

Sunday Dec 31 2017 - Parish Church 10am
Abbey 900 - Closing Sermon

For as the earth brings forth its shoots, and as a garden causes what is sown in it to spring up, so the Lord God will cause righteousness and praise to spring up before all the nations.

May the words on my lips and the thoughts of all our hearts be acceptable in your sight, O Lord, our Strength and our Redeemer. Amen.

Well here we are, on the last day of December 2017. New Year's Eve is a time when we naturally tend to **look back** over the last year. But like the Roman God Janus, who gives his name to January, who has two faces looking in opposite directions at the same time, today we also **look forward** to the year to come. What were the highs of last year? How did we cope with the lows? What will the new year bring? Much the same as last year? Or something totally different?

I think if next year were to bring much the same as last year the Steering Group of Abbey 900 would completely collapse! For **today** marks not just the end of 2017, but the end of this 900th anniversary year of celebration to mark the founding of the Augustinian Abbey of St Mary the Virgin which once stood at the heart of this community of Cirencester. It has been a wonderful year, if totally exhausting at times; not least for Corinne, the Chair of Abbey 900!

But **what a year** it has been! Who can forget those incredibly beautiful Neckham manuscripts displayed by the Corinium Museum? Or the 30 pint-sized Abbots (most of whom were called William!) at our opening service? The many concerts, the Fleece Fayre with its Maypole dancing in the newly-refurbished Market Place, the wonderful mediaeval banquet at the RAU, the fantastic dramatic re-enactments, the study days and lectures that have enhanced our understanding of the Abbey, the stunning Flower Festival here, to name just some of the events.

The **planning** of course began well in advance of 2017, but it turned out to be a bigger **commitment** than any on the Steering Group then realised. As we take on new commitments, we might think we have the measure of what is being asked of us, as we say, 'Yes, I'll do it' as did Mary saying 'Yes' to the Angel Gabriel. But it is often only as things unfold, only in the implementation phase, we might say, that we begin to understand the **enormity** of the task ahead, and the **nature** of what we have actually committed ourselves to.

When the Virgin Mary hears from the shepherds what they had been told by the angels about her Son, she treasures their words, but needs **time to ponder** them in her heart. She must have looked back at the commitment she had made and reviewed her answer in the light of this new information, but also looked forward and wondered anew about the **nature and extent** of the ongoing commitment.

Our reading from **Galatians** contains the result of such **pondering** over the **events of Christmas**: *But when the fullness*

of time had come, God sent his Son, born of a woman, born under the law, in order to redeem those who were under the law, so that we might receive adoption as children. This gives us the **wider picture** behind the Christmas story, the reason for it all. It is the result of considered reflection with the benefit of hindsight. Such reflection could not have been entertained at the time of the events themselves because their **nature and extent** was still in **process of being understood**.

The same could be said of our OT reading from the prophet **Isaiah**. The full **nature and extent of reference** of his words was not fully understood at the time that he uttered them. Like those of any classic, his words can transcend their own time to speak to others in very different eras. In his own day, Isaiah's hearers would understand him as saying that at last Israel may rejoice because her Exile in Babylon is coming to an end; she is being clothed with the garments of salvation, preparing for a joyful return to Jerusalem, for her penalty is paid. But for Christians in a later era the bridegroom decked with a garland is a clear reference to Jesus Christ, the babe born in the manger at Christmas.

And the same, I suggest, could be said of **Abbey 900**. The **nature and extent** of what has been going on during 2017 **has yet to really become clear**. It would be all too easy to think that the Festival is done and dusted as we down our fizz at the end of this service. But as the year has progressed there has been dawning realisation that Abbey 900 has been more than a series of celebrations; more than the marking of an anniversary. It has been about the **building of community** here in Cirencester. As

we **look back** and consider what this Festival has achieved, so we must surely also **look forward** and consider what potential it has to continue to enrich our community in the future.

Looking **beyond the present** to the future is usually a tricky business. Unless we receive some clear message from on high, as did the shepherds from the angels in our Gospel reading, we have no idea what is coming up in the days ahead. This was certainly true for the Abbey 900 Steering Group as we planned, we now realise!

Before the planning of the Festival there was a **vision**, perhaps I should say a **dream**, a **hope** that this **community** might come **together as one** to celebrate this Abbey that so shaped our town and our community. But I don't think anyone foresaw the **many and varied ways** in which our **community** has been **strengthened** by the Festival during this anniversary year.

Partnerships and relationships have been forged:

- Within the Steering Group, as representatives of different community groups have made connections and got to know each other
- Between the Steering Group and wider community groups
- Between the Festival and the business community
- Between Abbey 900 and its generous sponsors
- Between volunteers who have met and got to know each other
- Between those who met as colleagues in a shared enterprise and now are friends

What could have been more **symbolic** of this coming together in **community**, than the stunningly beautiful monastery garden of the Flower Festival, made out of a myriad little pots, carefully tended for weeks beforehand in private homes, and then assembled together in this church? Or the building together, brick by brick, of a replica Abbey out of LEGO? And what could have said more clearly that this community has **grown in its ability to come together** and to **embrace all** in our community than that wonderful Community Harvest Supper?

Such coming together is the **stuff of community**, the stuff that **strengthens** community, the stuff that **builds** community through relationship, the stuff that **embraces all** in a community. This is the stuff that can shape a **lasting legacy**. But **what shape** will the Festival's legacy have?

Some of that shape is already clear: monies raised by the Festival will be used to enhance the grounds where the Abbey once stood, improving it as a community facility that all in our community may enjoy. But it seems to me there is **potential for further legacy** that could build on the relationships forged between the different bodies of this community, who could continue to work together as a community for the good of our community; that is for the good of **all** in our community.

The Abbey of St Mary the Virgin was established here at the heart of our community with **purpose**, and with a **mission** to reach out to the community, as Abbey 900 has also wanted to do almost a millennium later. However that Abbey was an **Augustinian** Abbey with a **particular vision**, to reach out to the **sick** and to the

destitute. As we seek to shape a legacy from Abbey 900 let us not forget those for whom the Canons Regular had particular care. How can all the community bodies who have been engaged in Abbey 900 come together to develop a legacy for the marginalised in our community too, a legacy that has a distinctive **Augustinian shape**? Something for us to ponder, I suggest.

It has been a truly amazing year, and there is **so much potential** in the relationships and good will that have been forged over this anniversary year for the **ongoing** enrichment and **development** of our community here in Cirencester. Our OT reading from the prophecy of Isaiah contained these words:

For as the earth brings forth its shoots, and as a garden causes what is sown in it to spring up, so the Lord God will cause righteousness and praise to spring up before all the nations.

Over this past year, our community has brought forth shoots of new growth. Seeds have been sown within its garden. Who knows what might spring up and grow from those seeds in the future? But is **up to us to shape that new growth**.

As we look to the future, let us hold on to **what has been most important** in this past year. And let us seek God's guidance as we shape a legacy. **Let us pray** with Augustine of Hippo that as we plan, *God will grant unto us, His servants, a heart of flame as we seek to do His will, a heart of love towards all our fellow men - and to ourselves a heart of steel* - that we might keep going, might build an enduring legacy for our community that will reflect the love of God for all, and that will last until the 1000th anniversary! Amen.