

ST JOHN OF BEVERLEY AND 75TH ANNIVERSARY OF WORLD WAR II

Beverley Minster 10th May 2020

I shall never forget my first sight of Beverley Minster. I had just been interviewed by the Archbishop of York, John Habgood, about becoming Bishop of Hull and was driven from Bishopthorpe to Beverley. As we approached the Town there sailing towards us across the fields was the Minster. A Ship of Faith, a Sermon in Stone. Reminding us of the faith and the values that have over many centuries moulded our common life. Indeed, our language, our literature, our laws, our liberty, our learning, our leisure and our very landscape have been shaped by the faith that built this glorious Minster.

Here in this church as in the other historic churches of the East Riding of Yorkshire over the years thousands have come to fulfil the promise we make every year on Remembrance Sunday, 'We will remember them'. If it were not a promise then we would say, 'We might remember them'. But a promise is a promise and so 'We will remember them'. Today and tomorrow. The service men and women and the civilians who died as the bombs rained down. We call them heroes. They, of course, saw themselves simply as ordinary people doing their duty. But in these sacred buildings we sanctify their memory; we turn them into our heroes with our thanksgiving for their sacrifice and we cherish their values that secured for us and for future generations both liberty and peace.

But on this very day our minds and prayers go back even further than the two World Wars that claimed the lives of so many.

We hold in our memory today the life and work of St John of Beverley who in this garden of Yorkshire sowed the seeds of faith. He was the founder of the Minster and the Town.

John was one of three great saints of the North of England. He was one of the proteges of St Hilda of Whitby and ordained Saint Bede as a Deacon and Priest who later wrote 'The History of the English People'. And in this book we find the stories of John's extraordinary gifts of healing. He healed the poor and the rich alike. So confident was he in this God-given gift that as he laid hands on the sick he would exclaim impatiently, "Hurry up – and get well!". And they did!

What other town in England can boast the claim that they were founded by a saint with the gift of healing?

Such a foundation gives the Town of Beverley a unique charter on which to build its future.

More than at any time in the past and especially since the Coronavirus we have become aware of all that we need to do to build healthy communities. Beverley and the East Riding have achieved so much and made this part of Yorkshire such a desirable place to live. Were it not for the convention that a priest or bishop should not retire to the place in which they ministered my wife and I would most certainly have come back to Beverley!

But a healthy town needs now to look outwards beyond the virus and to see what needs to be done in order to create a climate that is healthy for us all. 'Carbon neutral' and 'Zero Carbon' have become almost clichés. But they speak of our common responsibility to care for God's creation and in so doing care for each other. Coastal erosion and widespread flooding are just some of the signs that we are failing to create a safe and healthy environment for ourselves and future generations.

In Bede's History of the English People he quotes one of the earliest poems in the English language. It's by the Northern monk and poet Caedmon. It's about the wonder of God's creation.

“Praise we the Fashioner now of Heaven’s fabric,
The majesty of his might and his mind’s wisdom,
Work of the world-warden, worker of all wonders,
How he the Lord of Glory everlasting,
Wrought first for the race of men Heaven as a rooftree,
Then made he Middle Earth to be their mansion”.

I love this poem – describing God as ‘the Fashioner of fabric’ and as the ‘world-warden’. The canopy of trees that covered England, the ‘rooftree’, was an image of Heaven itself.

This was written at a time when it was said that there were so many trees you could traverse all England without your foot ever having to touch the ground.

But in spite of the glorious trees of the Westwood and those of the Wolds, now immortalised by David Hockney’s paintings, we have over the centuries cut down too many. Not only is the climate changing but with every lost tree we make our rivers and our plains vulnerable to the rains.

That’s why it’s good to know of plans to create the Northern Forest of 50 million trees from Hull to Liverpool and to plant 100,000 trees in East Yorkshire where only 2% of our land is woodland.

This interests me not just because I’ve been bishop in both Hull and Liverpool but because when the Government tried to sell off the Forestry Commission and met with a howl of protest they asked me to chair the Independent Panel on the future of forestry. We recommended that the forests remained in trust for the nation, and so they have been.

The Panel went all over England meeting people with a passion for trees. In one place – the Forest of Dean – we were praising the trees as a work of nature when the local forester interrupted. “Bishop, that’s not a natural landscape. That’s a political landscape. Those trees were planted to become war ships for the British Navy.” I’ve never forgotten that because it reminds me that every landscape is a political landscape and reveals the values of each generation.

And, of course, just as the trees of Dean were grown for ships of war so one hundred years ago the forests of England were cut down to build trenches for our soldiers in the First World War. Indeed, the Forestry Commission was set up in 1919 to replenish the wood that was sacrificed to keep our soldiers safe on the front line.

That work continues with the Northern Forest which equally could be seen as a memorial to the antecedents of the Yorkshire Regiment, to all those who took refuge in those timbers, to all those soldiers cut down like the trees that were felled and failed to keep them safe. Each sapling a memorial to a fallen soldier.

“A seed falls into the ground and dies and rises again with new life”.

That’s straight out of the Bible and from the lips of Jesus himself.

And just as the soldiers died entrenched in wood so Jesus himself died affixed to the wood of a tree. But in the Bible the tree is not a symbol of death but of life after death.

In the closing pages of the Bible there’s a vision of a new and heavenly earth. Dominating the new landscape stands the Tree of Life, reminiscent of the Garden of Eden, budding from its boughs and branches leaves for the healing of the nations.

Trees, my friends, are the sign of health and salvation, in both this world and the next. Amen.

The Right Reverend James Jones KBE

