

# Reflections on the Role of the Cathedral today

KENYON WRIGHT\*

What is a Cathedral? Has it got a special role which differs from that of the Church as a whole and of the Parish and local Churches? These are some of the questions to which we must address ourselves and of course we must attempt to apply any answers we find especially to the situation of India today.

Throughout this paper I make two basic assumptions. First, that the Church as a whole has a mission to the modern world which demands that the Church take that world seriously. That mission is of course to share in the mission of Christ Himself. The mission of Christ as he defines it Himself is to proclaim and establish the Kingdom of God. Now the Kingdom of God is defined nowhere in full, but the nearest we come to definition is where Jesus Himself says in the Lord's Prayer 'Thy Kingdom come, thy Will be done in earth as it is in Heaven'. Now by the rules of Hebrew poetry (and the Lord's Prayer is certainly poetry whatever else it is) the second phrase amplifies, explains and makes clear the first. Therefore, we can I think, say, that when Jesus says 'Thy Kingdom come, thy Will be done in earth as it is in Heaven', the second phrase is a kind of definition of the first. God's kingdom comes when His will is done on earth as it is in perfection done in Heaven. Now this means that the end for the Christian—that goal towards which we are moving; the ultimate aim of all we do; of God's mission, and of ours—is that His Kingdom come, His Will be done by men on earth; and this is further explained and amplified in the Bible by the idea in Revelation of the new Heaven and the new earth, the Heavenly City which comes down from Heaven. For that Heavenly city is on the one hand God's gift; it is not achieved by human effort. It comes from God. On the other hand, it is a place of human society, a place where men are together, a place where all the broken relationships (broken by sin) are restored—the relationship with God, upwards; the relationship of man to his fellow men, across; and the downward relationship of man to his environment—all of these three which put man in the centre of a cross, in a sense, with a relationship upwards to God, across to his fellow man, downwards to nature and his environment, all of these three which were established in creation (look at Genesis) which were broken by the fall, are all re-established in the final vindication of God's righteousness which has begun in Christ. In that city of God men live in harmony, in

\* The Rev. Canon Kenyon Wright was formerly Co-Director of the Ecumenical Social and Industrial Institute, Durgapur. He is now on the staff of Coventry Cathedral.

that city of God the Lamb Himself is the lamp or the light in their midst, and in that city of God there is the tree—the tree of life—and its leaves are for the healing of the nations. There is that restoration of all relationships. Now what am I saying? I am saying that the Kingdom of God is not simply the removal of all faithful souls to some Spiritual Heaven which is totally other. I am saying that although the Kingdom of God is not purely achieved by human effort, yet it is in continuity with human effort. That is, all that is good in man's achievement is somehow taken up—You remember in the Revelation story, the nations bring their glory and their riches into the city. Now what does this mean if it does not mean that all that is good in the life of every nation, every tribe, every tongue, every group and, I believe, every man, is, somehow made perfect, purged of its sin and futility, and taken up in that restoration?

Now, you may say, what has all this to do with the mission of the Church today? A great deal. For unless we can see where we are going, and what is the ultimate goal, even if we cannot see it in detail, it is obviously hard to know what God is calling us to do today. But if we do believe this, that is if we do believe that God's Kingdom is the establishment of His Will among men, nations, movements of all kinds, and if we also believe that all that is good in human life even today, is not going to be lost, swept away, made meaningless, but somehow perfected, fulfilled, taken up; if we believe that, then of course we see that the mission of the Church is not simply to create a spiritual community that saves men's souls, but it is to be the witnesses to what God is actually doing in the midst of men in our day; to hear his voice in events; to respond to His command to obey, interpreted through events.

To sum up, my first assumption behind all this paper is that the mission of the Church shares that mission of God in Christ, to establish His Kingdom; and that this is a mission which must lead us to take the world seriously, for it is through the events of our time, and of our cities, and of our rural areas, that we hear the voice of God. And it is therefore through these events that we can understand what God is telling us to do and to be in our day.

My second major assumption, is that within this total mission of the whole Church which we all share as Christians, in one way or another, there are many particular jobs to be done. God does not call us all to do the same thing and to be the same thing. This is clear of course, even in the New Testament where Paul has those lists of Gifts of the Spirit; and his gifts of the Spirit are many, some are Apostles, some are Prophets, some are teachers, some are administrators, some have very ordinary gifts, some speak with tongues; but all of these are tested by whether they serve the whole Church, that is, whether they help the whole Church to be properly and fully God's people. That is, whether the Church is helped to discern what God is saying to her and to respond to it. Sometimes these gifts are judged in a very harsh way by Paul, on the criteria of whether they benefit the man outside. You remember, Paul accepts speaking with tongues and ecstatic phenomena, as one part, but only a small part, of the

Church's life, only on the condition and the criteria, and the clear test, that these benefit the outsider, and that they are intelligible and part of the Church's total order. What I am saying is that within the many gifts which we would expect to find in the modern Church, the Cathedral is given by God's Holy Spirit a very special role. Now that role must, of course, be part of the Church's total mission, which I have already tried to define, or at least suggest beginnings of a definition for. The Cathedral's role must be set within that of the Church as a whole, but it has I believe, a special and distinctive role in two ways.

- A. Towards the World. Within the Church's total concern for the world today, which I have tried to justify and underline, the Cathedral, I believe, has a very particular part to play. Its special gifts and special opportunities give it a special role as an important and distinctive part of the Church's concern for the world.
- B. Equally important, the Cathedral also has a special role towards the Church as a whole, because the Cathedral normally stands in a special relationship to the Diocese and to the Church as a whole; and therefore it not only has a responsibility to the world directly as part of the Church's mission, but towards the rest of the Church to help the Church define and clarify its total mission, for that after all is Paul's test of every gift of the Spirit in scripture.

What is a Cathedral? This paper makes the third assumption that a Cathedral is either the central Church of a Diocese, where the Bishop has his throne, (that of course is, I know, the original meaning of the word) or at least in some way an important central place of worship, whether in a city or in a rural Diocese, which therefore has some diocesan functions as well as usually having a fairly distinctive place in the community as a whole. I realise that Cathedrals vary very much from place to place, and that the way in which what I am going to say would be actually applied, would vary. What we are to do in the rest of this paper, therefore, is on the basis of the assumptions I have already outlined above to look at what I believe to be tasks of a Cathedral today in relation to the world and in relation to the Church. In each case I will try to give one case-study example in order to make the thing more concrete. The idea of these is not to suggest that these are the only ways in which a Cathedral could achieve these particular emphases, but to suggest one clear way in the hope that this will set off discussion. The aim of this paper is not to give a blue-print but to start discussion, so that I hope you will be enabled to discuss with more clarity what is the role of the Cathedral in India, and to apply some of these ideas to India, and to the many varied situations within India in which you yourselves minister.

I suggest that the Cathedral shares in a special way in the mission of the whole Church to be three things:

- (a) The witness to the Kingdom of God today
- (b) The agent of the Kingdom of God today
- (c) The first fruits of the Kingdom of God today

I. The Cathedral's job as part of the whole Church is to be a *witness to the Kingdom of God*, that is, to hear what God is saying in the events of our time, to make people aware of what is really happening today round about them, and therefore what God is saying in warning and in promise, and therefore to prepare people to respond to that. There are two words I want to give you, and under each to explain what being a witness to the Kingdom of God (bearing witness to what God is saying and telling us in contemporary events) is

(a) First of all: *Communication*. We live in a time when many people cease to hear each other. In Industry, worker and management very often are not simply in disagreement, they are simply not communicating. Similarly in our cities: often, rich and poor, young and old (the so called generation-gap) police and the radical. I'm sure all of you can think in your own areas of some of these barriers of communication across which each side assumes that the other side is devilish, demonic and totally wrong. Now I believe one of the tasks of the Cathedral is to clear away some of the rubble, which has to be cleared away before God's voice can be heard at all, because if God is saying something to us we are only likely to hear Him, to hear His warning and His promise, if we can at least hear one another; if our ears are cleared of the blockages of our own pre-suppositions, false images of one another and so on. Therefore I believe one of the roles of a Cathedral is to be a central place in the City or in the rural area where people are brought together, and brought together from both sides of these barriers in our society—now what these barriers are will vary from place to place, but I believe you must discover them and try to bring people together across them; that is, I see a Cathedral as a meeting point—what has sometimes been called in Europe a 'third place' . . . that is, not a place which is committed to either side fully—although we are never neutral as far as righteousness goes—not a place that is committed to one position, not a place that is part of the bargaining process of Industry for example, or part of the political arena, but a place where people can meet, talk, identify some of the issues that affect them and be helped, perhaps, to see some of the broader issues. Communication includes the awareness of people, of how international issues affect them. For example, how do policies in Europe, or the great crisis facing us in environmental pollution, or the new European Community or the policies of industry in the affluent West affect us here in India? How do these things affect, for example, the city of Calcutta? These are important questions, and people must be helped to ask not only their own immediate questions with their blinkers on; for example, how can I get a bit more money in my Union, or how can I control the workers a bit better in my management, or how can I make my political point? They must be helped certainly to ask these questions, but to ask them with some awareness that we are part of one world today and that the answers to these questions can only be found in ways that affect and are affected by things happening all round the world. Incidentally, this, I think, is a sphere where Cathedrals must not only do this separately and individually in terms of necessary bridges of communication in their own area, but must also identify together some of the great questions that the whole community would want to

ask about communication; and, perhaps, along with some of us in the so-called affluent West, (which whether we like it or not still has a very great deal of economic power even if we no longer have the political power) ask with us some of the human questions about world policies, without solutions to which some of these local problems of communication are particularly hard to solve. I hope you will be able to see your way through this, to see the way in which, locally, each Cathedral can be a centre of communication, and perhaps together as Cathedrals you might even set up some working organisation that will really identify the problems you hold in common and the questions you would like to ask nationally of one another and of other nations.

(b) Secondly: *Conscientisation*. The word 'conscientisation' has been used in S. America to describe the process of making oppressed people aware of the historical predicament in which they are caught and thereby hoping to bring about change. In other words, conscientisation can be defined quite simply as making people 'conscious', or aware; and I believe one of the roles of the Cathedral is to make people in our cities and urban areas much more aware of the processes in which they are caught up; aware of the positions they take and aware of the implications of these positions. For example, for us here in the West, in Britain, people must be made aware of the way in which, through their Unions and the Government, they support policies in the world which still oppress and keep down many nations; trade policies; economic policies. Very few people in our society are even aware of this. We tend easily and glibly to accept that our prosperity is our right. One of the tasks of our Cathedral is to begin to make people aware through exhibitions, through preaching, through Conferences, in all sorts of ways through contact with the Unions and Management, through our Industrial Mission, through contact with the city organisations through our Urban Mission, through contact with youth through our Youth Department; through contact with the world of Education through our Education Department; through all these various spheres through which we work here in Coventry as a Cathedral to make people aware of how their own lives affect the lives of other people and of how they are affected, because until they are aware the process of liberation can hardly begin. This process of communication and conscientisation demands, I think, that our Cathedral be in the closest possible touch with all the major areas of life in the region in which we live. If it is a city we must be in touch with Industry, the slum dwellers and their real problems and so on. With the world of politics, with economic power and commerce, with the world of culture and the arts, and all the many worlds that make up our society. If it is a rural area I am sure you could identify equally those areas of life with which the Cathedral or the Central Church must be in touch in order even to begin the process of communication and conscientisation. This means that every Cathedral really needs some kind of Team with members who are involved in each of the major areas of life of the particular region concerned. This team has the two advantages that it means that there is one of the Cathedral Staff in direct touch and presumably with a good deal

of understanding of the important areas. This also means that the team together transcends the divisions. It is a place where communication already takes place on a small scale and where, therefore, the team together identify not just what each of them can be doing separately, but those areas which they ought to be tackling together; those areas which are of concern to the City and where communication could take place. This should lead (as it does here in Coventry), to using the Cathedral constantly as a place of meeting, a Conference Centre, an 'Academy', for different sections of the life of the City. It is true, of course, that any parish church could to some extent play this role, and I believe the whole Church must. It is also true that the Cathedral is recognised to be responsible in a slightly different way for the whole life of its city or of its area, and therefore it is the Cathedral that should, on behalf of the Church as a whole, undertake to work with the larger organised areas of life that are not local, not to be found in parishes but that are concerned with a larger area. Obviously, this can mean all kinds of different things—for some Cathedrals setting up special agencies, as I know you have in Bangalore in the Industrial Team Service, for one very important area of life in your City. It could mean, in some places, where there is a very small Cathedral staff that, in fact, it is impossible to have a full time Staff which makes up this Team alone, and that there will have to be others, perhaps members of the congregation and people who represent some of the important areas but who are committed to being members of the Team.

II. The second major area of our Mission is to be the *agent of the Kingdom of God*.

(a) *Organisation*, particularly community organisation, is a very common word today. By Community Organisation we mean a process of not so much doing things for people as providing them with the basic organisation which enables them to find their own solutions and, therefore, not just to answer their problems but find a new sense of community and identity as a group in solving the problems. This is particularly important in a society like that of India where so many groups of people still have to find their real identity and role within society as a whole. It is the task of a Cathedral to relate to the needy of the City not just in the old traditional way of giving social service or charity or relief, though sometimes these will certainly be necessary; but it is more a matter of an attitude which does not begin with social service and charity but which begins with the understanding that the primary problem is one of identity and power, that the needy are not just the *poor* but the *powerless*. And, therefore, one of our jobs is certainly to help the poor, the powerless, whoever they happen to be in our area, to find a voice to help the voiceless speak. This, I believe, is one of the many lessons that you have to teach us in the West because we have, for so long, been among the powerful or thought ourselves among the powerful, that we desperately need to be taught the dangers of power and to be taught not just to give but to share. Somebody said to me in one of our local Churches in Coventry the other day, 'I can give, but I cannot share'. This is perhaps our problem and always the problem of those on one side of this barrier.

Every Cathedral should identify—'Who are the people in our area who are the powerless?—What are their real needs? How can we play some part with them, entirely with them, in helping them identify these needs and organise to achieve these needs and, incidentally, to achieve their own sense of pride and identity?' Here again, the ways in which this could be done obviously vary tremendously, but I think this is a central facet of a Cathedral's ministry.

(b) *Reconciliation*. We live in an age of tremendous diversity, and the Cathedral I believe should be a symbol of diversity in unity, perhaps even a 'Pentecostal laboratory'. I don't necessarily mean a place where people speak with tongues; I mean a laboratory where the different voices and tongues of our time are all able to be heard and to speak. The real miracle of Pentecost was not that people spoke in tongues but that they could understand one another. The real miracle which amazed those who heard the disciples speak was not that they spoke some ecstatic utterance, but that they could understand them all in all the tongues they spoke. I believe that the Holy Spirit is calling His Church, particularly perhaps the Cathedral with its central place in Society to be this kind of Pentecostal laboratory.

III. Let me move on to my third point. The third aspect of our Mission, I believe, is to be *the first-fruits of the Kingdom of God*. This is a biblical phrase, which describes the Church not as an end in itself but as somehow an example, a microcosm, a model, a foretaste of that which God intends for the whole of mankind so that people could look at the Church and say 'Yes, here we see what, in God's will, is His intention for all men. Here we see that love, that community, that sense of commitment to one another which we will only perfectly see totally in the Kingdom of God when He comes'. How can the Cathedral represent this aspect of the Church's Mission? Well, here again, I give you two words—one is the word 'Representation'; the other is the word 'Celebration'.

(a) The Church is always a *representative* community. We are called in the Bible the priestly people and a priest is a representative; a man who goes before God on behalf of the people. He is the man who goes out to the people with the Word of God. Now in the Bible it is not an individual who is called that (except for Christ) it is the whole people of God, the whole Church which is a priestly Nation, a priestly people. The Church is a representative people in that it stands, or should stand, between God and those who will not for whatever reason think for themselves: give thanks for themselves, confess for themselves. Now this, I believe, means that in our day the Church must be visibly a Community of Love and of Caring. Here in the West, more and more young people are obviously turning away from what they see as the artificiality of our society; the wrong values and goals by which men live, the material possessions which seem to be at the centre of life. Some are turning to be Hippies or other forms of what is sometimes called the alternative society. Others are turning to the ancient Eastern religions; more and more young people seem to be turning to the spirituality of the East, and even within the Church young people are longing for a new expression

of spirituality and community. In other words, a Community which is seen to have values different from those of the world. Now if one of the results of Pentecost was communication (people could understand one another) another result of Pentecost was Community, and a Community which in very material ways shared things and thereby demonstrated to an amazed world a set of values that were so different from those of their time that men could say those who have turned the world upside down have come hither. I do not know whether God is calling His Church today to a Community of that kind of sharing, though I believe He is calling part of His Church to that. We do have little communities which actually share things—share their money, share their goods,—and I believe they are an important part of what the Holy Spirit is saying. But I believe all of us are called not, perhaps, to that level but to creating a Community which men can look at and say, 'Yes, here we see different goals, different values'. I have said this from the point of view of the West: perhaps you can interpret this from the point of view of modern India.

One of the things which has helped us here in Coventry to achieve to some extent this sense of Community and New Spirituality has been a very simple thing, but a very profound thing, and that is a Common Discipline. We have here a written Discipline. It is a very simple one, it deals with quite simple and fundamental things—the use of our money, the use of our time, the amount of time which we spend each week in study and worship, time off with our families, commitment to worship, commitment to one another, commitment to people outside; it is, in fact, covering 'Life' pretty extensively. It is not something that is a law that we must keep, it is a guide for living and more and more people have been asking us for this Discipline. Perhaps (I suggest this very prudently and tentatively) the Cathedrals of India could, together, form a Discipline which is based on Spirituality but which is very straightforward and which tries to spell out the kind of Living which will be effective Christian living for today. I am quite sure that any such Discipline would have to include on the one hand simple Rules or guidelines for personal life; and would have to include, on the other hand, suggestions as to how Christians could more intelligently participate or at least understand the organised life of the society in which they live, and therefore be more creative 'change-agents' in industrial life, in political life, economic life, rural life and so on.

(b) And now I come to one more word, the word *Celebration*. Celebration means, of course, Worship, but more than Worship. The Cathedral in the Middle Ages was at the very centre of the Community. It was a place where every part of the City's life came to celebrate. Now things have changed, of course. But it is still very important that people from time to time should be able to come together. Not so much, perhaps, intellectually to hear sermons but just, perhaps, to express symbolically some of the things which concern them and worry them and make them happy. This means that a Cathedral must have Worship which is made very relevant to



different groups in the Community. It means also, I believe, that the Cathedral must take seriously the cultural life—the symbolical life, if you like—of its Community. Here in Coventry we have a Drama Director and a Music Director, and not one week passes without either a play or major music event like a Symphony Concert, or a Jazz Concert—it could be either—in the Cathedral. And in this way the Cathedral has become in a City which has no Concert Hall of its own, and no major Hall of that kind, very much the centre of cultural life. I think that we have failed in that it is a little too much 'culture' with a capital 'C'. We don't yet succeed in representing what I might call the working class culture of Coventry. This we have not yet succeeded in doing. However, you see my point. How can the Cathedral help the people of its area to Celebrate and become looked upon by the people of its area as a place of Celebration which they are happy to come into because they know that they will find there their own hopes, fears and desires symbolically and dramatically presented?

All of these, in a sense, are in relation to the world: the Cathedral's role within the total Mission of the Church towards all men. But a Cathedral has one more role. It has, of course, a special responsibility towards the Church as a whole. Very often it is a Diocesan centre. Very often it is looked to by the other Churches. If it is doing even some of the things I have tried to define above, it will, in a sense, already be performing a service to the Diocese for it will already be a place where people can see experimentation. It will be a place where people can see that the Holy Spirit says new things in new situations, although he always says things consistent with His Love in the past. The problem here is that it is possible for other parishes and Churches to say, 'You can do this because you have all the facilities of a Cathedral—we cannot; our job is to carry on the traditional, to go on our old ways and leave these strange and modern experiments to you'. This is a danger. And I believe this danger can only be overcome if a Cathedral takes seriously and quite explicitly its responsibility not only to the world but to the Church. This means being prepared to have one member of the Cathedral team who sees it as his responsibility to relate to the other Churches in the Area—not necessarily just in the Diocese, in the Area, and this relation can take the form of going out to them from time to time, of training courses; whatever is appropriate, but I believe it must be a definite and serious commitment.

These thoughts have been, perhaps, a little disconnected but I hope they may provide the basis for some useful discussion applicable to the situation of India. There is, however, one last thing to be said. We live in a highly complex, interdependent, organised world, where what happens in Britain or America or India affects all of us eventually and usually pretty soon. We also live in a world where the Urban civilisation as we have known it is rapidly reaching crisis. Why? I think we are realising that if things go on as at present, if change takes place only along the present lines, then two things will happen. The first thing is that our exploitation of our environment, of the natural resources of the world, will lead us to disaster. Therefore, I believe,

all the things I have been saying before must be seen in this context. The Churches have a responsibility to raise the real questions of our time, and this is surely the central question of our time. How can we find together a way of being God's people in today's world? How can we be the minority? One of the things I think you have to teach us in the West is how to be a creative minority; for we too are a minority although we don't sometimes realise it, we Christians in the West. How can we be a creative minority which helps our world to change in time so that all the possible benefits of this great urban civilisation can be brought to men and so that we avoid the great disasters looming ahead of us in our time? It may be, as has happened before in history, that in the economy of God we will find no answers: that there will be major disaster, that the world will enter a second dark age—it could happen—indeed, humanly speaking it seems likely to happen—and if that does happen the Church's task will change—perhaps it will become again as it did in the last dark age in Europe to keep alight the flame of God's purpose in the midst of the darkness in little monastic communities. But that is tomorrow's obedience, not today's. Today's problem is in a situation where there is still hope, humanly speaking as well as divinely speaking, to build up a community so involved and yet so demonstrating a new spirituality that it can still help men to find the way forward that we can still be demonstrably the first fruits of what God is doing in India, in Asia, in His world today.