

# The Spital Sermon

Preached by Bishop Christopher at St. Lawrence  
Jewry

6<sup>th</sup> March 2014

*The Spital Sermon takes its name from the Priory or Hospital of St Mary Without Bishopsgate, better known as St Mary Spital, founded in 1197. It has been preached every year since the late 14<sup>th</sup> Century. The sermons were formerly attended by the Lord Mayor, the Court of Aldermen and the governors of the Royal Hospitals (i.e. St Bartholomew's, Bethlehem, Bridewell, Christ's and St Thomas's). Since the City's links with Barts, Bethlehem and St Thomas's were severed by the National Health Act of 1946, the Sermon is now attended by the Lord Mayor, the Court of Aldermen, Common Councilmen and the governors of Bridewell and Christ's. Pupils of Christ's Hospital and King Edward's School Witley alternate in providing the reader and the choir for the service. As the sermon explains, Bishop Christopher has personal connections with both schools.*

**Reading: Matthew 3.13-17**

## Introduction

I am delighted to be able to be preach the Spital Sermon this year not only because of my, as it were, ecclesiastical relationship to the Lord Mayor by virtue of her joint chaplain<sup>1</sup> (she's one of my priests, that is the joint chaplain, not the Lord Mayor) but I am glad also to preach before you today because the invitation has taken me down memory lane.

## My own story

I was brought up in Horsham, where Christ's Hospital is to be found. Sights of Blue Coats and yellow socks were a familiar feature of my Saturday afternoons in town.

Later, I met and married a former pupil of King Edward's School Witley while we were both at University. So interested was I in stories of her school that I applied there for my first post, successfully so; and I have to say that the inside information of an Old Witlean was very useful data for a new and nervous teacher.

Local knowledge, though, of Christ's Hospital, did not help me very much when I would take my KESW U14 football team to play the annual match against our

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<sup>1</sup> The Lord Mayor's Joint Chaplain is the Revd Lizzie Woolfe, daughter of Nicholas and Fiona Woolfe. Fiona Woolfe CBE is Lord Mayor of London 2013-14.

sister school. We always lost massively – but Headmaster – no doubt the manager was to blame!

My connection with the city's wonderful work of supporting both of these humane educational establishments was renewed when I became Principal of a Theological College in Cambridge named after Bishop Nicholas Ridley, whose sermon before the King and fast work with the then Lord Mayor, began the great work that the present Lord Mayor and Aldermen continue today.

And there's more . . . in a happy piece of providence I found myself preaching my first sermon as a bishop on the occasion of King Edward's School's Speech Day, with the Lord Mayor and many members of the Corporation present at the time.

If I may be permitted one more personal connection with the city it would be to say that I have recently discovered my grandmother. I have known of her all of my life but only as a very shadowy figure who died in 1918. Life in Coventry has taught me much about the horrors of the blitz of both our cities in the Second World War. My grandmother died as a result of the aerial bombing of London in the First World War. I've known about that for many years but it was only when I ordered her death certificate and saw her name and tender age, and read the cause of her death, that I wept for her, bone of my bone and flesh of my flesh.

### **Jesus' story**

The chance you have given me to reconnect with my own past, its formative relationships and all that has shaped my identity, has given me cause to think about Jesus and all that shaped him. This is why I have chosen the account of his baptism as our reading. For it is here that the veil of heaven is lifted and the mystery of Jesus' unique identity is revealed in one breathtaking revelation.

Here Jesus is shown to be the bearer of the Spirit of God, the real presence and living power of God himself. He is the Son of God, the one loved with such eternal intensity that the voice of the heavenly Father calls him 'Beloved' and declares – God declares – not only, as it were, that this Son is loved but that he is liked, that God is not just pleased with him but *well pleased*.

Jesus, the bearer of the full reality of God's presence and power. Jesus, the beloved who brings joy to God and causes the divine voice to echo not only throughout the highest heavens but across our ordinary earth.

### **Both stories**

Forgive me from turning attention from this most extraordinary event in history and its sublime implications back to my own story. But the reconnection with my past that this sermon has allowed has brought to my mind the occasion when these two stories collided: the story of Jesus and my own story.

I was a boy at the time just on the verge of going to senior school. I won't go into details but I felt deeply disempowered and utterly convinced that my capacities for life were minimal. I also felt – perhaps unfairly, though I felt it all the same – that my own father was not at all pleased with me; that I had let him down. My soul was thirsty for affirmation, for confidence, for purpose, for love.

It was then that I heard the voice of Jesus say – and I heard it through the kind voices of good people –

‘I heard the voice of Jesus say (as we have just sung)  
Behold I freely give  
The living water, thirsty one,  
Stoop down and drink and live’.

So . . .  
‘I came to Jesus, and I drank  
Of that life-giving stream;  
My thirst was quenched, my soul revived,  
And now I live in Him’.

Jesus invites us to live in him so that what is said by God of him – this is my child – the Beloved, in whom I am well pleased – can be said of us. Jesus invites us to live in him so that the reality of God's presence – his love and peace and strength – can enter into us and abide with us. It is then that we find our deepest identity and discover our truest calling.

## **Conclusion**

What is true for individuals at the heart of their personal identities can also be true for institutions at the centre of their policies and actions. In 1552 the institutions of the King, the Lord Mayor and the Corporation heard the voice of Jesus call them say through a kind and good man: Open their hearts and open your buildings (yes, and their pockets) and let me (Jesus) live among you for, in Ridley's words, ‘Christ hath lien too long aboard . . . without lodging, in the streets of London, both hungry and cold’.

Jesus, who had once been homeless in Bethlehem, hounded by Herod and hungry on the road to Egypt was once again, Ridley claimed, destitute in the poor of London.

The king did a noble thing to give over his palace as a place for Christ to dwell. The Lord Mayor and Aldermen did an excellent thing in turning the King's gift into hospitals to care for the poor and destitute. The governors and teachers have done a great thing shaping them into two remarkable schools.

Dear friends, London and Coventry and every other city in our land – and the world – still have children who are hungry, children whose homes are inadequate, children whose families are failing, children barely educated, children whose

bodies are damaged and children whose lives are threatened and in danger. Children, made in the image of God, in whom Christ is to be found.

Permit me to let the words of Bishop Nicholas Ridley ring through the city of London once again:

‘I must be a suitor unto you in our Master Christ’s cause. I beseech you be good unto him.’

But first let me repeat the words of Christ himself addressed to all people, of all ages, of all styles, in all places:

‘I am the bread of life’, says Jesus. ‘Whoever comes to me will never be hungry, and whoever believes in me will never be thirsty . . . I am the living bread that came down from heaven. Whoever eats of this bread will live forever’ . . . ‘Come to me’.

As we come to Christ, and find ourselves in him loved by God without limit, and ennobled with the strength of God’s power, we are propelled by Christ to find him in the children who still suffer in our cities, our land, our world.