

Stephen Cottrell, Archbishop of York delivered this sermon at the Special Sung Eucharist Service celebrating the 600th Anniversary of Manchester

Cathedral on 5 May 2022. His sermon follows in full:

Then the LORD said (to Moses out of the burning bush), 'I have observed the misery of my people who are in Egypt; I have heard their cry; I know their sufferings, and I have come to deliver them; to bring them to a good and broad land, a land flowing with milk and honey.'

Exodus 3. 7-8

When I sat down last Saturday morning to think about this sermon, I thumbed through the rather lovely Order of Service that you've produced for this special anniversary. Obviously, I was looking primarily at the Bible readings, thinking what shall I say, but what caught my attention were the references I found to bees.

The lovely poem 'Standing for Six Hundred Years' contained the mysterious line, 'You stand for bees to bring sweetness to your crown.' The Manchester Psalm likened the work of God to the 'song of distant bees' and 'we hear God's promises hum down clust'ry streets.'

What on earth is this about?

Well, a quick google search gave the answer.

Manchester as I'm sure you know - is bee city. The worker bee is one of the city's best-known symbols. A bee has been on the coat of arms since 1842. There are bees on the bins round the city. On the mosaic floor in the Town Hall. In the clock face of the Palace Hotel.

And of course - there are beehives on your roof, part of a community project that brings hope and purpose to many people's lives. And of course also produces heavenly honey, from a literal hive of enterprising and collaborative activity.

Therefore, please forgive me, it is not to the dramatic call of Isaiah and his astonishing vision of God in the temple, nor to that turning point in the gospel story when Jesus returns to Galilee and goes to the synagogue and unrolls the scroll and makes Isaiah's triumphant announcement of God's kingdom his own, bringing good news to the poor, liberty to captives and sight to the blind, that I turn, but to bees and to honey, for they too are a sign of God's kingdom and God's call.

Again and again in the Old Testament, the place that God calls his people to a promised land - is described as somewhere that flows with milk and honey. Even the manna they eat in the desert on their long journey to freedom tastes 'like wafers made with honey' (Exodus 16. 31) And in the Book of Revelation the scroll of God's prophecy is also sweet as honey on the tongue (Revelation 10. 10).

Why does God speak of the Promised Land and therefore, I suppose, of heaven itself in this way? Perhaps it is because milk and honey are the only foodstuffs I can think of that do not involve death. Certainly, if we eat meat then that meal requires an animal to die. So too with a plant, (though maybe not with everlasting spinach). But even to eat a seed is to eat the possibility of life that seed contained. And eventually even the everlasting spinach will be completely consumed. But milk and honey are different. They are food that is generated without death, and when we eat them, life feeds on life. That is why Mother Julian of Norwich wrote that "The human mother can suckle the child with her milk" (and) our beloved Mother Jesus feeds us with himself."

Milk and honey are sacramental. They are everlasting. They are signs of an incorruptible physicality, of a new heaven and a new earth, of a peaceable way of living where death is no more and where every tear is wiped away. Perhaps that is why the worker bee became a symbol of unity in this city following the terrible Manchester Arena bombing a few years ago.

We so need this vision in our world today. And, of course, we have always needed it.

For 600 years this place has stood at the heart of this great city and represented that other city, our true homeland in the city of God, the land where milk and honey flow, and therefore, I suppose, bees are always buzzing."

And at the same time, while knowing ourselves to be strangers and pilgrims in this place, and looking to that place where we are called, we do all that we can to reach out and serve our community and show them the way for life. And we do it in a remarkable variety of ways "through hospitality; through the daily round of worship; through simply being a space where everyone can come and where everyone is welcome and where the barriers that everyone else in the world loves to build are broken down and left behind; through the Volition Community's work with unemployed people, by putting beehives on the roof.

This is the place, this Cathedral Church, where stones are rolled away. Where hope is the common currency of love. Where Jesus, the servant king, stands ready with his towel of service. Where the Red Stripe is on ice, the haloumi on the barbecue, someone has sent out for a curry and we are ready to welcome home the stranger and find them our long lost friend. Where bees hum and honey flows.

Who knew it? Manchester flows with honey.

Rogers, and every Dean of Manchester before you, and to all your many colleagues, staff and volunteers, I thank God for the witness and service of this place, both a foretaste and a sign of heaven. May God continue to bless and guide you in your ministry to Manchester, and beyond.

And so we wind our way back to our scriptures. Isaiah standing in the temple and discerning to his amazement that God is calling him, and uttering those words of astonishing commitment, "Here I am, Lord, send me". And Jesus in the synagogue at Galilee, opening the scroll, reading those words of prophecy and saying they are fulfilled in him.

We too on this great anniversary need to stand in that place of call and vocation and ask God to use us and send us."

We need to take hold of God's capacious vision of justice and make it real today, for there is so much hurt, confusion and uncertainty in our world.

This will be hard and it will be challenging, but we have 600 years of witness and service to build on. So though hard, and though challenging to follow the way of God and find in Jesus Christ the only real hope for our world, I can assure you of this: it is a foretaste of glory. Its promises and joys, and the assurance that in the midst of all the world's muddle and suffering, you are known and loved and called, will be, well, as sweet as honey.

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This service was livestreamed - please visit: <http://www.facebook.com/ManchesterCathedral/live>

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