



CHELMSFORD
CATHEDRAL

Nicholas Henshall
Dean of Chelmsford

11 September 2021

Dear friends and colleagues across the Cathedral Community,

GOD OF MERCY AND CARE

Luke 1.46-55

Last week we celebrated the Cathedral's "patronal" festival. That is nothing to do with Harry Potter. It simply means the day on which we remember the saint for whom the church was named. And back in the 13th century, what is now the Cathedral was named for Mary, the mother of Jesus. That's why there is no Lady Chapel - because the whole building is named for Mary.

Mary's song - sometimes called the Magnificat - is sung every evening here in the Cathedral. You can find the text at the bottom of this letter. Sometimes it's a glorious setting sung by the choir; sometimes it's just a few of our tired voices chanting at the end of the day. Either way it is a stirring manifesto. Here, in her first developed response to the news that she is going to be the mother of the Lord, she sings boldly of God as the God of mercy and care with a special love for the poor, the weak and the vulnerable. She invites us to recognise the same God in the child of Bethlehem and in Christ on the cross.

Down the centuries the Christian community has sought to respond both personally and corporately in service of a world in need, recognising God's bias, to the poor. That is core to Jesus' mission, so it stands at the heart of the Church. God of mercy and care.

At which point I find myself brought up sharp. In a series of national reports the churches - and indeed now mosques, temples, synagogues, chapels, meeting houses - have been confronted with their catastrophic failure to keep children and vulnerable adults safe. If you have watched the film *Spotlight* or seen the documentary about Bishop Peter Ball, the impact of the church's tragic and appalling failures in safeguarding will have been laid bare for you. For anyone still wondering why we are placing so much emphasis on safeguarding here at Chelmsford Cathedral, do watch either or both of those films. They make clear the devastating consequences of failing to take safeguarding seriously.

Faith communities of all kinds should be the last places where the safety of children or vulnerable adults is compromised or ignored. And yet we must face up to the shocking reality that when the church (or the mosque or the temple or the synagogue or the gurdwara....) becomes a place where power is exercised inappropriately and carelessly, then it creates the space where our core values are eroded so deeply that precisely such compromise occurs, with devastating consequences for the victims.

Last Saturday in her first *ex cathedra* address, Bishop Guli spoke powerfully of vulnerability as a key characteristic of being a Christian - an awareness of our own vulnerability that leads us to a deeper understanding of the vulnerability of others. Of course - as we've said in these letters before - its appallingly easy for the church (the mosque, the synagogue, etc...) to have a beautiful narrative about vulnerability when all along it has power up its sleeve. That demands an honest reckoning,

When asked what it means to follow him, Jesus simply points to a child and says, "be like that". When asked who is important, he points to the stranger, the beggar, the person in need. We need to learn a new way of seeing. With Mary as our patron saint, this is our territory. A place where power is turned upside down. A place where we take active responsibility for the protection of the vulnerable, for the safety of the child. Where religions cannot hide behind grand titles or the symbols of power.

Mary invites us to go there - this Hebrew teenager who tells us of a God of mercy and care who dethrones power, might and manipulation and invites us to build at the heart of each community a place where the needs of each are met and all may flourish together.

With my best wishes to you all.

Nicholas



The Song of Mary

Luke 1.46-55

My soul proclaims the greatness of the Lord,
my spirit rejoices in God my Saviour;
he has looked with favour on his lowly servant.
From this day all generations will call me blessed;
the Almighty has done great things for me and holy is his name.

He has mercy on those who fear him,
from generation to generation.
He has shown strength with his arm
and has scattered the proud in their conceit,

Casting down the mighty from their thrones
and lifting up the lowly.
He has filled the hungry with good things
and sent the rich away empty.

He has come to the aid of his servant Israel,
to remember his promise of mercy,
The promise made to our ancestors,
to Abraham and his children for ever.