



A sermon for Choral Evensong marking the beginning of the Cathedral Choir Year at Wells Cathedral, preached on Saturday 6 September 2025 by the Very Reverend Toby Wright, Dean of Wells.

Joy woven through eternity

May my words be faithful to the written word and may the written word lead us to the Living Word, Jesus the merciful One. Amen.

As we begin this new choir year, we are reminded that the calling of a Cathedral is unlike any other. It is a vocation both ancient and contemporary: to be a house of prayer, a centre of music, a locus of mission, a place of civic identity, a focus of joy and a sign of the Kingdom of God in the midst of the city and the county.

In 2 Samuel 9, King David welcomes Mephibosheth to his table, restoring dignity, belonging, and hope. This is the heart of Cathedral life: to open a table where all are welcomed, regardless of weakness, difference, or background. It is not just hospitality but transformation—a vocation of lifting others into the fullness of God's grace. You may well not know, but Mephibosheth was David's best friend Jonathan's disabled child.

Jonathan had been killed in battle (1 Sam 31) and David reached out to get the child to come to him. His first words to the child are: 'Don't be afraid'. New Choristers, hear those words for you – 'Don't be afraid'. This space is one for you and there is always a space for you. There's lots to learn, but each of you – and your families – are always welcome.

Here at Wells, our strategy expresses this vocation in four strands: Christianity, Connection, Culture, and Commerce.

- **Christianity:** At the core, our worship is rooted in the Incarnation—God dwelling among us.
- **Connection:** We exist not for ourselves but to weave together city, county, and nation.
- **Culture:** Our music, art, and heritage are gifts that shape society's imagination.
- **Commerce:** We do this in ways that are sustainable, stewarding resources faithfully for the flourishing of future generations.

Our values of being *Welcoming, Caring, and Respectful* embody the same spirit David showed to Mephibosheth. They also reflect the early Church in Acts (from which our second reading came), where joy and hospitality drew people into God's story. And our aspiration here in this place is clear: to be the most Joyful Cathedral in the country. For joy is not mere cheerfulness but the deep confidence that God is at work in us, through us, and often despite us.

Recent statistics from the Church of England show that cathedrals across our country are becoming crucial centres of recovery and renewal. Midweek worship in cathedrals has grown by over 15 per cent this last year, with both children and adults finding a place of belonging and prayer. Musical life flourishes, with more choirs now than before the pandemic. Visitor numbers are higher than ever, so in every corner of England, Cathedrals are living out this vocation: as civic, cultural, and spiritual centres, where music, worship, and service draw the community into God's presence.

And so it is fitting that in this Cathedral, music is not just ornament—it is vocation. Herbert Howells understood this when he set words of Ursula Vaughan Williams' text for his *Hymn to St Cecilia*, our anthem tonight. Twice in that extraordinary work he highlights the paradox of music: on the one hand, it is full of ecstatic joy, rhythms that dance with life; on the other, it bears moments of aching dissonance and fragility. In both, the music becomes prayer. That is your task as choristers and choir: to carry both joy and sorrow into the presence of God, so that those who listen may find themselves lifted and healed.

And again, Howells gives us a vision of vocation when he writes of music as something that is both born of heaven and yet sung on earth. As a Howells fan, his soaring melodies and luminous choral textures seem to me to unite angels and mortals in one song. That is what you are doing each time you put on your cassock and surplice—joining the voices of this congregation with the voices of saints and angels, weaving together earth and heaven in praise.

Professor William Whyte describes cathedrals as “*repositories of memory and identity*,” holding the story of a community and helping imagine a future. For Cathedrals hold both tradition and renewal in tension - acting as both anchor and horizon for the Jesus community, and those who come alongside as explorers and adventurers with us. A Cathedral is called not only to preserve ancient rhythms of prayer, but to let them expand outward, engaging with culture, community, and commerce, announcing the good news afresh in every generation.

To the families and supporters, thank you. Without your sacrifices this vocation could not flourish. We are indebted to you all.

To the choir and musicians, remember this: your singing is both ancient and new. It joins voices across way more than 800 years in this place, stretching back into the mists of Christian prayer, which we know has been offered on this site since Roman times, and it also speaks afresh to the world today. Like Philip in Acts, your song proclaims Christ in a new age. Like David at his table, your music makes space for those who long to belong.

So may your voices this year echo with joy; reverberate with holiness, and carry the healing power of God into this Cathedral, this city, this county and this nation. As we begin our new choir year, may you sing with David's generosity, with Philip's boldness, and with Mary's faithful yes to God. And may the music of this Cathedral continue to be a place of restoration, mission, and holiness—a song of joy for our time and a song of joy woven through eternity:

so from the earth another song shall rise

to meet your own in heaven's long delight.

Amen.

Toby Wright, Dean of Wells

6 September 2025