

## **SERMON IN PREPARATION FOR THE AGM**

*Sunday, 7 April 2019 at Chelmsford Cathedral*

*by Nicholas Henshall*

Today's Gospel reading is John 12.1-8. Just before his final journey to his death six days later, Jesus has dinner with his friends, Mary, Martha and Lazarus. Mary takes some immensely costly perfume and anoints the feet of Jesus. She pours out her love for the Lord. And that's at the heart of what I want to say this morning in my report for the year in preparation for the AGM on 27 April – my look back at 2018 and forward to the coming year. Our job – as Jesus says explicitly – is to pour out our love; or as Jesus has it in his summary of the law, to “love God and love our neighbour as ourselves.”

We use a quote from John 20.21 as the foundation of the Cathedral's strategic plan: “As the Father has sent me, so I send you.” Recently Bishop Stephen has suggested to me that we should place another quote (John 15.9) alongside it: “As the Father has loved me, so I have loved you; abide in my love.” It's a great suggestion – that verse becomes a kind of commentary. As we are sent out, love is our purpose, love is our meaning, love is what we have to share.

We pour out our love because that's what Jesus does. In a phrase I've used a lot recently: we go where Jesus goes and we do what Jesus does. That's our job – to pour out our love. That – at both its simplest and its most costly – is what it means to be a follower of Jesus.

2018 turned out to be a challenging year here at Chelmsford Cathedral. But also a time of real change and opportunity. We have one of the smallest staff teams of any English Cathedral so the fact that we have been at least one full time canon down for over two years has come at a real cost. And indeed through 2018 Simon's death continued to have an impact on our life together.

Alison's arrival 6 months ago came as a real blessing, and with Imogen's appointment we will soon have a complete ministry team for the first time in over 2 years. But the challenges of the last two years have, I suggest, been important and formative. They have certainly stress tested the Cathedral in unexpected ways. And what we have learnt is indeed best captured by that line from John's Gospel: “As the Father has loved me, so I have loved you; abide in my love.” Pouring out our love at the feet of Jesus.

What I really want to celebrate in 2018 is that as a cathedral with very limited resources we continued to punch above our weight and make a difference. Paid staff, clergy and volunteers alike across every area of the Cathedral's mission and ministry.

So I want here to celebrate our remarkable volunteer force, and I can do no better than to quote a whole paragraph from my sermon at the recent Volunteers Thanksgiving Service:

I simply want to say thank you. It is hazardous for me to attempt to name every volunteer group, so I will talk in areas of work - whether we volunteer in the cathedral's outward facing ministry as work place chaplains, or in supporting lunchtime concerts, making the cathedral beautiful with flowers, welcoming visitors on Sundays and weekdays, sitting in the nave as a duty chaplain listening to people's stories, up a scissor lift changing the lights, running a school visit, moving chairs, hoovering the porch, updating the database, ringing the bells to call people to worship, serving in the kitchen, running a great fundraiser, sitting on Chapter or one of its committees, developing the largely hidden work of the prayer group, planning the next set of repairs to the Chapter House heating, serving at the altar, in the ministries of drawing up rotas for services and activities. Much of this isn't glamorous, I know, but it supports and sustains the ministry of the cathedral at every level.

All of that enables us to focus our resources on our core mission and ministry, serving the networks of the city, diocese and region as a thriving, outward facing community; the church of the Bishop; a community shaped by worship; and public space for everyone.

For me one of the absolute highlights of 2018, and core to our mission, has been the creation of a team of day chaplains, ready and available in the Cathedral through the week. That – and the hospitality we now extend to rough sleepers – are a proud example of what we can deliver.

Back to John 15: the mutual love we seek to live by is the message we bear. I love those moments when you read a comment in the visitors book or get an email about how this place and this community has touched a life, started a new stage on their journey, helped them understand something new about what God wants for them.

In the spring of next year we begin another round of stakeholder conversations where – under the guidance of our two new canons – we will be looking at worship and mission; developing what we already do well and seeking new ways to serve the networks of our community. I'll be saying a bit more about that at the AGM itself on 27 April. But for now just think of what happened here just last Christmas where we saw total attendances in December rise by 11,000 and for the first time had no option but to turn hundreds away from carol services. The big opportunity there – and indeed from that amazing 9.30 am last Sunday (literally all singing and all dancing!) – is how we turn contact in engagement.

In conclusion, I want to borrow a phrase from the Installation of the new Dean of Portsmouth a few weeks ago. Just before the blessing the Bishop prayed for the cathedral that it would grow in depth, impact and number. To grow in depth, impact and number – in that order. As we grow in our desire for God so we touch and change the world around us and in turn others want to join in. That's the synamic: "Let us go with you, for we have heard that God is with you" (Zechariah 8.23).

As we move forward into what feels to me at least like the next stage of the ministry of this cathedral church, that is my prayer for us.

*Nicholas Henshall*