



**A sermon for Choral Evensong at Wells Cathedral,
preached on Saturday 5 September by the Very
Reverend Toby Wright, Dean of Wells.**

Freedom, winging wildly

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.

When Hensley Henson became Bishop of Hereford in 1918, he asked the Chapter a simple question: *what is the purpose of the Cathedral?* Dissatisfied with their answers, he later remarked that he learned more from his butler than from the Chapter itself, noting: *"The right use to be made of the Cathedral foundation has long perplexed the bishops and constitutes a problem which none has yet succeeded in solving."*¹

A century later, the question remains. What is the vocation of a Cathedral? Historically, cathedrals were centres of worship, learning, music and mission. They gathered people into communion and sent them out again in service of Christ. The question still shapes us today as we seek to be a joyful Cathedral, serving Wells, Somerset and beyond.

Our first reading offers the image of a stone engraved by God. The Fathers often saw such stones as pointing to Christ himself. Yet perhaps the image also tells us something about a Cathedral. This place exists to be a stone upon which God continues to write. Generation after generation comes here seeking meaning and hope, discovering that God's deepest communication is not an idea but an encounter.

The builders of Wells filled this place with inscriptions: saints, glass, geometry, proportion, and light. All seek to make visible the invisible Word. Yet perhaps the most remarkable inscription of all is not carved in stone but sung in sound. For music cannot be possessed - it exists only as gift. It sounds, vanishes, and yet leaves its mark behind. The stones of this Cathedral have endured for centuries; the music must be created anew each day. Every psalm, anthem and response is written again, not in granite but in human lives.

¹ Howe E, *Heritage and Renewal* (London: Church House Publishing, 1994), p.187

The science behind this is remarkable. Music shapes memory, attention, anticipation and emotion. Singing affects wellbeing and reduces stress. Our minds are shaped by patterns of sound. Yet the deeper question is why music possesses such power at all. Why is the universe intelligible? Why do mathematical patterns describe reality so beautifully? Scientists continue to marvel that the cosmos is ordered in ways the human mind can understand.

Christians have long seen that order as reflecting the eternal Word through whom all things were made. For Christians, music is therefore more than entertainment. It is one way creation participates in the life of God. Augustine spoke of a hidden harmony woven through creation itself.² Long before modern physics revealed the mathematical order of the universe, theology spoke of creation as a cosmos rather than a chaos: an ordered beauty held together in God.

The builders of Wells understood that instinctively. This Cathedral is not simply a container for worship: it is theology in stone and its music serves the same purpose. At its deepest level, church music is not performance but alignment: human voices learning to tune themselves to something beyond themselves. Indeed, what science now confirms, theology has long understood. Human beings are shaped by what they repeatedly hear and attend to. The question is not whether we shall be formed, but by what. The Gospel seeks to write its story upon our hearts.

That is one of the great vocations of Cathedral music. For the challenge facing our age is not that people know too much science. It is that many have forgotten how to wonder. Cathedral music restores wonder. It reminds us that reality is deeper than utility, richer than consumption and more beautiful than productivity.

Here, a child and a Nobel Prize-winning physicist may stand side by side and recognise truths which can be sung long before they can be explained. That brings us to today's New Testament passage. When Jesus places a child among the disciples, he is not simply teaching humility. He is revealing the Kingdom, for greatness is found not in domination but in participation, not in power but in communion.

That is why choristers matter. Since children formed the choir which led to our school founding in 909, here, children stand at the centre and remind the rest of us how to receive, how to listen and how to wonder. And perhaps this reveals something of the vocation of a Cathedral itself. As the seat of the Bishop's ministry, it gathers people into communion and reaches out across the diocese. It stands at the meeting point of inheritance and imagination, keeping faith with the saints who have gone before while opening doors for those yet to come.

The Cathedral's calling is not merely to preserve the ancient song of prayer but to let that song resonate through the life of our communities, so that the Gospel may be heard afresh in every generation. So, we return to Henson's question: what is the purpose of a Cathedral? Perhaps its vocation is simply this: to make visible and audible the life of the Kingdom of God as our primary purpose. To be a place where

² Augustine, Book 6 of *De Musica*

wonder is cultivated. A place where the eternal Word may still be heard. A place where beauty, prayer, music, and truth converge.

For whenever Evensong is sung, words and melody, mathematics and mystery, science and faith are woven together. Beneath the noise of our age, another harmony may be heard: the eternal Word through whom all things were made, and in whom all things hold together.³

Perhaps that is the answer that eluded Henson's Chapter: the vocation of a Cathedral is to help people hear that deeper music. And, hearing it, discover for themselves (in Sassoon's unforgettable phrase from our anthem) *freedom, winging wildly*.⁴

The vocation of a Cathedral Choir is to sing that deeper music, to open us to wonder, and to allow our lives to be engraved by God. So Welcome back families and supporters. Welcome back, Vicars' Choral, Scholars, Chaperones and Organists. And welcome back, Choristers.

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Dean of Wells

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³ Colossians 1.16-17

⁴ From the anthem: Everyone suddenly burst out singing;
And I was filled with such delight
As prisoned birds must find in freedom,
Winging wildly across the white
Orchards and dark-green fields; on – on – and out of sight.
Siegfried Sassoon (1886–1967)