



THE ARCHBISHOP
OF YORK

Archbishop Stephen preached during the Evensong Service at York Minster today to commemorate the 40th Anniversary of the fire at York Minster. This follows in full...

1 Peter 1:3 - Blessed be the God and Father of our Lord Jesus Christ! By his great mercy he has given us a new birth into a living hope through the resurrection of Jesus Christ from the dead.

There have been two occasions in my ministry when I have had to deal with the aftermath of a fire.

First, as the Incumbent of St Wilfrid's Chichester, this is 30 years ago, there was an arson attack on our church building one Saturday afternoon. In broad daylight some youths, or at least people assumed it was young people, came into the Church, piled up some chairs and using hymn books for kindling started a fire.

One of the Church wardens, passing by on their way home, noticed the fire before it had taken hold of the building, called the Fire Brigade, and we had all the inconvenience of extensive smoke damage and burnt furnishings, but the building was saved.

Although I absolutely love the church of St Wilfrid in Chichester and will hear not a word against it, the building itself, I'm afraid, is not a thing of beauty. Built in the late 1950s, it is a red brick box of a building, more resembling a sauna than a church. Bumping into the Bishop of Chichester a few days after the fire, he expressed his commiserations, 'Oh Stephen', he said, 'I was sorry to hear about your fire, pity they didn't do a better job', he wryly added. He had a point - a big insurance cheque to build a more beautiful church would have been nice.

Ten years later I was a Canon of Peterborough Cathedral. Young people again got the blame but actually we don't know who it was that came into Peterborough Cathedral during Evensong on 22 November 2001, and slid some lighted votive candles into the middle of some stacks of plastic chairs which were stored in the North transept aisle behind the organ and became a slow burning fuse, whether it was just a prank gone wrong or a serious attempt to burn the building down, a huge conflagration ensued and this beautiful, beautiful only just renovated Cathedral was, according to the Peterborough fire brigade, only five minutes away from becoming another Notre Dame. Actually, it was the organ that saved the day, acting as a firewall for the rest of the building. None of us who lived or worked in Peterborough at that time, just like those of you who lived and worked in York 40 years ago will ever forget that evening. The damage was extensive and it took years and years to be restored.

Both of those fires whether by deliberate intent or foolish stupidity, were started by people. The fire that engulfed this great building on this day 40 years ago, was, as the insurance brokers put it, 'an act of God'. Which doesn't of course mean that God started the fire, though as many of you will recall such speculation did go on at the time, since a few days before the fire, David Jenkins had been consecrated as Bishop of Durham here in York Minster, and some, who for reasons I've never quite understood, disapproved of his appointment, and thought this was evidence that

God disapproved too. But that can't be right. Not just because that isn't how God acts. And not just because David Jenkins was in fact a very faithful, if often widely misquoted and misunderstood teacher of the Christian faith. But surely if divine displeasure was the issue, God would have sent a thunderbolt on Durham, or acted more swiftly in the case of York Minster. Why wait several days? No, by an act of God, we mean something that was not the result of human intent. It was a tragic accident, like all the other tragic accidents that for all of us are part of what it means to live in a frail and fallen world, a world where human beings still do stupid and wicked things, and a world where we are subject to earthquake, fire, lightning bolts and all other so-called natural disasters. And if there was any divine intervention, or at least an answer to prayer, it is probably the fact that the Canon Treasurer at the time had the good sense to have increased the insurance premium at York Minster just a few weeks earlier. We certainly remember him with thanksgiving.

As it happens, my first ever visit to York Minster was 40 years ago, shortly after the fire. I know how to show a girl a good time, Rebecca and I were on our honeymoon in Yorkshire. We may have preferred somewhere sunny and exotic, but we had no money. And, forgive me if this is too much detail, on a honeymoon, it doesn't much matter where you are.

Therefore, a few days after being married, I with Rebecca made my first visit to York and I came to this great building and saw at first hand the terrible devastation of the fire in the south transept and the great convulsive shock it gave to us here in York, and shockwaves, because this building is so loved, shockwaves, not just around this nation, but across the world because there are so many thousands of people who love and cherish this house of prayer.

But we have rebuilt it. We have done what Christian people have done throughout the ages. As happened here in 1753, 1829, 1840 and 1971. As happened in Chichester, in Peterborough, as is happening now in Paris or in so many other places in the world where precious buildings and cherished heritage are damaged or destroyed. We do not let these things deter us, we do not let these things defeat us.

We know that the church is not a building - not bricks and stone or wood and glass, but living stones built into a temple of praise and prayer of witness and hope - and yet we also need and love our buildings. Let me put it this way: we Christians need our buildings so as to learn that the church is not a building. And therefore we love our buildings and we lovingly restore them when fire and flood and other disasters befall us.

So, yes, I suppose today we are remembering the fire of forty years ago this night, but most of all we are remembering with great thanksgiving all the emergency services who helped us this night, but especially the firefighters whose dedication and great bravery saved this building; I had the great privilege of meeting and chatting with you before this service. Can we give them a round of applause. And we are also remembering the city of York and the people of Yorkshire - and indeed the people of the world - who then supported this building's restoration; we remember with thanksgiving those who gave millions to restore the south transept, the artists and craftsmen and women who refurbished and repaired the building and whose skills and dedication continue to do so today; and we give thanks that in this nation we have the freedom to gather ~~for~~

worship and prayer, and because this building is restored, and because of what it stands for we fling wide the doors of this building so that it continues to be a place of welcome, refuge, sanctuary and hospitality for everyone.

This building is precious, because it points beyond itself to the God who is made known to us in Jesus Christ; the God who is Himself raised from the dead to show us that death never has the last word because this building gathers us in so we can learn how to be followers of Jesus and bring his message of peace to our needy world.

And as we have restored this building, so we make our mark on it. Because this building is not a museum. It is not a piece of history locked in time and unchanging. Just as we are the living pilgrim people of God, so this church bears the mark of each generation that has worshipped here. And if you stand in the restored south transept and look up you will see the roof bosses which are both copies of the mediaeval bosses that were destroyed, and also those designed by a generation of children who watched Blue Peter and entered their ideas into the competition to design new ones. One of them depicts the white rose of Yorkshire. One of them depicts a man on the moon. Another shows a starving Ethiopian child. Those bosses reflect the interests and the issues of 1984. Today and tomorrow we must do the same, as we love, cherish, restore and renew this building for its service and ministry to our city, our diocese of York, our county and our nation.

And finally, this building makes its mark on us. What happens here changes us. For sisters and brothers, we too are constantly in need of restoration and repair. And it happens here by the grace and goodness of God. I don't now why you are here this evening, but if you're here and in any way you're feeling lost or lonely, or feel that there's not much love in your life, you have come to the right place. The place where sins can be forgiven, the place where you can learn how deeply you are loved by God because here we are renewed and restored. We bear the mark of the one in whose name and for whose purposes this building exists, the one who heals us and forgives us.

On the Sunday morning after the fire in St Wilfrid's Chichester, a very senior member of the congregation came up to me after the service, commiserated over the damage to the building, but was gloriously up beat, because she well knew that the church itself was not bricks and cheerfully offered the hope that the fire in the church would never be extinguished.

I offer the same view today.

This glorious building stands throughout time and history as a sign of God's love made known in Jesus Christ. And this is the love, and this is the hope that our world so urgently needs. This is the love, this is the hope that I need. As is obvious from the scaffolding that's always around this building, it is constantly being restored and renewed. So let me say this plainly: I hope the fire in York Minster never goes out. I hope it burns brightly in each of us.



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