

**Patronal Festival at St Edmundsbury Cathedral
on Sunday 21 July 2019
A Sermon preached at the Eucharist
by The Very Revd James Atwell, Former Dean.**

Jeremiah 45: 1-5

2 Corinthians 4: 7-15

Matthew 20: 20-28

Thank you to Dean Joe for inviting me to preach for the Patronal Festival of St James. It is good to be back, and to participate in Cathedral life as a new chapter unfolds in its long and interesting story.

Of the vast number of sermons I have heard over a lifetime in the ministry, for some reason few really stand out. One, however, is the sermon preached at my Installation as Dean in this Cathedral Church in 1995 by the then Diocesan Bishop, John Dennis. He talked of the identity of ‘Silly Suffolk’, to be translated, of course, ‘Holy Suffolk’, with its treasure of St Edmund, King and Martyr. Bishop John continued with a quip based on the then current renumbering of the A45 to be the A14. He pointed out that if you want to understand the character of Suffolk compare the signposts in Cambridgeshire and Suffolk. Effete Cambridgeshire had regular signs “A14 formerly A45”; you crossed into Suffolk and the unadorned message changed: “A14 was A45”.

Bishop John also picked up on the slightly incongruous fact that St Edmundsbury Cathedral was, in those days, dedicated solely to the Apostle St James the Great. His rationale was that of the great churches in waiting on the historic Abbey, St Mary’s was built for the parish and St James for the use of pilgrims. Certainly, St James Church owes its dedication to the son of Zebedee as Santiago de Compostela, St James of Compostela. It was built to assuage the disappointment of the 12th Century Abbot Anselm, when the king would not countenance his absence on a pilgrimage to Compostela. Compostela must be brought to Bury St Edmunds. The Church of St James was rebuilt by John Wastell in 1503, and we celebrated its Quincentenary in 2003. I’ve still got the mug!

Of course, another architectural great is associated with this place, and that is Stephen Dykes Bower. The glorious medieval colour, reminiscent of an exquisite manuscript such as the Bury Bible, is his vision. None of our great Cathedrals can lift your soul in quite the way this one does. It was SDB’s

insistence that the architecture of the Cathedral should resonate to the inspiration of Compostela. He incorporated Moorish architectural influences in the arches and the metalwork. It always surprised me that he did not find a way to incorporate the great swinging censer, the Botafumeiro, of Compostela into the Cathedral of St James. A challenge for the Dean and Chapter perhaps!

Stephen Dykes Bower invited me to meet him as soon as my appointment was announced. I decided not to wait until I was installed and made an immediate appointment to see him. Sadly, he died before the date of our assignation. However, he had set up a surprise for the new Dean. During my first week his Trustees announced that he had left the combined wealth of his family to further the architectural development of St Edmundsbury Cathedral. However, only if the Dean co-operated, otherwise the Trustees were to favour Westminster Abbey. Every time I met the Dean of Westminster he used to enquire whether I had blotted my copybook. SDB actually ruled against building a tower with his bequest, which turned out to be £3m. He knew it would be nowhere near sufficient.

However, at the time the Millennium Commission had come into being, enabling a proportion of National Lottery funding to be used to celebrate the Millennium. If the Commission adopted a project, they were in the business of doubling funding raised locally. The lottery was still in its infancy and many regarded its money as tainted. In the end the Cathedral Council supported a bid, and the Dykes Bower Trustees agreed to allow their money to be used as collateral provided SDB's nominated works were included in the total project. The strategy was to raise £3m locally, bringing up the total with Dykes Bower's bequest to £6m, and invite the Commission to double it. After two disappointments when we were turned down, at the eleventh hour, with an article in the Times and another in Private Eye, like the Exodus of old, the tide suddenly turned. One Thursday morning a fax came through to the Cathedral Office summoning us to the Angel Hotel at 11 am for a press conference to announce the award, and so the Tower was to be built. Prince Charles, already the patron, gave us our strapline 'a spiritual beacon for the new millennium'.

As we celebrate the feast of St James in this glorious place, the accumulated labour of saints and benefactors down the centuries, we cannot avoid the resonance of Santiago de Compostela. We honour St James as the patron of pilgrimage. In particular, we are in the company of those tens of thousands over the centuries who have been inspired by St James to walk the Camino de Santiago as a spiritual exercise. In this secular age that challenge seems to be ever more popular and undimmed. In many ways faith as a pilgrimage, as exploration, as seeking, retains immense power.

Journey is central to the biblical portrayal of the ministry of Jesus. He was always on the move: 'Foxes have holes, and the birds of the air have nests; but the son of man has nowhere to lay his head' (Luke 9:58). The apostles were invited to join that itinerant lifestyle. St James was not furnished with all the answers before he responded to the call of Christ. He was called to a journey, to be adventurous for God, to trust and to explore.

You remember, Jesus finds the two sons of Zebedee in their boat beside the sea of Galilee mending their nets, and we gather: 'Immediately he called them; and they left their father Zebedee in the boat with the hired men, and followed him.' (Mark 1:20) They were to journey around Galilee, and at least once, on that Passover of destiny, make the journey from Galilee to Jerusalem with thousands of Pilgrims from Palestine and far beyond. That adventure of pilgrimage is beautifully captured by St Mark in a way that anticipates the numinous fear of the women fleeing the tomb on Easter Sunday: 'They were on the road going up to Jerusalem, and Jesus was walking ahead of them; they were amazed, and those that followed were afraid' (Mark 10:32).

The apostles were open to the journey with all of its enigma, uncertainty and numinous potential. They had trusted the call of Jesus and set out without guarantees, but ready for the encounters of the soul and the lessons that the journey would afford. They were open to those God-moments, when the Spirit stirs in the human heart. To be an apostle was to be a patron of Pilgrimage; a duty which was to fall above all to St James.

One of the themes that Jesus used in his teaching about the Kingdom of God was the joy of a wedding celebration. Not only does the Jesus tradition recollect that Jesus and his disciples attended a wedding at Cana of Galilee, but he used the wedding banquet to illustrate various of his parables. Crucial to these events was the invitation and the summons that went out when everything was ready. Perhaps the single word that sums up the identity and the distinctiveness of the Christian Gospel is that it comes as invitation. We live in a perplexing world. We don't have all the answers. There is no consulting the back of the book, not even in the Bible. Yet, in the life of Jesus there is an invitation, a reaching out, a summons. A hand is placed on our shoulder and we are invited on the journey of following Christ.

Jesus' powerful teaching. We only need to have the story of the Good Samaritan in our back pocket. Jesus' striking example. 'The Son of Man came not to be served but to serve, and to give his life as a ransom for many' (Matthew 20:28). The numinous breaking through in his death and resurrection. These all come as grace, as initiative, as invitation, to get us going on the journey of faith. We are

called simply to be responsive, to make our lives a journey and set out in trust – Christ first invites ‘follow me’.

In many ways the smaller pilgrimages to Compostela, to Iona, to Taizé, to the Holy Land, to Bury St Edmunds, or wherever, are parables of our whole life’s journey. They are an intense focus of what our lives are called to be. Over the years I have led pilgrimages, spiritual journeys, to many places in the Middle East with its biblical landscape. They are all journeys undertaken in the spirit of ‘faith seeking understanding’. They always yield a revelation.

When you are travelling, the landscape, so often taken for granted, is suddenly significant and vital. That is true whether you are walking, close to sunshine and rain, enjoying the spectacular scenery of valleys, streams and paths, or even in a coach. I remember a guide in Jordan getting us out of the bus in the middle of the desert to inspect a single black iris, the national flower, that had defied the arid terrain. An awareness of the sheer gift of creation breaks through.

Every pilgrimage, journeying together, is like Chaucer’s Canterbury Tales. If you travel together you share stories, share incidents, share meals, risk intimacies and discover the giftedness in relationships. If you’re in the shower and have forgotten your towel, you depend on someone else! Pilgrimage is about community, which reflects the community of God himself.

I think, also, almost every pilgrimage I have led has jolted us with its moment of unexpected hospitality, sheer kindness and grace, which is transparent to the ‘grace of our Lord Jesus Christ’. I remember in the middle of the Sinai desert, the guide spotting some Bedouin on the horizon. ‘Do you want to meet them?’ he said. The bus careered off the road across the desert to their encampment. They didn’t wait to be asked. In seconds the women were gathering sticks for a fire, and the men needing bread and boiling black tea. We were seated on cushions in the carpeted tent, reminiscent of the hospitality of Abraham. We couldn’t understand their language, but we could read their generous hospitality. It was an Emmaus Road moment.

The patronal festival of St James celebrates the Apostle of Pilgrimage. It reminds us that Jesus called St James to a journey that was to take him far from the security of a Galilean fisherman. It reminds us, too, that the heart of Gospel faith is the invitation issued in Christ that we should make our lives a pilgrimage of faith. We are called to live beautifully and die hopefully in response to the paschal mystery. Alleluia! Amen.