**Dean’s Charge to Vestry**

**27 February 2022**

As our Cathedral community gathers today for its annual meeting, it is almost exactly two years since what we then called the “novel coronavirus” was declared a global pandemic. On March 17, the cathedral and our cathedral offices went into lockdown.

COVID has tested our mettle in almost every way conceivable. Churches are not generally known for moving quickly on *anything,* but we have had to learn to be nimble, and ingenious. We have had to find ways to balance each other’s competing desires and needs; and to live with rather more ambiguity about what is and isn’t permissible than makes us comfortable. As wave after wave of the virus has assailed us, hopes rising only to be dashed once again, we have had to call upon and nurture our emotional resilience. Possibly the most difficult thing for us has been the way COVID has nibbled away at our sense of community, and our awareness of each other. The underside of the gift of solitude (a good thing for Christians to embrace) is isolation. We have -whether reluctantly or enthusiastically – made technology our friend, meeting by Zoom, and worshiping via livestream.

It is anyone’s question what will be the permanent effects of COVID on the Anglican Church – let alone this cathedral. We know, for example, that many have learned to enjoy not having to drive the length of the peninsula to get to church on Sundays. Who will come back, once it is irrefutably safe to do so? And what will “safe” mean? Is the Peace changed for ever? When will the chalice be returned to the people? Has Zoom spelled the end of in-person evening meetings? How will we find meaningful ways to connect with our cyber-congregation? What effect will “unidentifiable donors” have on our ability to fund the work that we do? And so on.

We find ourselves in uncertain times. Now, to be sure, this is not a function of COVID alone – although the pandemic has certainly cast our situation into sharp relief. But even before 2020, the Anglican Church knew that that we were in bewildering, if not perilous, times. We had only to look at the demographics of the average congregation – not to mention its size - to know that whatever it was we used to do, and that worked so well for us, doesn’t work any more – or at least, it doesn’t work for the people who aren’t here. Which is just about everybody. And yet, it seems to me that what we have – the core of our Christian identity and mission – has never been more necessary than it is now. This world, this country, is crying out for an ethic of compassion, and forgiveness, and kindness and diversity; for freedom rooted in responsibility and duty; for justice, and mercy, and truth, and peace… The question is, How will the Church “do the gospel” from now on?

Some of you will know of a book which has been making the rounds over the past 8 months, entitled *How To Lead When You Don’t Know Where You’re Going*. The subtitle is *Leading in a Liminal Season.* Liminality, according to author Susan Beamont, is an in-between time, a threshold, limbo, a time when we have stepped (or been propelled) out of the past, but it is not yet clear what the future will be. Liminal times are uncomfortable, because the past is no longer serving us, but we have no map to the future. All we have is a compass.

The front cover of Beaumont’s book shows a narrow foot bridge which disappears into dense fog. It strikes me that navigating fog is a good metaphor for the challenges of negotiating times like the present. You’ll know, if you have any experience driving in thick fog at night, that there are two quite common scenarios. The first is – and studies have proven this – that even though you are taking great care, your gut is in a knot, and you’re leaned forward peering intensely into the fog, looking for road markings or oncoming headlights, you don’t realize that you’re actually speeding. I can’t tell you the number of times I found myself going 80 or 85 when I thought I was going 60! The second scenario is that you just pull over to the side of the road, and wait it out. The danger here, however is (a) you don’t know how long it will last, which means you’re making no progress at all on your goal; or (b) the woman in the J-car going 85 is going to hit you.

When you’re driving in the fog, you just want it to be over. The same goes for liminality. The trick in these times is to avoid going too fast – rushing headlong into decisions because the uncertainty is killing us, and we just want to feel normal again.

The trick in these times is also to avoid paralysis – hunkering down, on the assumption that one day, this will pass, and we’ll be able to go back to “normal.” Often in liminal times, people harken back to the way we were, and imagine that if only we could do it the way we used to do, all would be well. If only the Dean would do children’s talks; if only we started up Piffy parties again: that would pack them in! But it wouldn’t, you see: For one thing, what’s a “Piffy party”? And for another, have we not realized that the parents of the children we want to entertain have no experience of church themselves? Church is just about the last thing on their radar screen: trust me, they’re not looking for a good children’s talk.

To be faithful in times of liminality is to be willing to step into the fog, even though that means that the past is now beyond reach: we remember it; we can learn from it; but we can never go back there. Faithfulness in times of liminality it to keep moving forward (albeit cautiously), watchfully, and open to any intimation that we are now in view of the future that is coming to meet us. William Faulkner once wrote, “You cannot swim for new horizons until you have courage to lose sight of the shore.”

But swim we must. I have no truck with those who believe that the Church should be in wind-up mode, should just pull over and park. Indeed, history has shown us repeatedly that the Church is strongest and most vibrant when it is in crisis. Think of the Jews in exile. Or of the first Christians, under persecution.

In this regard, I am put in mind of a little book by Phyllis Tickle, called *The Great Emergence: How Christianity is Changing and Why*. Tickle argues that the upheaval currently experienced by the Church has been creeping up on us for some time now, and actually falls into a pattern of such upheavals, that take place every 500 years or so. It is as if, she says, every 500 years, the church feels compelled to clear out its attic, and have a great rummage sale. She describes each of these 500 year demarcations as “hinges of history.”

If we go back 500 years, it takes us to the Great Reformation – also a period of intense turmoil, and conflicting visions for the future. It was messy, but the Church survived and was strengthened. Another 500 years, and we land on the Great Schism – this was that momentous time when the East split from the West, with the Orthodox going one way, and the Roman Catholic Church another. Yet another 500 years, and we find ourselves just after the fall of the Roman Empire, entering into that period called “the Dark Ages.” Enter Gregory the Great (otherwise known as Pope Gregory I) under whose rule monasticism not only flourished, but saved civilization. Another 500 years, and of course we have the foundational event that gave birth to Christianity: the birth, death and resurrection of Jesus of Nazareth.

None of these periods was brief or straightforward. There was no rushing through the fog; nor was there any escaping it. Think how conflicted and confused the first Christians were over the admission of uncircumcised Gentiles to the Church. It took a long time to get that issue sorted. Similarly, it took a long time, during the Reformation, to figure out where we were going to land on the subject of Christ’s presence in the eucharistic elements. People were burned at the stake over this (Thomas Cranmer among them). Liminal times are messy.

But, and this is the point, never have they spelt the end! Rather, they are but the birth pangs of what is to be. This is our gospel after all: that between the life that is, and the life that is yet to be, is passion, suffering, uncertainty, and yes, even death. After death is resurrection; which means that before resurrection, is death.

It is on this gospel that we stake our life, and our ministry. And it is thus, I say to you, dear People of God, in this liminal time, that “We choose hope!”

Let me say a little more. Because I am not using the word hope in its usual, colloquial, anodyne meaning, but in it is full-blooded sense as one of the three “theological virtues” (the others being faith and love.)

Colloquially, we use the word “hope” to mean something like “wishfulness” – I hope the grocery will have eggplant in stock. I hope I don’t get COVID on the plane.

Or again, sometimes, we think of hope as a synonym for optimism. Picture Monty Python’s thief on the cross, singing “Always look on the bright side of life.” These are those naturally cheerful people (possibly even deluded), who see their glass as half full, rather than half empty, and no matter what the indicia, generally expect things to turn out.

Now, of course, this kind of positive attitude can be, often is, a good and necessary thing. After all, who would embark on a second course of chemotherapy if they didn’t think it might work? And who doesn’t prefer Pollyanna to Eeyore?

But this said, the kind of hope I commend to you is something altogether different. I take my cue from the theologian Reinhold Niebuhr, who said, “Nothing that is worth doing can be achieved in our lifetime; therefore we must be saved by hope.”

To hope is to bite off a project that you already know is too big for you; too big even for your length of days; a project that, if it is to be completed, will outlast you. It is to begin the work, even though you will one day have to relinquish control, and entrust it to a generation yet unborn. Hope is the trustful willingness to inhabit a dream in the midst of uncertainty, to forswear the satisfaction of eventual closure or resolution. If one sows and another reaps, the person of hope doesn’t mind being the one who sows. Because, you see, nothing that is worth doing can be achieved in our lifetime.

We do not know what the Church is becoming, for now, as St Paul said, we see in a glass darkly: that is, we live in liminal times. But we do know that our God has always been faithful. We do know that at every hinge in history, the Church has undergone great trials, and emerged renewed. We do know that life follows death just as surely as it precedes it.

And for these reasons, We choose hope. We choose hope.