developed at Lambeth Palace and now all over the world for living well with difference. The course suggests three habits which we need to develop.

The first is to be present. Stick with the uncomfortable when things are uncomfortable. Fully enjoy the blessings you are giving them. Be present this year. Be present to each other and to God. It means what it says. Stay with people, stay with God. God will show you His love when you've sinned and when you've served. People are unpredictable, but God loves them like you.

The second habit is to be curious. When we encounter things we don't recognise, our natural instinct is to reject it. With the other people in the community, people you meet in the cathedral seek to know their stories so well that if you tell it they will recognise it as their own even when you disagree passionately.

And the final habit is to reimagine. Together and separately see the vast horizons of reconciliation in the church, the blocked roads opened by the Spirit of God, the love that changes destructive conflict into loving and welcomed diversity in which you celebrate and dance with those who are different because they revealed to you the richness of God.

What are you doing here?

You are remaining in the love of God. You're laying down your lives for God and others. You are chosen and appointed, and you are here to bear fruit. Fruit that will last, that the world may know Christ Jesus who first loved us as the Father loves him yesterday, today and forever.

Amen.

Learn more about the [Community of the Crossing](#).

10 min read

Source URL: <https://www.archbishopofcanterbury.org/speaking-writing/sermons/church-cannot-flourish-without-religious-community-archbishop-justin-nyc>