‘Seek the Lord while he may be found, call upon him while he is near.’

I’m sure that some of you don’t know quite what to expect from the next ten minutes or so. There are regular Evensong attenders who get a bit concerned when someone unfamiliar gets up to deliver ‘the address’. They feel somehow doubly disappointed that the person in the pulpit isn’t either an ordained minister or a qualified lay reader. If you’ve seen the monthly Service List then you’ll know that it lists the Acting Dean as Preacher. Very confusing! I hope, however, that someone very unfamiliar may arouse your curiosity. This afternoon is, after all a special service, a celebration, an ending. Not that there hasn’t been a little consternation in our household about me giving this address. My long-suffering wife is rather concerned that it still might re-awaken my desire to take church services. I am, after all a lapsed Methodist Local Preacher who, although an Anglican by Baptism and Confirmation was seduced away to the Methodists by my first girlfriend. I returned years later through Lincoln Cathedral and its music and left taking services behind. You might, though, have detected my Methodist connections in the anthem of mine that the Girls and Clerks have just sung – thanks for making my humble efforts sound so grand – where I made Charles Wesley’s 18 verse hymn into a more manageable 4!

So where do I start. Today, the first Sunday in Epiphany is also, in the Anglican Church the celebration of the Baptism of Jesus when John the Baptist recognised the greatness of Jesus and when we are told that after the baptism in the River Jordan heaven was opened, and the Spirit of God descended like a dove onto Jesus; and when a voice from heaven said, “This is my Son, in who I am well pleased”. Epiphany, the time when the seemingly ‘ordinary’ was turned into the ‘glorious’. So putting together what I was going to talk about has been, well...interesting. When it was decided that we should officially ‘close’ the Golden Jubilee Year, Christmas sort of got in the way. Sunday 30th December was an obvious date but with only Evening Prayer scheduled that was difficult. But, the next Sunday, 6th January, was Epiphany Sunday and, as the Precentor knows, I got quite excited about that. Why, you might ask. Because amid the ‘Wise Men Seeking Jesus’ image of Epiphany Sunday it’s really about the giving of gifts and, in an odd sort of way, that’s how I come to be standing here. I still can’t quite believe that I’m actually doing this just as I haven’t been really able, over almost the last 3 years, to believe the trust that was placed in me by the community based in this awe inspiring building to run their Golden Jubilee Festival. I want you to picture a little boy from inner city Nottingham standing with his parents, returning from a day trip, outside the scaffolding watching these zig-zag walls being erected. The parents can’t get their heads round it but the boy stands amazed. All these years later he’s still amazed. Picture this same boy, now a precocious musical teenager having the temerity to write to the Cathedral’s first Director of Music, David Lepine, in 1963 asking for some organ lessons on his magnificent new instrument and being given the undreamed of opportunity to play the organ of this Cathedral when it was still less than a year old, as a result. The power of this Cathedral and its message of hope and reconciliation amidst the worlds continuing strife was fixed. And then, in 1991 I was at concert in London when I first heard a work by Sir Arthur Bliss, commissioned for the Consecration of this Cathedral in 1962 but denied its premier here and, even then, still unperformed in Coventry Cathedral. The piece was based on Jesus’ Sermon on the Mount containing The Beatitudes. That was the title of the
work and my determination to bring it ‘home’ took over 20 years. I came back to this place several times before I, in an echo of the precocious teenager, had the temerity to write to the Dean about getting it performed during the Cathedral’s Golden Jubilee year, and found myself being asked to direct your festival. You see, the history of Sir Arthur Bliss’ *The Beatitudes* shows that it started life as an Epiphany work all about the giving of gifts – in stone, glass and wood. And, yes, we did bring it home in spectacular style to this Cathedral Church that has meant so much to its people, the nation and the wider world over the last fifty years. As a place of worship and prayer, music, art and beauty, it has maintained a distinctive ministry of peace, forgiveness and justice.

‘Seek ye the Lord while he may be found’. Does this mean what it actually says or, [like the popular misinterpretation in Shakespeare’s ‘Romeo & Juliet’ *(wherefore art thou Romeo meaning why are you called Romeo and not where are you)*] rather, does it mean ‘wherever and whenever’ he may be found? Where can the Lord be found? Is that what we were seeking to achieve during the Golden Jubilee celebrations? What did the people who came to this place for our magnificent concerts and recitals, our imaginative and deeply moving exhibitions, our drama presentations, our special services or, as many people do just come and sit in this iconic building - what did they experience?

Should I be standing here giving a sort of ‘end of term’ address’, or should I be reverting back to my Local Preaching days? Probably a bit of both in a way. You see, what my part in this last year in the life of this place has shown me is that to really communicate with people you have to ‘love what you know and know what you love’. Of the many vivid memories I have, perhaps the one that stands out most is striding up and down the centre aisle of Holy Trinity Church during a pre-concert event in which I was participating just telling the audience a story of what happened 50 years ago. Without notes and wholly different from what I’d carefully scripted. But there are so many other pictures. We certainly turned this building upside down on many occasions in the last 12 months or so. A lot of you will remember the organised chaos here for the best part of a week when the Golden Jubilee performance of Britten’s ‘War Requiem’ went out live on television to 17 countries worldwide and we had more technical trucks in Priory Street and St Michael’s Way than anyone could ever remember. The good humour and willingness of the staff here, and the fact that the mission of the Cathedral went on, was amazing. The chaos somehow became part of it all.

And what about the Flower Festival that really opened the Golden Jubilee celebrations? The Cathedral filled with themed displays reflecting the message not only of the building but of the art that it embodies. They came by the coachload for that exhibition. What were they seeking? What did they find? A welcome – surely. An outward manifestation of the Cathedral’s mission – probably. But did they feel our vision – now there’s a question?

And the Art exhibition – ‘Journey into the Light’ - when we featured the background to all the amazing art in this amazing building. From the archives came detailed drawings of the way the many of our artists, Jacob Epstein, John Piper, John Hutton approached their work for this Cathedral. What were *they* seeking? What were their thoughts when they received commissions to create art to the glory of God. Does it matter or is what really matters the way that the Baptistry Window, The Great Glass Screen, the statue of St Michael and the Devil helps others on their quest?

And what of the three Wise Men and their gifts that I had hoped would be a useful theme for my address at this Service. Can we learn from them? I think we can. Part of my upbringing was in a religious context in which you almost feared being unorthodox. To an extent I still do. God might not like it, you see. And yet, there are many times when I find myself uncomfortable with the sort of religious expression that claims to
have it all. Some will find it surprising that I know anything about ‘pop’ music but I read that Bono and U2 were castigated some years ago by a few supposedly orthodox Christians when they produced a song called, ‘I still haven’t found what I am looking for.’ I can’t see the problem with that, especially given that there are spiritual depths in many of their songs. You see, the example of the Wise Men was that they were searchers. They didn’t claim to have it all but they saw their lives as a journey of discovery. And in that they’re an example to us. We don’t know it all. But if we, like them, are prepared to be diligent seekers, then like them we may be graced by a vision of God’s light, perhaps in the most unusual places.

And what of those gifts? Gold, frankincense and myrrh - hardly ideal gifts for a baby you may think. I saw an article written by Vivian Faull, who as many of you will know was once on the staff here, suggested (tongue in cheek) that these men weren’t all that wise after all. If the Eastern visitors had been wise women the baby Jesus would have received sensible gifts, not a potentially useless lump of gold and two bottles of perfume. But, of course, gold points to Kingship, frankincense to priesthood and myrrh to suffering and death. But there is another understanding that is worth considering. Some speculate that these gifts were the principal items used in the wizardry and magic that Wise Men from the east dabbled in. So in giving the Christ-child gold, frankincense and myrrh, they were handing over their tools of trade. They were demonstrating that they were no longer pagan dabblers in magic. They were letting go of the past because they had found a new guiding star. ‘Seek the Lord wherever and whenever he may be found’

When the Lord of the universe reaches down from heaven and touches the earth, condescends in love to come to us, in the flesh, as one of us, what do we give? Last year, to celebrate the first 50 years of this Cathedral which, with its destroyed predecessor stands as a witness to his mission for understanding, peace and reconciliation we gave our gifts - our praise, our music, our acting, our art, this building (stone, glass, and timber). Small gifts in comparison to God’s goodness and love toward us. All we can do is to offer the best of what we have at any moment. And we did.

Almost two weeks ago now we celebrated the beginning of a new year. With it our Golden Jubilee year ended. But the work goes on. The Wise Men went home by another road. Perhaps our road, too will be different this year. Next Saturday you install the new Dean. He will bring fresh ideas, challenges, questions. In its own way the future will be as exciting as the past. Different though. I wish the Community here well as I loosen my ties with you. It has been an important journey that we’ve made together – and an important quest. Did I find what I was looking for here? Perhaps. But for all of us, those who have much faith and those who have little, our journey continues.

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