

**On this Easter Vestry Sunday, I want to take you back to an incident in my own life which is deeply etched into my memory. It was 1969, and my father had just bought a brand new car. It was a dark green Austin Maxi, Reg: CIJ 9186. My dad drove his brand new car back from the garage and parked it in the drive at the front door of our house. The drive was on a slope, and there was a brick wall at the bottom of the slope.**

**I was 8 years old and fascinated with this shiny new car. I wanted to know how it worked and how to make it go! So I borrowed the keys, opened the door and sat in the driver's seat, turning the steering wheel and pretending to drive. Then I wondered what would happen if I let off the shiny hand break, which I did! Suddenly I discovered for myself Newton's 2<sup>nd</sup> Law of Motion:  $F=MA$ ! Where M is the mass of a brand new Austin Maxi, A is the rate of acceleration down a hill, and F is the Force with which my Dad's brand new car was going to smash into the wall!!**

**Fortunately at that moment my Dad came out of the house, flung open the driver's door, grabbed the hand break and demanded of me "SON, WHAT ON EARTH ARE YOU DOING?"**

**This morning, on our Easter Vestry Sunday 2022, I want to ask the very same question: "What on earth are we doing?" As a cathedral, "Why are we here? What are we about? What on earth is this cathedral for?"**

**I ask that question in the context of a very different sort of impact. Not the impact of my dad's new car against a wall, but the impact that the Covid pandemic has had on the life of this cathedral in 2021, the year under consideration at today's Easter Vestry. And also the ongoing impact that will shape the future direction and priorities for this cathedral.**

**And what a Year it has been in 2021! From Christmas 2020 to July 2021 our cathedral operation was largely shut down. Services were on-line or with severely restricted capacity. The office was operated under "home working", and a number of our staff remained on furlough. The cathedral was closed to tourists and events. At the same time the government was still paying 80% of wages, giving an income in the year of £14,000. And the RCB had given us a loan of £150,000. Across the year, the number of staff employed by the cathedral continued to fall, most notably with the departure of Jack Wilson from the Music Department in September, and by December with the departure of both our Business Department staff, Holly Wilson and Lorna Towns.**

**Set against this, we had a one-off windfall during Lockdown when the cathedral was hired as a location for a Netflix production. For this we received a one-off payment of £130,000. All this means that later, Tom Smith our Finance Officer, will report a highly unusual operating profit for the cathedral in 2021 of £69,000.**

However, let us not be lulled in a false sense of security. The financial circumstances of 2021 were highly unusual and will not be repeated. Instead we are predicted to fall back to our old ways for 2022, with a projected operating loss for 2022 of up to £230,000. Another way of looking at this, is that every Sunday under our current financial model costs £2,000 for fees, salaries, heat and light. Each year over the past 5 years our cathedral has operated at a loss of between £180,000 and £250,000 each year, a total approaching £1 million!

And how have those losses been paid for? Up to now by eating into the historic financial reserves built up by previous generations. We have been selling the family silver simply to keep going day to day. But if we do not change our ways, then one day the money will run out. And at current rates that could be in 8 year's time. That will be when the brand new car, running down the hill hits the brick wall.

So today we **MUST** ask ourselves "What on earth are we doing?" Over the past year, your cathedral board has been giving a lot of attention to answer that question. And the answer they have arrived at is this: "Under God, in the Way of Jesus Christ, enabled by the Holy Spirit, Belfast Cathedral is to be a Spiritual Centre at the heart of the City, with the City at its heart."

How? "Through worship and prayer, outreach and service we are to Serve God's purposes, Serve our Dioceses and Serve this city and society."

What we must not be is a people who serve ourselves. We cannot be a cosy club of likeminded people coming together only on a Sunday. So then, what on earth are we called to be, and called to be doing if we are to build God's Kingdom and Grow God's Church for the 2<sup>nd</sup> quarter of the Twenty-first century?

Here we turn to Jesus' words spoken to Judas (not Iscariot) at the Last Supper, which we heard earlier. Jesus said, "Those who love me will keep my word, and my Father will love them. We will come to them and make our home with them." The phrase "make our home with them" translates a favourite word in John's Gospel. The word means Remain in me, or Abide in me. When we are faithful to God and God's ways, then God, as Heavenly Father, as Risen Son and enabling Holy Spirit is **AT HOME** with us & what we do.

A little later Jesus says, "I am going away, and I am coming to you"! This is not a contradiction. This is a promise from God. Within 24 hours of speaking these words, Jesus was going to be taken away from his disciples to be crucified and killed. But three days later, in the resurrection of Easter Day, Jesus would come back to his disciples, teaching, empowering and encouraging them, making himself at home. But then at the Ascension, which we shall mark on Thursday, Jesus would again be taken away from the physical sight of his disciples and from us. But then again, through the gift of the Holy Spirit at Pentecost, and through the life of the Church over 2,000 years, Jesus

would come back and REMAIN with us, calling us to be his body in the world, calling us to serve him powerfully and effectively in everything we do and are.

How? How are we to be the presence of Christ in a post-Covid world? How is our cathedral community to prove that Jesus remains alive and relevant in a Cost of Living Crisis, made far worse by the brutal war in Ukraine? How is our cathedral to be the Body of Christ to a province without a functioning Executive? How?

Let me list 3 ways:

First - We are NOT meant to squander the resources of the past by spending them until they run out. God needs our ministry and presence not just for today, but for tomorrow as well. We must become wise stewards of what we have received from the past, so that we can BUILD BETTER for the future, God's future and our future.

Second – As a cathedral community we must always look OUTWARDS to grow our congregation. We must serve the 15,000 students who will finally arrive in our area in September 2022. We must reach out to the young twenty somethings who are drawn to live and work in the vibrant city of Belfast. We must have a passion to bring new families into the life of our cathedral family, including through church music and our cathedral choirs. It means building on the success of our children's choirs so that each young person who sings in our children's choirs has a pathway and ambition to sing in our adult choir. Then the gateway of singing will become the gateway to that lifelong love for this place for our children and you their families, as in previous generations.

And Finally- We must be a cathedral that Serves our community and our world. Whether through the Xmas Black Santa Appeal, or more recently through the money raised for the Dean's Lent Appeal for Ukraine, we are recognised as a cathedral that serves. It is a service that demands much from us as a cathedral family, so that the lives of many others can be transformed. The £160,000 raised for the refugees of Ukraine shows us at our best.

But in each of these three ways we see the answer to that question "What on earth are you doing?"

In the Book of Revelation, in the passage that was our first reading, John gives us a vision of a world where the Risen Jesus rests, remains and is at home in our place and our time. John writes "I saw no temple in the city, for the temple is the Lord God Almighty and the Lamb. And the city has no need for sun or moon for the Glory of the Lord is its light, and its lamp is Jesus the Lamb."

What on earth are we doing? You and I, the people of this cathedral are called in 2022 to be the Light of the Risen Christ which shines in this city. We are to be the Spire of Hope which is seen from every point of the compass, in worship, prayer and teaching, in outreach and service.

And this is a call not just for the person in the seat beside you. This is a call for the person sitting in your seat today.