

## Mayor's Dedication Service

PREACHER : The Very Revd Adrian Newman, Dean

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People sometimes say to me; it's a shame that the cathedral is in the wrong place. What they mean is that Rochester Cathedral sits on the edge of the Diocese of Rochester – if you wanted something at the geographical heart of the Diocese, you'd transplant it, London-Bridge-like, stone by stone, to somewhere like Sevenoaks.

But I say to them: if I was God, and I wanted to put a Cathedral somewhere in the Diocese of Rochester, where would I choose? And I think He would choose to put it close to the highest concentration of people, and especially to the areas of social need. Somewhere like Medway.

The vast majority of people in this country, indeed the vast majority of people in the world, live in urban environments. If we are to make our world a better place, we must begin in the cities.

Cities are back in vogue in the UK. Towards the end of the 1990's the flow of population out into the suburbs was reversed, as the image of the city was reinvented. Ever since WW2 we have held an essentially negative view of cities as places attracting blight and poverty. Now people want to live closer to their place of work and closer to the activity and excitement that a city generates. There is definitely a new tune in the urban air.

Lord Rogers, who has been at the forefront of thinking about this new urban renaissance, said this,

***"Cities remain the great demographic magnets of our time because they facilitate work and are the seed beds of our cultural development. They are places of hugely diversified activities and functions, exhibitions and demonstrations, bars and cathedrals, shops and opera houses.***

***I love their combination of ages, races, cultures and activities, a mix of community and anonymity, familiarity and surprise, even their sense of dangerous excitement. I enjoy their grand spaces as well as the animation that simple pavement cafes bring to the street, the informal liveliness of the public square, the mixture of workplaces, shops and homes that make living neighbourhoods."***

This is of course to be very positive about cities and to focus on the good things about them. But Rodgers' "demographic magnetism" attracts all sorts of other things as well: loneliness, fear, unemployment, environmental pollution, crime, violence, and poor housing. Perhaps the most pessimistic definition of a city is a place where millions of people are lonely together.

But for all this, cities at the start of the 21st century are very much where it's at, and urban policy is utterly crucial to the development of a healthy society.

Did you catch a recent book by Robert Putnam? It's called 'Bowling Alone', and it is rumoured to have been very influential in the higher echelons of the Labour Party. It chronicles the changes in US society in the second half of the 20th century.

The book takes its name from bowling clubs, a celebrated part of US society in the past, which have now all but died out. These days you do not bowl in community, you bowl alone.

His book traces the impact of this trend on US society and recommends, not unsurprisingly, that an important part of the political agenda should be the strengthening of those organisations which promote and encourage community. "We need", says Putnam, "to rebuild society's stock of social capital."

My reason for mentioning Putnam's book is that so much of what he says revolves around healthy cities. He sets out a positive agenda for action at the end of his book which covers work that may be necessary in the realms of education, employment, urban design, communications, the arts and government.

But he also goes on to say, working from a US context, that religious communities have a vital role to play as one of the major producers of social capital in society. To quote Putnam, "***faith communities in which people worship together are arguably the single most important repository of social capital in America.***"

He cites evidence that nearly half of all associational memberships in America are church related, half of all personal philanthropy is religious in character, and half of all volunteering occurs in a religious context.

There isn't time here to develop Putnam's ideas but it's interesting to note that these insights have been taken up in a UK context by the leaders of all the main political parties.

Tony Blair is quoted as saying "***faith communities have an important part to play in enriching and re-energising society***".

I have detected, in the past 10 years, a sea-shift in terms of attitude towards the faith communities. In our own region there are some very positive signs of a growing ability for secular and sacred organisations to understand each other and work together. Rather like St Paul's image of a body functioning well together (in the 2<sup>nd</sup> reading), we need each other; we are diminished without everything that the other brings.

And just a few weeks ago this report (Faith as Social Capital) was produced by the Joseph Rowntree Foundation, a major piece of research indicating ways in which faith communities can add enormous value to the processes of regeneration at work within the renaissance of our cities.

This re-discovery of the place of faith in public life is still viewed with suspicion, because for centuries now we have been living in a world where the religious horizon has been sponged away. The secularisation of the world, and the abandonment of religion, has punctured the sacred canopy which historically set the framework for our understanding of life. It did so for a host of good reasons but its results have been powerful and not always for the good.

Now any sense of the sacred has been marginalised to the farthest corners of life. You can be religious in the private realm but public life deals with reality: definable, measurable and observable. And so public life is no longer seen as a realm in which religion can play a part. So it's okay for Tony Blair to acknowledge his personal Christian faith but it's not okay for him to allow his faith to influence Labour policy. Instead of a sacred canopy for society, we give out individual religious umbrellas.

The puncturing of the sacred canopy by secularism has been, in my view, a destabilising force within society. In secular society's attempt to strip life of the harmful and damaging effects which religion can undoubtedly have, it has thrown the baby out with the bath water. What I think everyone is discovering is that unless we take a holistic approach to urban regeneration and the development of society, we will not be building on firm foundations. To be holistic means to take spirituality seriously.

So today we talk in terms of the need to re-sacrilise society, to re-enchant our experience of life, and this is a vital task in any regeneration. The challenge to politicians and planners is to start to take faith communities on our terms more than you do at the moment. For unless and until you accept the faith dimension behind what we do, you will limit our contribution.

Steve Chalke, who initiated the Faithworks campaign a few years ago to draw attention to this, said:

***Faith is the engine that drives our work. Faith drives churches and Christian charities up and down the UK to get involved in care and welfare provision in the first place. Faith pushes us to develop a clearer understanding of the massively complex problems at issue within society and to strive for more effective medium and long-term solutions. Faith motivates us to keep going when the going gets tough and the mission ahead looks impossible. Put simply, faith transforms both individuals and communities."***

The sacred canopy. It's a sort of dome of course, and domes aren't in fashion are they? - from the Millennium Dome to the fantasy canopy of the Truman show, we're suspicious of canopies which see life as a theme park.

Religion, the sacred canopy, has often been seen in this way, limiting, enslaving, not engaged with the realities of life. But maybe a better image of a dome comes not from Greenwich or the Truman Show but from the Eden Project, where the canopy supports an eco-system.

Ironic, isn't it, that they called it Eden, which in a strange way leads me back to the city, because I have said many times that the Bible begins in a garden and ends in a city, the Garden of Eden and the new Jerusalem. They are the two bookends of the Bible, both pictures of paradise. The world we would wish for.

Cities have become magnets for all that is destructive in life. It does not have to be so. They can be redeemed. The heavenly vision is urban. But if they are to be the places where society flourishes, we must rebuild our stock of social capital and churches, along with politicians and planners, have a vital role to play.

Not by limiting themselves to secular activity but by growing afresh the sacred canopy under which human beings can flourish and live life to the full.