

Revd Michael Burns  
Christ Church West Wimbledon  
Sermon : August 18th, 2019  
“Ninth Sunday after Trinity”

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**PREACHED AT EVENSONG AT ST PAUL’S CATHEDRAL ON 18 AUGUST 2019**

350 years ago in 1669 the task of designing a replacement structure for the old St Paul’s Cathedral was officially assigned to the architect Sir Christopher Wren. It is said that when this new St Paul’s was being built Wren was in the habit of making frequent visits to the site, wandering around from craftsman to craftsman watching and noting each phase of the construction. Sometimes he would pause and ask a worker what he was doing. ‘I’m carving a keystone for that arch’ a mason would reply. ‘I’m constructing a door for the west entrance’ a carpenter would answer or ‘I’m forging the metalwork for the screen’ a blacksmith would say. One day the architect spotted a small boy standing alongside a pail of water and a pile of hay. It was the boy’s job to water and feed the horses which pulled the wagon-loads of building materials up Ludgate Hill. Wren approached the boy and put the same question to him. The boy looked up, and not recognising the man standing before him replied ‘I’m helping Sir Christopher Wren to build a cathedral’.

Every person’s role, however humble, when seen against the great canvas of life, becomes meaningful and important. That story reminds us that we are all linked in some way to the bigger picture – that there are lots of ways in which we are all connected together as human beings.

This afternoon we are connected because we have all come together to worship. Each of us has come for our own different reasons and many of us will be at different stages of faith and belief – but it is enough that we are here. Each of us has come from different places, different countries – and it is not difficult to imagine that many of the world’s nations will be represented here this afternoon. It is also good to be here at a service with the music led by the Cathedral Choirs of St John the Divine New

York. There has long been a close affinity between the cities of London and New York. I remember being here in this Cathedral in September 2001 three days after 9/11 at a sombre and emotional service of remembrance attended by Her Majesty the Queen as Britons and Americans stood shoulder to shoulder.

There are other things that link us all together this afternoon. The Cathedral Church of St John the Divine New York, 125 years old, describes itself as a warm and welcoming church as does my own ordinary parish church in south-west London, 160 years old today. Warm and welcoming is certainly what this great Cathedral has aspired to be for the past 1,400 years to all who come through its doors in these words: *'we welcome people of all Christian traditions as well as people of other faiths and people of little or no faith'*. So it is that all our churches and cathedrals strive to be places of prayer, of refuge, of wonder as men and women reach up to God and outwards to the world but also yearn above all to be places of warmth and welcome to both strangers and friends alike.

There is yet a further link to these three churches – the Cathedral of St John the Divine is in the Morningside Heights district, St Paul's Cathedral is at the top of Ludgate Hill and Christ Church West Wimbledon is at the top of Copse Hill. All were built to be like a city set on a hill, to encourage men and women to look up and, in the words of our psalm, *'Open thou mine eyes: that I may see the wondrous things of thy law'*. In Isaiah we hear these majestic words of the foundation of faith: *"See I am laying in Zion a foundation stone, a tested stone, a precious cornerstone, a sure foundation"*. And over and above all the wonderful buildings in which we can worship God, we remember, in the words of Paul, *"the generous act of our Lord Jesus Christ, that though he was rich yet for your sakes he became poor so that by his poverty you might become rich"*.

But – and it is a big but – all these church buildings are worthless and pointless if they are empty of people – people of faith and people of doubt – but people nonetheless who are all searching for some meaning as taught by Jesus of Nazareth and perhaps hoping to find it through coming together to worship God.

So what will you take away with you from this service this afternoon? Wonderful music certainly. Stunning architecture undoubtedly. Maybe a sense of the majesty of

God? Maybe something that will give you encouragement on your journey of faith? Perhaps remember too that small boy who by feeding the horses carrying the building materials up the hill was helping Sir Christopher Wren build his cathedral. That simple story reminds us that every person's role, however humble, when seen against the great canvas of our world, becomes meaningful and important.

Remember as well that we are all connected in some way to the bigger picture – and say a quiet thank you for all the ways in which we are connected together as human beings in the world of today – with the words of the anthem ringing in our ears: *“Let the people praise thee, O God: yea, let all the people praise thee”*.

I finish with this prayer written by a former Bishop of Norwich, Maurice Wood: *“Almighty God, may we as a congregation reach upwards to your throne in worship and adoration; inwards to one another in understanding and friendship; outwards to the world in evangelism and social compassion. Make us like a city set on a hill whose light cannot be hidden so that men and women may find Christ as the light of the world and eternal life as the gift of God through Jesus Christ our Lord”*.            *Amen.*