

Today we come together to give thanks for 160 incredible years of ministry in this place. Amongst the many great institutions and industries of this town, this church has played an essential role in spiritually feeding and shaping this community; it is the fulfilment of a calling that those who have served and worshipped here should be immensely proud of and so, as I said last Sunday at St Paul's I now say to you: 'Well done, God's good and faithful servants'.

Made all the more blessed by the fact that I know a good many of you have been on an immense journey of sacrifice from where you were when closures were first spoken of to where you are now, and I offer that upon the altar for God's glory. I'm sure we can all look around and give thanks to those who have journeyed with and supported us.

This week I have been mindful that in and amongst all the processes and procedures and legalities, as I said in my pastoral letter, lie the most important things: God and people - relationships; we should never lose sight of those things as we come to terms with the grieving and healing process that is to follow today. Like all things there is a balance to be found between getting things done and pastoral care.

But this week I could feel my resolve weaken. Because on Tuesday we had our last mid-week service here and it was wonderful. A gathering of the regulars as well as those who couldn't make today, we were double the normal attendance.

I met a gentlemen called Gareth who told me his family have been attending and serving this church since 1906 and pointed to the pew they had used all those years (only an Anglican would claim such a title!).

As he told me of each generation of his forbears and what they had done, I couldn't help but focus on Gareth's own son beside him as his dad spoke, here to bid this old building farewell. And the enormity of what we do today became almost overwhelming.

Glad that my resolve hadn't completely disintegrated I then met a guy who brought a photo album with him that showed Lewis and Ian as choir boys here. In that simple photo the investment of people's lives, resources and emotions that have been poured into this place, as they have sought to serve God, hit home and, again, became almost overwhelming.

I name these things not because I want to turn our thanksgiving into mourning, of course I don't, but because they are at the heart of what it is to be the real church – human beings filled with emotion, hopes and dreams and, in times such as these, the need for each other's support and the guidance of the Spirit, the Comforter.

Because today we feel most keenly the reality of what it is to pick up our cross and follow the Lord in sacrificial service for the greater good. And yet, just like he did with his Son, it is the faithfulness and grace of our God, a God who has walked the road before us, and walks with us now, that brings hope and stability when all around us seems lost; that gives us the strength to journey on with thanks and the courage to ask God 'Ok then, so what now?' It may not feel like it, but it will!

Last week the stories of the Prophet Haggai encouraging exiled Judah to rebuild God's temple to show the world that God had not abandoned his people, and the tale of Jesus raising the temple of his body in three days, came to me set for the service. Today's readings however I have chosen with the themes of journey and what it is to be human in mind, fuelled by my conversations with people this week.

Because there are some people that feel today is the end of the road, that we have been cast out into the desert. But it is our response to today, and the challenges set in our readings that will define whether we exist in a desert or a fertile plain; not the closure of this building!

Our first reading records the call of Samuel and is used at many ordination services: Samuel had a choice to follow God's call or not. Responding to an unrecognised voice, working with another person of faith to see the truth, Samuel committed his life to a God and a mission which doesn't waver because of life's circumstance.

In trust he utters the words of all who would follow in faith: '**Speak Lord**, for your **servant is listening!**' And God response? 'I will not let any of your words fall to the ground'. That has been happening here for 160 years and today we are called to listen and obey again, lest we find ourselves in the desert.

Then our Gospel reading that encourages us through Peter, another person who has been on a journey himself. When all felt lost, faced with adversity and the repeated questioning about the validity of his love, we hear God's trust in him: 'Go feed my lambs, go tend my sheep, go feed my sheep – **come follow me**' - for there is work to be done. And we will journey on with thanks for all this place has done in setting the foundations of the future ministry of God's church here in Castleford.

Today, as we give thanks and discern God's future call on each of our lives, God asks each of us: 'How will you respond to my call?' I hope your prayer is the same as has guided the PCC and myself through this whole process: 'Here I am Lord, speak, for your servant is listening', just as it was for the people of this church 160 years ago. But remember this, wherever you are spiritually or emotionally, God has travelled with his people through desert and plain, and is ever faithful!

I now wish to give the last word of the last sermon to be delivered in this place, to one of its faithful members and one of the people this church and community owe so much, our Warden Ian Fletcher. As I offer it to you I in turn offer him my deepest appreciation for his support, which has been invaluable:

This church has been consecrated for 160 years and built for and by the people this parish and although it is about to close to worship, we should celebrate the good fellowship that has been had by successive congregations. Hightown has always felt like a happy church. For our 125th anniversary we produced a history (copies are still available) and had three days of celebration fundraising organised by our priest and the ladies of our congregation. The building of our new hall inspired the ladies to organise a weekly lunch club fundraiser, which was well attended across the parish. I would like to mention Norah and Peter Price for their tireless work, Peter and Jane Harvey as Wardens and Treasurer, and Jack Woodall our organist and his wife Rita for their dedication to our church. A special thank you has to be said to Pamela Atkinson for her continuing support for keeping our front lawn neat and tidy, not forgetting Tom Precious for his weekly winding of our clock.