

London Challenge 2012 Launch

Richard, Bishop of London: St Paul's Cathedral - 08/02/07



“I saw the Holy City coming down from God out of heaven.”

Revelation 21 presents us with a powerful vision for these next five years of the twenty first century. We are not alone of course in looking into the future. Last week a businessman barked at me “We’ve got thirty years to save this planet, what are we going to do about it, bish?” I love the urgency of London.

But looking forward thirty years here are some the things which we will not want to hear said when this Cathedral has been turned into a Super Casino:

“We have managed to survive the last thirty years here and there in Kensington and Chelsea – what a pity the church has largely disappeared in the poorer boroughs.”

“What a pity we lost the opportunities given to us by church schools. It was a shame that we did not fight together to stop them being secularised.”

“Thirty years ago of course the Diocese of London was quite a player in London life, now the banner of faith is held by the Chinese Christians and the Muslims – thank God for them. It was a mistake for the Church of England in London to stay within the diminishing East Saxon ghetto.”

“It is a shame that we did not rise to the vision of an interconnected world but instead have seen the effects of two decades of avoidable poverty and disease in some of the world’s most vulnerable areas. It would have been good to have done more about our African links.”

“I feel ashamed to live in London now that it is chiefly known as the porno-capital of the world.”

This is all going to happen and this will all be said in thirty years time, unless we open ourselves to the Spirit and live as a church with the biblical vision of building together the Holy City, founded on the sacrifice of the Son of God but whose towers reach out of sight into the vastness of God’s love.

As well as the urgency I love about London there is the message of the sandwich shop “Pret a Manger”. *Thanks to the excellence of the training and the clarity of the vision there is a culture of service and welcome to any hungry sandwich fancier.* “Pret” of course means ready and I find myself asking – what would it be like if I had more of that spirit.

The vision of the Holy City has been the climax of the New Testament for many centuries but because Christians showed so little urgency in envisioning and building the Holy City and so little readiness to serve Christ in one another, the initiative passed to others. They were not so interested in the Holy City whose foundations are the twelve apostles of the Lamb instead they set about building Heaven on Earth.

That is what some people have been trying to do in Europe for at least two centuries through political religions. These religions have held up class, race or nation as sacred and the supporters of these political religions have attempted to build Heaven on Earth by domination and exclusion. Others stood by paralysed and horrified as heaven turned to hell.

We have endured god-delusion – that most dangerous delusion of all that regards human beings as gods and believes that the whole earth simply exists to be exploited by its human masters and possessors. The attempt has also been made to persuade us that man does live by bread alone and becomes happy by the accumulation of things and that this life is all we’ve got.

The world that is fabricated out of such ideas does not of course satisfy the best in us and unsurprisingly we are witnessing a widespread flight into fantasy. One significant web site which has been given a good deal of publicity recently is candidly called “Second Life”. You register and pay your dues and construct an “animated avatar”, a version of yourself who can live the life of your dreams. As one of the founders said - “We are competing with the real world to create a better place for your mind to live.”

In this Diocese of London we have hundreds of real not virtual sites where the Holy City is being built. They are called parishes. The emphasis in some national publicity on novelty and fresh expressions should not distract us. The foundation of the Holy City is Jesus Christ and the building bricks are the communities assembled by the Holy Spirit. The very first commitment of the London Challenge is “We will support traditional ways of being church and encourage the highest standards of worship, witness and service.”

To look forward again over the thirty years which the businessman says we have to save the planet, we expect to hear the following praises echoing around this Cathedral.

“Thank God for the strength of family and community life; thank God for the children of our community and in our schools; thank God for the prosperity which enables us to be generous; thank God that Jesus Christ is the talk of this town.”

To open the door so that God can bring all this to pass is why the bishops, clergy and laity gathered together last November in Synod to endorse the various commitments in London Challenge 2012.

The period of London life that chiefly concerns us tonight is 2007-2012 leading up to the Games. It is a period that will demand from us all the kind of personal discipline which St Paul describes in 1 Corinthians. “Everyone that competes in the Games goes into strict training. They do it to obtain a laurel wreath that wilts; we do it to get a crown that will last for ever. Therefore I do not run like a man running aimlessly nor fight like a man who is just beating the air.”

The London Challenge is a distillation of the vision we share and what is happening in different parts of the Diocese. The whole needs to be seen to be believed and being seen gives birth to even greater confidence. The London Challenge is an **add up** exercise not an **add on** demand imposed on busy people.

The DVD enclosed with the London Challenge brochure is an encouraging snapshot of what God is doing the length and breadth of the Diocese. Please do not leave tonight without your copy. Show it and discuss it with your friends and pinpoint where you and your community are contributing to the general construction work on the Holy City site. Have DVD parties in your home and in your hall and in your church.

Then the brochure is just the flame on the candle. There is no intention that the London Challenge conversation should be one way. The brochure points you to the web site which is up and running now. Every commitment is connected with a bulletin board designed to allow you to post details of what holy city building work is being undertaken on your construction site. If we describe our own courses and ideas, we shall avoid unnecessary duplication while cherishing bio-diversity. We can develop a more precise blueprint for the Holy City together and with it a clearer and clearer vision of what it will look like when it comes in Harrow and Brent.

But let us have no illusions. If we do not build together, we shall atomise, fall to pieces as a church and we shall be consumed morsel by morsel. We shall need a spirit of generosity which stretches beyond the boundaries of parishes, areas, the diocese, even the UK, if we are to realise the potential that Christ has entrusted to us. We need resources to be shared in response to a common vision which embraces the whole of life and all the citizens of this world city and not just my little bit of it.

One of my most exiting visits last year was to St Aldhelm’s Edmonton. The parish has installed solar panels and the children using the church hall are treated to a visual display of how much energy their church is contributing to the national grid. This is an acted parable. At the most practical level it would be good if as many churches as possible equipped themselves to capture the energy of sun or wind to generate more sustainable energy but all churches should be equipped to receive the sustainable energy which flows from God which gives eagles wings and fresh inspiration to the weary. We should be built together as communities which not only receive spiritual energy but which can communicate that energy to others for the common good just as St Aldhelm replenishes the national grid.

The light and peace of Christ be with you all
With you Lord is the well of life; in your light we shall see light. Amen.