

## **Speech for the Banquet of the Gild of Freemen of the City of York Palm Sunday Eve 2003**

*by Rev'd David Wilbourne, Vicar of Helmsley*

Lord Mayor, Masters, Governors and Wardens,  
Distinguished Guests, Lords, Ladies and Gentlemen,  
my love affair with York Minster began in 1962  
when, as a very bewildered child of six  
I entered the Minster with my mother  
and watched my father ordained deacon and priest.  
Don't tell me about shock and awe!  
Twenty years later I returned, no less bewildered,  
to be ordained deacon and priest myself.  
I felt very unworthy both for the ministerial office  
and also to be centre of stage in this magnificent building  
which dominates York's skyline.  
In fact I felt like the elderly peer who had the nightmare  
that he was making a speech in the House of Lords  
and woke up to find that he was!

When my father was ordained priest he bought me a present,  
a book entitled *Nick and Cecilia in York Minster*,  
whose eponymous heroes  
have a holiday with their uncle, the Canon for a week,  
and pour over the Minster's treasures.  
For many years it was my favourite book -  
you realise what a wildly exciting childhood I had -

although reading some of its twee lines now  
make my toes curl. Such as:  
'The children had never been to a service in the Minster before, but  
they were not too young  
to appreciate its beauty and its dignity.'

Dream on:

My very bored youngest daughter fell soundly asleep  
when I first preached in York Minster!  
But the book concludes with a gnostic comment  
"'We'd have missed quite a lot of the Minster  
if you hadn't shown us round' said Nick.  
'You have to learn how to look,' said his uncle,  
'and that doesn't come all at once,'  
and he smiled as he walked away."

Since 1962 I have been learning how to look at York Minster.  
My boy's heart missed a beat  
when they launched the six-million pound appeal  
to save the central tower in the 1960's.  
To a boy whose father earned £6 a week as a curate  
six million pounds was an impossible amount  
and I thought the Minster was doomed.  
I remember the parents of York College for Girls  
had a special meeting to discuss what they could do  
if the central tower fell on their school.  
I think they proposed to put a steel membrane  
under the gals' green hats!  
Yet the money came in,  
and the Minster became an exciting construction site,  
complete with railway tracks;

the foundations were virtually rebuilt,  
and the Minster was renewed and shone.  
I felt physically sick  
when the south transept roof was gutted by fire in 1984,  
as if a part of me was burnt.  
Surely this was the end?  
And yet once again York Minster rose from the ashes,  
more glorious, a superb visual aid of resurrection.

I took a parish trip to York from Middlesbrough  
and we parked in Lord Mayor's walk.  
'Which way's the Minster?' a hapless parishioner asked me.  
'Look up,' I said, trying not to sound too exasperated.  
The Minster is unmissable,  
a sign of the infinite in the midst of the finite.  
It dominates York, boldly and breathlessly,  
the rest of York's buildings are mere chicks  
compared to the Minster's huge mother hen.  
If I go far away up Garrowby Hill on the road to Bridlington,  
the Minster still looms on the horizon.  
From Kilburn's White Horse, 20 miles to the North of York,  
I can still see it.  
Definitely Yorkshire's wonder of the world.

I have been into York Minster's heart  
for countless services,  
as Archbishop's chaplain we'd be going there virtually weekly,  
yet no occasion has ever bored me.  
Quite the converse in fact: each has thrilled me.  
Consecrations of bishops,  
Great Civic and National occasions

David Hope's enthronement:  
all brilliant occasions.  
Even a Mothers' Union service where the congregation were instructed  
to stand tall like stalks of corn and wave in the breeze.  
On the service sheet was the rubric,  
'Congregation to make wind noises,'  
which mercifully they ignored!

Over 40 years I have learned to look at York Minster  
and like very much, very much indeed, what I see.  
A couple of years back I was visiting an old lady  
dying in York District Hospital.  
She'd had a hard life but also a fantastic life,  
and now she was simply worn out.  
Her bed was by the window  
and I sat by her bedside holding her hand,  
neither of us saying anything.  
Instead we both looked out of the window  
at York Minster's grandeur,  
which heartened me and heartened her.  
'It's simply marvellous,' she said.  
And those were her last words to me.

York Minster is a rallying point for Christians,  
for Yorkshire folk, for folk throughout God's world,  
and so I gladly, very gladly  
propose the traditional toast  
of the Guild of Freemen of the City of York  
to York's Minster, its Builders and Servants,  
Past, Present and Future.