

Big World Fair : Truro Cathedral : 20 April 2024

Opening Address by Bishop Hugh Nelson

In 1851, Queen Victoria stepped onto a raised platform at the centre of an extraordinary glass building known as 'the Crystal Palace' and declared 'open' the Great Exhibition of the Works of Industry - which has come to be known as The Great Exhibition.

She later described that day at the Great Exhibition, held in the famous Crystal Palace, a huge glass cathedral 3 times the size of St Paul's, as 'one of the greatest and most glorious days of our life.'

And I want to welcome you to this great and most glorious World Fair today. Thank you for coming.

I don't know if you will leave this cathedral declaring it to be 'one of the greatest and most glorious days of your life', but I am confident that your time here will be a gift to you, and that the things you will hear and see, and the conversations that you will have, will be rich and important.

There is of course one great difference between the Great Exhibition and our World Fair here today - other than the location and the presence of the Queen. That event was designed as a huge British Imperial opportunity to show off. The exhibits and exhibitors were there to introduce the British public to the astonishing variety of the world that was becoming better connected at an astonishing rate, but underlying it all was a clear message about British domination and superiority.

This is not that. Today we gather to celebrate our diversity and the ways in which we can learn from one another across nations, cultures, languages and traditions. We're here to discover what people who have a different perspective on life might have to teach us.

That's why Bishop Philip, when he was here, gave the church in Cornwall a priority - the most surprising perhaps of his 5 priorities - to become a church that '*rejoices in strong, warm and mutually encouraging international links*'. And he said that because he knew that the local church belongs to a global church, and that every part of that great and glorious global family has something to teach every other part, and it's only together that we can know what it is to really be 'church'.

I used to live in Crystal Palace, named after the great park where the glass Exhibition building was relocated from its original home in Hyde Park in 1854, and where it burnt down in 1936. But before that I have had the privilege of living in and learning from many other places and cultures.

I was born in Uganda, where my Dad was working in development. I only managed 10 days there, as Idi Amin was in power and it had become a dangerous place to live, so my Mum and

I left as soon after my birth as we were able to fly. After leaving we went on to live in Mauritius, and then Brussels. And as a young adult I spent a year teaching in a very rural school in South Africa - just as apartheid was crumbling, and then a time with the Anglican Church in Lesotho.

I don't remember anything of the first two places, but I'm sure they have shaped who I am in ways I will never know. But I remember Brussels, South Africa and Lesotho, and I will always be grateful for the experience of being a stranger in communities that welcomed me, and gave me a home and from whom I learnt more about life, faith and what it means to be alive.

And those experiences which I am sure many of you have had as well – and the kinds of opportunities that a day like this gives us - are more important than ever. The world is a more dangerous place now than it was a few years ago. And there are powerful voices telling us that 'those people' are different to us, and that difference is dangerous, and that they might even be a threat to us - and so we'd better be careful and stick together, and perhaps we'd better make sure that 'those people' don't get to be part of 'us'.

And that way of thinking and acting is powerfully tempting. Because we all want to belong; the need for community and shared identity is hard wired into our DNA. And it's easy to build a strong sense of belonging by identifying a threat and gathering together against it.

And so the challenge, which is a very real one for the world at the moment, is to find ways of belonging; ways of nurturing a strong sense of community built on cultures and traditions that are properly rooted to the people and places where we live, without having to find someone else to be the threat that brings us together.

And Christians should get that better than anyone else. After all, to be a Christian is to follow a man who was deeply rooted in his culture and traditions and who never set foot outside his own small country, and who Christians declare to be the one in whom all people can find their truest and deepest identity.

Jesus tells us that our cultures are important, that the way in which communities develop unique stories, habits and traditions matter. And he says, belong to me and you are adopted into a global family in which there is neither Jew nor Greek, in which who you are is discovered and defined by your belonging to me.

To be a Christian is to be a dual passport holder; we belong to real, specific places and to the people of God; we are citizens of our own nation and of the kingdom of heaven.

And that means that Christians are all called to belong locally, to love the cultures and traditions which have shaped and nurtured us and which are the place of God's grace and activity, and to love and serve the people who are part of those communities with us, while also belonging to a great and glorious global family in which our nationality, ethnicity, language and culture do not define us.

We are called to rejoice in our diversity and to celebrate our shared identity in Christ.

And so it is a great privilege to welcome you to this Big World Fair, and to invite you to make the best possible use of the resource and opportunities that it offers; have conversations, dance to the music, learn from someone different to you.

And I hope you leave saying it was indeed, a 'great and glorious day'.