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Dear friends and colleagues across the Cathedral Community,

IN THE SAME PLACE

Acts 2.42-47

In the early centuries, Christians marked Easter tide in distinctive ways. Kneeling was typically banned during worship, as was reading the Old Testament. In its place - a practice re-introduced in the 20th century - many churches read volume two of Luke's Gospel, the book we know as the Acts of the Apostles. We are not doing that here at Chelmsford Cathedral this year, but you can see the logic. Acts records the impact of the resurrection of Jesus on the first Christians and invites us to consider our own response.

Acts repeatedly uses a specific phrase: "in the same place". That is translated in a whole variety of ways, but it is distinctive and characteristic. What does the church do? Acts tells us that its distinctive and characteristic activity is to gather "in the same place", or as it is typically translated, to "gather together".

I need to confess a personal interest here: it was reading Acts 2.42-47 as a 17-year-old that catapulted me from inherited church going to a living adult faith. And that phrase "in the same place" stands centre stage in those verses: "all those who believed were 'in the same place'". Those verses go even further in making it clear that the primary missionary activity of the church is gathering together 'in the same place' in prayer, learning and service. Luke says unambiguously that it is through the Christian community as it gathers to worship together, to learn together and to serve together that "the Lord added daily to those who were being saved 'in the same place'". Exactly the same distinctive and characteristic phrase 'in the same place' repeated twice in just three sentences. Luke is expecting us to notice.

I sometimes wonder whether it was through the impact of those verses on me over 40 years ago that - despite all the burdens of the office - God finally called me to be a Dean. Because at the heart of the Cathedral's mission is precisely that profound sense of place, public space where all are welcome, and - as we have discovered in a unique way over the last year - a shared space, a cathedral without walls.

The interim, provisional time we are living through raises a range of interesting and over-lapping questions - which is why after Pentecost we will be launching the Big Conversation in earnest. Somewhere close to the heart of that is the question of what we gather around; what it means for us to be "in the same place".

That's a question certainly for the Cathedral as we discern the shape of the future mission into which God is calling us. At the most basic level, what is the pattern of our gathering for worship to be? How do we want to shape the Cathedral's core ministry of hospitality and welcome as we seek to serve our city, region and diocese in a post pandemic landscape? How do we learn to listen to all the voices? How - in this week when Bishop Guli takes the reins of the Diocese of Chelmsford - are we to be together with her 'in the same place' to fulfil the Cathedral's core identity as the church of the Bishop? How do we gather around as she begins the Bishop's core task of discerning and developing the spiritual heart of all the communities we are here to serve, from Clacton on Sea to Canning Town; from Southend to Saffron Waldon?

On Friday evening we remembered Prince Philip at Evensong, as we have done in the daily prayer. We were treading carefully because - bizarrely - several of my fellow Deans were last week threatened with police action against them if their cathedrals insisted on celebrating commemoration services. I am deeply grateful that this was not the case for the region that we serve. And that Evensong on Friday - with appropriate prayers for Prince Philip and our life as a nation - told me something important about what we gather around, what we are for as Cathedral. 30 people - representing several different brands of the Christian faith along with the vice chair of the Essex Council of mosques, the Queen's representative in Essex, a young person who had completed the Duke of Edinburgh awards, elected and appointed civic leaders - gathered here, 'in the same place' to pray together.

Alongside Acts chapter 2, I'm also a big fan of the Kevin Costner epic Robin Hood, Prince of Thieves, however incongruously it filmed in the North East. One of my favourite scenes in the film is when a young boy hesitantly approaches Robin Hood's Arab companion, Azeem, played iconically by Morgan Freeman. The boy asks why God has "painted him". After a slight pause the man replies, "because Allah (which is after all the name Arabic Christians as well as Moslems use for God to this day) loves wondrous variety". Maybe that's another line we should add to our strategic plan. It is certainly something that we should place at the heart of the welcome we offer to all as we learn to gather in new ways, in a new landscape, 'in the same place.'

With my best wishes to you all.

Nicholas



WELCOME

This is simply a reminder that we are no longer asking people to register in order to come to worship at the Cathedral and very much want everyone to feel welcome as things continue to open up around us.