Ian Rees and the Cathedral Canons: 20th June 2021

Jeremiah 10:1-16, Romans 11:25-36

Our service here this afternoon is a very rich occasion. We rejoice that we can meet here in the context of a choral evensong – an ancient liturgy which, like the other daily offices, plumbs the depths of scripture in its readings, prayers and canticles. Those of us brought up on a weekly choral evensong never lose the love of its rhythms and especially its music; even when the church choirs we’ve experienced singing it have been of a somewhat lesser quality and accuracy than the choir leading us in our worship today. Evensong has held and shaped the spirituality of countless down the centuries, often in preference to the Eucharist.

Today, within the richness of this offering, we’re licensing, installing and praying for a number of people as they take up a new ministry within the diocese. Together, those being installed represent a breadth of ministries that make up the life of the diocese, and a vital link between our cathedral church and the churches in our Ministry Areas. Each one of them, in their different ways, will be working as part of a team; offering their gifts, their insights and their prayers in collaboration with others.

Ian, as Archdeacon of Monmouth, will be working with the Bishop’s Staff Team, the team at the Diocesan Office and the churches of the MAs in the Monmouth Archdeaconry. Archdeacons often get a bad press and there are a number of less than complimentary images associated with them – Bishop’s rotweiller, ecclesiastical toilet brush, poacher turned game keeper. But it’s the Archdeacons who are the glue which hold the workings of the diocese together, and it’s they who hold the link between the various elements that make up diocesan life. Their job is to work with others to ensure things are running as smoothly, as effectively and as efficiently as possible and, most importantly, to ensure that there is good communication between all the different strands.

Ian will also be working with the Diocesan Ministry Team; overseeing, directing and shaping the ministerial life of individuals and church communities, lay and ordained and encouraging us all in our life-long discipleship and various ministries and callings.

Our new Cathedral Canons are also becoming part of a team – the Cathedral Chapter - charged, under the leadership of the Dean, with the good and effective running of our Cathedral Church. They too will be important links, between the Cathedral and the churches and Ministry Areas in which they live and worship; strengthening the bonds, representing the one to the other and holding both before God in prayer.

All of these teams, and the individuals that make them up, have important work to do as we seek to build up the church in this post-Christian and (almost) post-pandemic society in which we live. But our readings this afternoon remind of what is even more important than that, and they offer a warning or two of the wrong turns we can so easily take.

Two things we have to hold before us. The first is to discern what it is that God is asking of us. In the final verses of our reading from the letter to the church in Rome, Paul wonders aloud at the depth of the riches and wisdom and knowledge of God. His ways are inscrutable, his judgements unsearchable. And he asks the rhetorical question, ‘for who has known the mind of the Lord?’ There’s a real sense in which God is unknown and unknowable. God says that of himself through the words of Isaiah: ‘for my thoughts are not your thoughts’ God declares, ‘neither are your ways, my ways… As the heavens are higher than the earth, so are my ways higher than your ways and my thoughts than your thoughts.’

And yet, we have the Spirit of Truth, the spirit that was poured out at Pentecost and is poured out on us today. It’s the spirit promised to us by Jesus and the One that leads us into all truth. To know the mind of the Lord, then, is to discern what the spirit is saying and where the spirit is leading. And we do that together: it’s the very task of the church. We have to listen prayerfully to the still small voice amidst the clamour; to watch for the signs of God’s presence, God’s hand at work, God’s activity in our midst; and to trust that God continues to lead and guide us, even in our fear and failure. Our task – the task of each one of us – is to discern the mind of Christ and to follow.

The second thing we’re called to hold before is us is the absolute centrality of God in all things. Both Jeremiah and Paul speak of this. Jeremiah, as he extols the One who formed all things through his power and wisdom and understanding, simply by uttering his voice. Paul, at the conclusion of our second reading, as he declares that ‘from him and through him and to him are all things.’ In all our busyness and in all our important work, it’s all too easy to lose sight of what we’re really about. We get lost in the tasks we think we have to do – and, although on one level they may be good and important, on another level, they are incidental in the light of God who holds time and eternity and the whole of creation in his hands. God must always be the centre; the reason, the foundation of what we’re doing. Otherwise, we can find ourselves diverted from the very thing we think we’re doing without realizing it.

This is the warning that we hear from Jeremiah. The people of God have been seduced, he claims. Their attention has been drawn to idols – those things that the world around them is so taken up with. These things look impressive: made by craftsmen and artisans; of the highest quality in terms of wood, silver and gold; products of workers highly skilled in their art. But they’re useless for centering your life on; unable to move or to speak or to do any good at all. Sometimes we think we know what’s important and it’s only later that we realize that we were, in fact, missing the point. ‘The customs of the people are false’, warns Jeremiah. However impressive they might seem, they are foolish and stupid.

So, as we pray for Ian, for Rod, Fay, Peter, Mark, Colin and Caroline as they take up their new roles in our diocese, we pray for ourselves and the whole of our diocese. That we may focus our attention and effort on discerning the mind of Christ and acknowledge the centrality of God in all that we think and say and do; working together to become the church, the Body of Christ, God calls us to be.