

**On a bright and sunny autumn day, on 6<sup>th</sup> September 1899, the Countess of Shaftesbury, resplendent in a wide brimmed hat, watched on as the vast foundation stone of St Anne’s Cathedral was lowered into its place. And in the sunshine, the Countess declared that the building of Belfast’s brand new cathedral had commenced. When that vast foundation block of gleaming white limestone was laid in the ground, Queen Victoria was in the 62<sup>nd</sup> year of her long reign. The Victorian age was drawing to an end.**

**Five years later, a new King, Edward VII had ushered in the Edwardian age. And on this day 1904, the sun was once again shining, This was the Day of the Consecration of the great Nave of Belfast Cathedral, as you can see it pictured in the Order of Service. On that day all the Bishops of the Church of Ireland were assembled here in Belfast. 198 of the clergy of the then United Diocese of Down, Dromore and Connor had gathered for a full day of services. This was a cathedral which expressed the self confidence of a new century. And it declared the self assurance of the Church of Ireland. This was the first cathedral to be conceived and constructed since disestablishment, built at the centre of one of the greatest industrial cities of the British Isles. This self confidence was expressed in the majesty of the Service of Consecration, in the packed cathedral, and in the astonishing collection gathered that day, totalling £3,000. In modern money that is £104,000! And I’m hoping for just such a collection today – Maybe!!**

**But the world of 1904 is NOT the world of 2024. A cathedral that was built by the great industrialists must now be a cathedral for the people of Belfast, and beyond, in all their variety and diversity and richness of origins. A cathedral which was packed to hear a 38 minute sermon, preached by the Bishop of Ripon (and don’t worry – here history is NOT going to repeat itself!), is now to be a place where Christianity must earn its right to be heard. Because in today’s world our voice must compete with many other religious voices, and also with those who stridently speak out for NO religion.**

**So what is the ROLE of this cathedral in the decades ahead? How can this cathedral strengthen the Church of Jesus Christ in the mid C21st? How can this cathedral be a resource for mission and outreach for the parishes and the dioceses which we were built to serve? These are FOUNDATIONAL questions. This is the bricks and mortar of Xn witness in the C21st.**

**St Peter, writing in Chapter 2 of his 1<sup>st</sup> Epistle declares this “Come to him, the Living Stone, though rejected by the people of his day, yet chosen and precious, prized in God’s sight. And so, like Living Stones, let yourselves be Built into a Spiritual House, to be a Holy Priesthood, offering sacrifices acceptable to God through Jesus Christ.” How are we to be Christ’s Living Stones, built as churches and cathedrals, a spiritual house and a holy priesthood, for the C21st?**

**Let me suggest that the history of THIS cathedral and the Mission of This cathedral gives us the Signs that we need for the future. So let me suggest that this cathedral is a place of AWE and a place of ENQUIRY, a place of DISCOVERY and a place of Christ centred SERVICE. And for this, in our cathedral, and in every one of our churches today, we must be INFUSED by the Holy Spirit's Call to Mission and Motivation for Outreach.**

**AWE. This cathedral was built to inspire awe and wonder in every person who enters through its great West doors. Awe at the scale of the building. Awe at the massive pillars marching toward the Choir and Sanctuary. Awe at the Stainless Steel Spire of Hope which pierces its glass ceiling as a visible sign suspended above the choir stalls to challenge all to hope in God's better way for our city and for our world. And awe at the music and worship offered for great celebrations like today, and offered with equal passion, in the quiet Evensong of a winter's night.**

**We live in a world that is in awe to technology: the possibilities of genetic engineering, and of artificial intelligence. And we live in a world which lives in Fear Filled awe at the violence of modern warfare, and the destructive power of Climate Change. But God calls us to be a Church of Living Stones, built in worshipful awe of God's love for us, Christ's sacrifice for us, and the Holy Spirit's call for us to faithful, self-giving discipleship. In small parish churches and in great cathedrals we are called to REDISCOVER our AWE for the love that God has for us, each and individually, together and in community.**

**How might we do this? In today's Gospel reading we find Jesus walking in the great Temple of Jerusalem. He was walking and talking in the colonnaded Portico of Solomon. This cathedral, with its marching arcades of pillars and arches, is designed to replicate the Roman architect which Jesus would have seen around him in Jerusalem. And there, among the pillars, the Jewish Leaders are Enquiring of Jesus, asking him foundational questions. "Jesus, how long will you keep us in suspense?" "Jesus, if you are the Messiah, then tell us plainly."**

**A cathedral is to be a place of ENQUIRY. A cathedral with its open doors, its local visitors and overseas tourists, is place filled with questions. But it is also to be a place open to the Questions of Faith. This is a place where people can slip in, almost unnoticed, where they can ask: Is Christianity for Me? Can the story of Jesus become MY story? Is Jesus that person who can heal my hurts, answer my doubts, share my burdens and inspire my life?**

**For the Church of the C21st, we must know if our answer to these questions is "Yes – Let us journey with you. Let us share with you that we know of Jesus" OR is it "I'm sorry, but the doors of this church are closed until next Sunday morning."**

**How then does a cathedral answer these enquiries? We must also be a place of DISCOVERY. Yes, everyday there will be visitors who discover about our history, or more about this cathedral as a place of ecumenical endeavour. But every church and every cathedral must also be that place where those who enquire about Jesus, then DISCOVER him. To discover him as the Creator of the Universe and the Saviour of our World, to discover him as the visible face of our Loving Heavenly Father, and the one who draws alongside each one who is hurting in the journey of life.**

**Jesus gave two answers to those who enquired of him in the Jerusalem Temple. First he replied radically and dangerously “The works I do, the miracles I have performed, the healing I have given and the signs I have shown, all in MY Father’s name, these all bear witness to who I AM: The word made flesh, the visible face of the living God. And then Jesus adds “YOU do not believe in me because you will not recognise my voice.” As Jesus said a few verses earlier: “I am the Good Shepherd. I know my own and my own know me.”**

**Discovery for you and me, and for the church of the C21st is when we discover, first how deeply and personally I am known by the living and risen Lord Jesus. And then, as one known, that we each are set on our own journey of discovery, so that every day we may KNOW MORE of Jesus.**

**Why? Because we are called by the Good Shepherd, to be built as Living Stones into that Spiritual House, that Royal Priesthood, which goes BEYOND our walls, and THROUGH our open doors: to serve, to care, to love and to proclaim. St Peter writes “You are a people belonging to God, in order that you may proclaim (Peter’s words are “Evangelise outwards”), the mighty acts of the one who called you out of darkness and into his Awesome Light.”**

**Those who celebrated the Consecration of this cathedral 120 years ago today, assumed Christianity to be the constant of civilisation. Today in 2024 we have no such self assured certainty. Our Christian future is not a given! Instead, it has to be won, it has to be earned, it has to be prayed for, and it has to be lived to the full.**

**A cathedral for the C21st is to be a place of Awe, Enquiry, Discovery and Christ Centred Service, sending us all out into the world of today. So then, whether as cathedrals or as parish churches, in our communities of faith, let us “Like Living Stones be built into a spiritual house, and a holy priesthood, in order that we may proclaim the mighty acts of him who has called us out of darkness and into his awesome light”. For this will be the foundational cornerstone on which the church of the twenty-first century can be built for Christ’s sake. Amen.**