

ARCHDEACON OF NORTHAMPTON

THE ARCHDEACON'S CHARGE 2024

There's a story of a church that decided to have a day out at Sunny Hunny. The archdeacon came along for the candy floss, chips and gravy. Once they were at the coast, someone suggested a boat trip. Everyone thought it was a good idea, but after half an hour a terrible storm hit the boat. As the storm raged, the churchwarden (being a true leader and bishop's officer) realised the ship was sinking fast, so he found the life jackets and shouted above the noise of the crashing waves, "I've found the lifejackets. Now, does anyone know how to pray?" The archdeacon staggered forward and said, "I know how to pray." "Great!" said the churchwarden, "you pray while the rest of us put on our life jackets – we seem to be one short."

Today is, in contrast, a time of unbridled unity and harmony between churchwardens and archdeacon! It's a foretaste of heaven (discuss in no more than 2000 words). Hold tight ... here we go:

Preamble

- My thanks to the rural deans, lay chairs and to the home team for organising this service and for making us so welcome. It is always an absolute pleasure to meet at these admission services year by year.
- Thank you for standing as churchwardens for 2024-2025. Some of you have completed over half a century as a churchwarden whilst others are starting the journey this year. Half a century is not compulsory! You are the bishop's officers and the senior laity in your churches. With this comes many responsibilities, not least to work in harmony with your incumbent. For those of you whose parishes are in vacancy and for those of you who serve in large multi parish benefices, in many ways you are the day by day Christian presence in your own unique community. You are Mr or Mrs Church. Thank you for all that you have done, are doing and will do for the Lord Jesus.
- Please take time to read the information you were given on the way into church by the Northamptonshire Historic Churches Trust. One of the Trustees will be present at the end of this service and would be very happy to talk to you about ways that the Trust may be able to help with the maintenance of your church building. There is money to give away to churches and your first step is to share your need.
- Please look at the churchwardens' pages on the diocesan website for lots more information about the duties of a churchwarden, the DAC and Jon Breckon (the Historic Churches Support Officer). Please also look on the website at Archdeacons' Visitation News (that wonderfully entitled magazine, which really should be a guest publication on 'Have I got news for you'). It is full of helpful local and national articles for churchwardens.

- Churchwardens' Training is coming up on 9 November at Bouverie Court. The session will run from 10am-2pm and will include lunch. There will be further information coming soon about the programme and how to book. For now, save the date.
- Finally, my appreciation goes to Chel Cullen. Chel works as my PA for 2.5 days a week (plus 2.5 days for Archdeacon Alison). In reality it is often more. The times surrounding the articles of enquiry and the churchwardens' admissions are frenetically busy for her. Added to that is the challenge of organising so many vacancy, recruitment and interview processes year on year. Chel works phenomenally hard for the parishes of this archdeaconry and I am so grateful to the vast majority of churchwardens who work helpfully and cooperatively with her. For the tiny, tiny minority who have A Levels in complaining (you know who you are), please do not shoot the messenger. If you ever want to have a moan, please do it to me. I love it.

Now, let's turn to Psalm 84

Psalm 84

I became a curate when I was 25 and an incumbent when I was 29. At that age you have much to learn. Bishop Bill Westwood told me to go and try new things, make mistakes and love the communities. He said that, in turn, they would love me too. I felt very loved. The Tower Captain at one of the churches had learned his Psalms as a choirboy and they had stuck in his mind and heart. During the traumas of WW2, the Psalms became very real to him. Many Psalms were written in adversity and make sense in adversity. Years later as he lay in hospital with his eyes closed, quite near to the end of his life, I told him (loudly) that I had been reading Psalm 84. "I've been reading Psalm 84, John. Do you remember Psalm 84?" After a non-responsive pause, he spoke these words quietly, slowly and deliberately – and in unmistakable Northampton tones. It was in Prayer Book English:

O how amiable are thy dwellings, thou Lord of hosts!

*My soul hath a desire and longing to enter into the courts of the LORD;
my heart and my flesh rejoice in the living God.*

*Yea, the sparrow hath found her an house, and the swallow a nest, where she may lay
her young;*

even thy altars, O Lord of hosts, my King and my God.

The Psalms were deep in his heart. He was almost at heaven's door and the words he spoke were, "My soul hath a desire and longing to enter into the courts of the Lord."

Some years later and in a different benefice, one Easter Sunday morning, I said to the congregation: "Instead of saying the usual greeting during the peace ("peace be with you") this morning, may I encourage you to greet one another with these words: "The

Lord is risen” and for the reply to be “He is risen indeed”. Everyone followed the instructions to the letter, except for one. I approached Richard, an elderly and slightly unpredictable retired clergyman, and said, “Richard, the Lord is risen.” He replied, “I know!” Not quite what I had in mind. A couple of years later, Richard had a stroke. He could still look after himself (after a fashion) in his warden controlled flat, but he could no longer speak. I visited him as he was in the act of making beans on toast. His Bible was open on the table and the window was also open, showing the communal garden and bird table beyond. “What have you been reading?” I asked Richard. He brought his beans on toast to the table, sat down and then, in trying to show me what he had been reading, accidentally closed his Bible. He then painstakingly went through it, almost page by page. Ten minutes later he was still persisting – although I thought that he had probably by now forgotten what I had asked him. Every now and then he would shovel in some beans and then start again. Then, after what seemed like an eternity of page turning, toast eating and bean spilling, he pointed to a page and then he pointed to the birds on the bird table.

*Yea, the sparrow hath found her an house, and the swallow a nest, where she may lay her young;
even thy altars, O Lord of hosts, my King and my God.*

He couldn't speak but the Psalms (especially this Psalm) were deep in his heart and spoke for him.

The Psalms are in the centre of your Bible and for many years were in the centre of our liturgies. Through year in and year out repetition, they were imprinted on our hearts and minds. I have to confess that, like that tower captain all those years ago, I learned my Psalms in a Prayer Book church as a choirboy.

So, what does Psalm 84 have to say to a gaggle of churchwardens this evening? Donald Coggan, a former Archbishop of Canterbury, said, “This is a Psalm of sheer joy!” It is! He's right. Psalm 84 is a pilgrim's poem. It is written with the freedom of a street poet and the exhilaration of a Pentecostal worship band. It describes a people who are glad to be home and overjoyed to be in the presence of God.

Let's take a look:

- Being in God's dwelling place, the temple, is a source of unbridled delight
- The psalmist longs to be worshipping with God's people in the temple
- It's a place for all creation ... the sparrow and the swallow nest around the altar
- Those who dwell in God's presence are called happy and blessed
- This pilgrim people are strengthened by God himself
- Their heavenly home is in their hearts
- They are a people whose glass is half full

- This people knows that God is there to shield and defend them in the best and worst of days
- To live one day in the presence of God is better than living to old age without him
- Being a doorkeeper in God's house is better than 5 star luxury elsewhere
- God is the sun who warms us and gives us life and is also a shield from harm
- God wants to give us good gifts
- God is all-powerful and we are really blessed if we trust him

What a great Psalm!

- It's how we feel when we gather with our sisters and brothers week by week.
- It's about being in the presence of God and in the place where all people are welcome.
- It's about the joy of friendship and fellowship and worship.
- Even the sparrow and swallow find a place to live by the altar in the temple ... Eco Church!
- Everyone is welcomed and celebrated.
- I used to be vicar of a church whose strapline was 'Open to Jesus, Open to All.'
- That's the heartbeat of this Psalm ... and there's joy in it.

I love it when churches are open – day by day and week by week through the year. The only thing better than a sign outside a church saying, "Church Open" is one saying, "Church Open – coffee and cake being served." As I have said on many occasions, Simon Jenkins (in his book, England's Thousand Best Churches) says, "A church that is locked except for an hour on a Sunday has become the meeting place of a sect." Most of our churches could stay open. Sadly, some simply cannot.

However, IF our churches could be open but are kept firmly locked, the message for anyone trying the door is, "You're not welcome. This isn't for you." Why penalise the 99% of people who will never steal from your church by keeping it locked because of the 1% who might? If something goes missing, move on. I have seen many church visitors' books with entries like: "Thank you for being open" ... "a place of peace on a busy day" ... "somewhere to sit and pray." In a society that bombards us with 24/7 information, finding a place to sit and be alone in the presence of God is like a cooling shower on a hot day. We are parish churches for the benefit of the parish, not congregational churches for the benefit of the congregation.

Let's be open to Jesus and open to all.

When I was about to start a service in my last church, a group of tourists from across the pond entered the building. They asked how long there had been a church on that site. I replied, "St Wilfrid died here in his church in October 709. They couldn't get over it! Down history, as everything has changed around us, our buildings speak of the unchanging love, mercy and grace of God – and of the joy of being in his presence.

That's what this Psalm is about.

Acts 2: 42-47

I can't finish without mentioning the reading from Acts.

It's a picture of the early church – in worship and in the community.

As archdeacon, I sometimes have to challenge churches. Often that challenge is about the state of repair of the building. I was talking to a churchwarden once. She didn't know that I was the archdeacon. Why should she? Having spoken with real excitement about the ministry and mission of the church she said, "Anyway, what do you do?" I said, "I'm the Archdeacon of Northampton." She took an involuntary step back and said, "Our downpipes and gutters are clear!" It was as if that would be the information that would most interest me in all the world.

However, sometimes the challenge that I have to give is nothing to do with the state of the building. I remember saying to a PCC: "If I asked people in the village, what specifically is the local church doing that makes it a real blessing to the whole community, what would they say?" How are we known as being good news to those around us? The early church described in Acts 2 was good news to the whole community. No doubt about it.

Take time to think about that question.

If you shared a car with someone today, then have a chat as you journey home.

We earn the right to speak of Jesus by being good news to those around us.

So, churchwardens, in summary:

- Be open to Jesus and open to all.
- Delight in the times the church gathers to worship.
- Soak up the presence of God.
- Be a radiator and not a drain to your community.
- Know and love your Psalms.
- Store them in your heart and mind.
- Mull them over as you go to work and pray them through when you come home.
- Be a people who are 'glass half full'.
- Love your colleagues and congregations.
- Rejoice in every opportunity to serve Jesus and those he has entrusted to you.