

What do we have in common, those of us who have gathered here today – well, in our word for Lent, we all “belong” together. We belong to a church community, we belong, ultimately, to each other, and we belong to Jesus.

We also have our church building in common – the place we call our spiritual “home”. So let’s start by asking the question, what is a church building?

I have to state a conscious bias, I think our church is a bit special. I have learned its history, well some of it, at least! Because I realise there is still an awful lot I don’t know. Those, like Andrew Nicholson, have spent a large part of their lives here, and have a lot of family history connected with the place. There are a serious number of memories here. I could go on about the memorials, and those who are remembered in the memorials on our walls – and those beneath our feet, those ledger stones which now make up the rather elegant floor, with copperplate engravings telling the stories of families through their deaths – and there are some unbearably sad stories if you care to look at the details of parents whose children all died in infancy.

At a recent conference on Greater Churches, Bishop John Inge spoke of our cathedrals and Greater Churches as being “memory palaces” a wonderful and evocative phrase. Perhaps he’s been reading or watching a lot of Sherlock Holmes (he used that phrase a lot). Because yes, we do a lot of “remembering” in our churches.

And what he said made me think of the other side of that particular coin - what memories are we **making** for our children, our young people, our young families, our families with children at university or now with their own families, and those who have retired in, or to Lancaster and are a part of our church family? I’m always surprised at what people remember; sermons, a brief off the cuff comment made to someone, a prayer or a special moment shared. We often have little idea of the impact we make, and it can come as a major shock to be told that a brief comment has had a major impact on someone’s life. I hope there are more positive impressions that are made, for we must also remember that an unkind or thoughtless comment can also last a lifetime in another person’s memory. These things we must always be most careful to avoid!

But as a church family, there is another, bigger question that we can ask. What LEGACY are we leaving behind for the generations that will come after us?

We have inherited so much

- from the medieval period the choir stalls and the bulk of the fabric of the church.
- from the period of the terrible Tudors we have the destruction of the monastic buildings
- the Stuarts gave us the beautiful pulpit and some other items of furniture
- the Georgians gave us the Gallery
- the Victorians gave us the pews (cough) and the stained glass windows
- the Edwardians gave us the Regimental Chapel
- the mid-20<sup>th</sup> century reordered the church to be suitable for Eucharistic worship
- the 21<sup>st</sup> century is almost 20% done, and has barely made a mark on the church.

True, we have a pipe organ that has made a significant difference from what was there before, but it can hardly be claimed to be a 21<sup>st</sup> century modernisation, as both instruments are from a previous century (and that was done to be cost effective – creating a totally new 21<sup>st</sup> century organ would have been a wonderful thing to do, but it would have been prohibitively expensive). Yes, we have a

new sound system, and that is working well (for the most part). And we have an icon by the lectern, a radical innovation from my first year here, and the gift of a former High Sheriff, who is Orthodox.

Some have accused the Victorians of being vandals, destroying all they inherited from their predecessors, the Georgians, and often many other preceding generations too, and leaving their own view of church architecture on the generations that were to come after. Though the Priory is a true Medieval church, we do see it through Victorian eyes – the stained glass, which is of a largely inferior quality, though there are some good individual windows; and the good, solid pews of Victorian oak, which have welcomed many a Victorian posterior, continue to seat all who come to our services. I make no secret of my view that the church would be far better off if they were all completely removed, and we were able to be totally flexible with our seating both for worship and concerts, as well as for special occasions. If I were to win the Lottery, we might be able to achieve that aim, but as I don't do the lottery, I fear it's a vain hope! However, in the light of our priorities, there are other things which may be higher up the list of what needs to be done to make our Ministry and Mission more effective in the short term.

It is, of course, left to us to care for our church, for no one else will. Unlike some of our European neighbours, the state has no interest in our buildings, and despite our "established status", in reality we are the least established church in Europe. That means that communities around our churches truly do exercise "ownership" of the church buildings, and the result is that our churches are probably more LOVED than their continental counterparts.

That can have a downside to it, when people hold on to the past – "My grandfather used to sit on this pew, and I expect my grandchildren to be able to sit on it too!" is an inappropriately proprietorial view of church. That is not what I mean by "ownership" – what I do mean by that is a sense of commitment to the agenda of the church – its evangelism, its commitment to the Gospel imperatives, and not to the dusty hassocks which were given in memory of a worthy of the City.

We have to keep coming back to what is a church? And what is it for??

The word is the clue, but (unless you're a linguist) it's not terribly obvious. It's all Greek, I'm afraid. The word "church" comes from κυριακόν, meaning "The Lord's" – it's not ours, it is The Lord's Church, but it is entrusted to us, as the place where we maintain His Memory above all others, and begin to build up His people into the Kingdom of God.

The Church is where we tell the story of God, the story of Jesus, and we do our best to get the people to see how God's story involves us, and we learn to engage with these stories for ourselves.

I love to take children round the church and tell them stories about it, and see them wide-eyed in wonder at the beauty and the glory of it. They have an openness to God which is unaffected by cynicism and worldiness. How can we convey that sense of wonder for people who enter the building, and, unaccountably, seem not to be touched by its beauty and majesty? Or how can we draw people into the church and allow it to speak for itself – "towers that may tell forth salvation" without the need for human interpretation. Someone called a medieval church "a sursum corda in stone" (sursum corda is the "Lift up your hearts" phrase in Latin), so the phrase – which I rather like – suggests that the very building inspires people to have their hearts lifted up to God!

Here, in our church, "prayer has been valid" (to quote TS Eliot) and people do continue to come and pray in our church – for somehow in a mysterious way, a church such as the Priory can validate and affirm the spirituality of an individual, and give it shape, and form, and enable it to sing songs of praise, or songs of sorrow: or whatever song our soul needs to sing.

So, our challenge today is to consider how we might wish to work with all we have received from God in our own place and our own generation, and to be alive and active here and now.

How can we work with our church tower, to tell the story of salvation? How can we use our extraordinary spiritual inheritance – in stone and in flesh and blood, to create a strategy for our growth into the future God would have us build, and the spiritual legacy we would leave to those who will come after us.

There are **FIVE Priorities** in our Strategy for the next Five Years.

Each Priority has five subheadings, and I'd like to invite you to come up with ways (you don't have to have five, though the symmetry would be pleasing....) in which we can make those subheadings a reality in our ministry in Lancaster Priory.

We will look at each section at a time, and note your responses: please try and cover all the points in the time allotted, but if each group begins with a different one, that should make sure all of the points are addressed today.

I would like to collect in all your individual comments, so please do write legibly – for others to read! We will be also inviting the wider Priory family to respond to these points over the next four weeks (sorry its not 5) and then a small group will select a number of points to go with each subheading which show how we have consulted with the whole parish in seeking to discern what we all want to be our strategy for the next five years.

We will then publish the final document as the Priory's Strategy Document, and seek to place these priorities at the heart of our work in the coming years.