

The restoration of St Paul's Cathedral: A presentation

Melbourne Anglican Synod

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A first step: safety. A first leap: faith.

Bp John Stewart used to tell a joke: When Archbishop Rayner came to Melbourne, the diocese stood on a precipice. Since then we have taken a great step forward. In the case of St Paul's, the precipice is more of a chasm and the step forward is to be more of a "leap", a leap of faith which takes us to the other side, to a new plane.

The need for restoration of the building is a given. Without restoration the building is unsafe: unsafe masonry, unsafe electrics, unsafe - because inadequate - lighting, unsafe fire protection services. But no Cathedral, indeed no building, exists to be safe; safety is simply a condition we expect from our buildings be they houses, theatres or churches. The Cathedral does not need restoration so that it can be safe - it needs to be safe so that it may serve its purpose which is to bear witness to the Good News of God in Jesus Christ. It needs to be safe so that it may serve as a focus for unity in this diocese. It needs to be safe so that it may effectively respond to the contemporary challenge to which God is calling us. The building needs to be safe because the work of the Gospel is not safe, the arena in which the church must now minister is not safe.

The new plane

So what is this new plane on which we hope to stand? Bringing the building up to scratch is about maintenance. The Chapter is very clear that the call of the Gospel in our time is not a call to maintenance but a call to mission. So the question for the Chapter is: how can we use this crisis as an opportunity rather than as a disaster? A victory rather than a defeat?

St Paul's given a welcoming look

Across the road from the Great West Doors (so-called, though they face south) is an enormous and extremely exciting development called Federation Square. It is a development which is expected to bring some 5 million additional people annually into the Cathedral's environs. Already we estimate that St Paul's welcomes some ¼ million people each year. These are visitors from all round the world. Some come to St Paul's as committed Christians, to see what a Christian Cathedral in Aus. looks like. Some are on the fringes of Christian life, some quite outside it from other faith traditions, and some would claim no faith allegiance at all. St Paul's draws more seekers after God into its space than any other church in the diocese. Its potential for evangelism is thus extraordinary. And with the additional numbers drawn by Federation Square, this opportunity can only increase.

But go to Federation Square and look across the road. What do you see? You do not see there a building opening its warm heart to the world. You see instead a stark 'west end' and a closed Great West Door without any sign of access. So one opportunity for mission is to fling wide the gates. An idea being explored by Chapter is to move the Rood Screen still further into the Narthex so that it becomes an entrance. Between it and the wooden doors, a glassed-in-area would allow the Great

West Doors to be opened, giving the people entry whilst keeping out the dirt and noise from Flinders Street.

In the open front door enough?

Clearly, a “we’re here for you” look is vital if we are to pick up the challenge of evangelism - vital but not sufficient. An open front door does not of itself promise anything other than access.

St Paul’s is a notoriously dark and cavernous building. If people are to look from across the road and see that the building is open, they will be encouraged too by a feeling that it is a place of warmth and light. The fact that the electrical system, some parts of which are 70 years old, must be renewed does more than provide an opportunity; it demands a response. A Cathedral building like St Paul’s should itself speak of Gospel truth, that “there’s a wideness in God’s mercy, that there is grace enough for thousands and that in Jesus our lives can be all sunshine in the sweetness of our Lord,” as the hymn *Zum Frieden* expresses it. The opportunity to re-light the interior will express something of that spaciousness, that sunshine and sweetness, that hospitality of which the building must speak. With the lighting will come the cleaning of the interior stonework, stained with a century of grime.

Bright lights do not salvation make!

About a fortnight ago some fifteen members of Chapter, together with the architect Richard Falkinger, met on a Saturday morning to do some creative, theologically informed, mission-oriented brainstorming. An open west door, access for the disabled, cleaning and lighting which shows off the building and facilitates seeing – all these were affirmed. But so what? These things are obvious. Let’s think beyond the obvious. A theology of mission in our day probably involves creating a space which has at least a modicum of flexibility. Would it be possible, we asked, to have a space within the Cathedral which is readily adaptable to more experimental worship forms? a place where forums can be held? a space where exhibitions can be staged?

The pews are of course a problem but, what if some of the pews in the west (southerly) end of the nave could be dispensed with and replaced with more user-friendly chairs? This has happened in almost all English Cathedrals despite heritage constraints.

In helping the Cathedral to tell the story of the Christian journey and commitment, would it be possible to move the font to a more central position, closer to the one Butterfield had in mind, either in the narthex or at the west-end of the nave? That way the “pilgrimage building” would tell a story of life through death to all who entered it.

Much more could be said... Currently the car park, providing space for only about 20 cars since the Mason’s Yard arrived, is one of the most wilfully extravagant, under-utilized pieces of expensive real-estate in Melbourne. What more creative things could we do with that space? Could it be turned into a place of beauty, a calm oasis in the busy heart of Melbourne? Would it be possible to build a Visitor’s Centre on it, a place of hospitality offering food and drink, and build a car park underneath it? Is there value in thinking of building a crypt underneath the Cathedral nave to house a display area?

Some current work

The Lazarus Centre at St Paul’s is part of the Cathedral’s mission to the homeless and hungry. Could such a new building as has just been mentioned house a renewed and enlarged Lazarus Centre? Could it house too a Cathedral Education Centre, a project currently under consideration by Chapter and for which Anglican schools around the diocese are showing much enthusiasm?

All these ideas, and many more besides, were considered by that group meeting on a Saturday morning recently. Nothing has been decided. That is not because, as someone has said of the Church of England, that we have acquired institutions to do everything with decisions, except take them. No, having been given what looked like a problem, we are determined to see in it an offer and an opportunity, God-given. We are determined to move forward, but to do so in consultation with the Cathedral's congregations, with the parishes and regions of the diocese as well as other church agencies, and with the people and institutions of the City of Melbourne. For the Cathedral, as the Archbishop said in his pastoral charge, does not belong to the Chapter: we are its stewards. It belongs to the whole community, to any who find within its spaces that their life story is written, and who find that their story and the life story of God overlap.

The restoration so far

Faced with the challenge of dangerously exfoliating stones, a beginning had to be made. It was able to be made only because the Federal Government responded to our pleas and gave \$2.5 million from the now-closed Federation Fund, together with tax deductibility for the Appeal. We are currently seeking more funds from the Federal Government and the State Government has promised to match them dollar for dollar. A Feasibility Study has been carried out recently to establish the extent of support we are likely to find in the city for an appeal and the results of that, while not overwhelming, are encouraging. As the Archbishop said on Thursday night, we hope to launch a public appeal early in 2003.

Of course all the restoration in the world, all the creative opportunities, will be of nothing worth if we have not love, if people drawn to the building find there no human interest in them, no care for them, no human warmth. Restoration must be about more than stones and lights: it must involve restoring the Cathedral in the hearts of both the city and the diocese to a place of affection and respect.

Endeavour of the Spirit

A study on the theology of Cathedrals, published in England in 1998, was called *Flagships of the Spirit*. It is a good image in many ways, for the flagship has a focal place within the fleet, providing amongst many other things a fillip to morale. It's the symbolism of the flagship which is more significant than its fire-power or its size. But the image has its problems too. Though some may want to see the Cathedral as an instrument of aggressive spiritual warfare, not everyone would be comfortable with that image today and for some, who already see Cathedrals generally as triumphalist and pompous, the image is unhelpful. However, for some Australians at least - those whose history in this land is only a couple of centuries old - there is a flagship which has some helpful allusions. It is called the *Endeavour*, and it was the small bark in which James Cook explored the eastern coast of Australia in 1770. A small vessel, *Endeavour* undertook a great work and headed a great new wave of history of which we are all heirs.

I offer the image of St Paul's as an *Endeavour of the Spirit*. Not a battleship, more of an explorer, seeking out far spiritual horizons and witnessing to the human desire to know more of God's mysterious ways. A vessel in which ordinary seafarers and scientists, artists, cooks and artisans, young people and old, saints and sinners, can all find a place.

Yes, I like the image of *Endeavours of the Spirit* for Australian Cathedrals and for St Paul's. I like to think too that this task on which we are now embarked is a great endeavour of the spirit. I hope you may join us in it, so that St Paul's may be established anew as a place of outreach and mission, of worship and witness, for a new century.
