

**Sermon preached at the Thanksgiving Evensong
for the Restoration of St Mary's Rievaulx.**

There's a story of an American stopping his car
outside Kings College, Cambridge
and asking a local,
'How do you get to Ely?'
'Well, if I were you, I wouldn't start from here!'
the local replied scratching his head.

It's probably worth asking on this special afternoon
how we started, and how we ended up here.
Just three years ago things looked very bleak for this church.
The roof and the fabric were in a pretty bad state,
and although English Heritage
offered us a generous grant,

the shortfall was substantial.

Far too big a sum
for our small faithful congregation to raise.
The Parish Church Council
with all the other calls on its limited funds
didn't feel they could provide the money.
For my own part,
I didn't feel I could commit the time
to fund-raising and directing a major restoration.

Like Elisha's servant at Dothan,
we were all crying,
'Which way are we to turn?'
Closure of St Mary's seemed inevitable,
the saddest way to mark its centenary.

But then things started to happen.

John Sentamu,

newly arrived as Archbishop of York

toured the deanery

and encouraged me to keep St Mary's open.

It's all too easy for archbishops to ride into town,

say things like that

and then ride out again,

leaving the poor old vicar to pick up the pieces,

but he said it with great passion:

'We must maintain a presence in such a holy spot.'

And then, sadly, my mum died.

On the morning before I was to preach at her funeral

I decided to cycle up Beckdale,

as you do on the morning of your mum's funeral.

I'm a bit of an adrenalin junkie,

and cycling the 1000 feet up to the top of the North York Moors

gives me a buzz.

Usually I just take the main road back down to Helmsley,

but on this occasion I made a diversion

and dropped down into Rievaulx.

I stole into the abbey and just sat in that hallowed hollow.

As one mystic explained about their time out:

'Sometimes I just sits and prays.

Sometimes I just sits and thinks.

And sometimes I just sits.'

My silence as I sat there that morning

was broken

by the little bell in this church's turret

striking 10 o'clock.

And that striking struck me.

In a way it was a plaintiff cry from this little church,
'Your mother's died, and you can do nothing about it.
But you can stop me dying.'
Also it was a witness.
Terrible things were done in the Tudor period
in the name of religion and the name of irreligion
and places like Rievaulx bear the awful scars.
Yet that sweet bell ringing
testified to a Christian presence
beyond that dysfunctional period,
just as in the Orthodox Church
the bells of Easter
ring out faintly on Good Friday,
testifying to Resurrection Day's dawn
ahead of the darkest of nights.

I talked to my dad
and he agreed with me
that St Mary's should be saved,
More than that,
in the days following my mum's funeral
my dad wrote to our relations and friends
and his former parishioners
inviting them to make donations to Rievaulx
in my mum's memory.
Their generous response effectively jump-started the appeal.
We even wrote to the Archbishop of York
who put his money where his mouth was
and very kindly sent us £250.
The day after my mum's funeral
I visited a certain Mike Ingle

and asked him to be fund-raiser and project manager.

He seemed to me to be an obvious choice,

a boy-like enthusiasm,

an experienced and senior businessman

who could walk the walk and talk the talk,

who had a wide network of contacts

and could do some straight but respected talking.

Vicars need human angels like Mike.

Archbishop Magee was once at a Lord Mayor's Banquet

where a stupid waiter spilled scalding soup

down the back of his neck.

'Is there a layman present who could kindly express my feelings,'

the archbishop quipped.

Mike has eloquently and effectively

expressed my every feeling and desire for this church

and words fail me to catch how grateful I am.

And marvellously the money came pouring in.

Mike's business contacts,

trusts and charities,

local donors,

Rievaulx inhabitants past and present,

the people of Rievaulx themselves worked so hard:

teas were served,

Sir Richard's fields were suddenly transformed into

pay-up-or-else car parks,

mills were opened up to the public,

authors sold books,

a local auctioneer put Sotherbys to shame,

an art exhibition brought the Louvre to our rickety village hall,

a 90-year-old cashed in all his presents for the fund,

Rievaulx's oldest resident died

and her family collected for St Mary's at her funeral,

the Bilsdale Band played their hearts out,
often in tune.

Those are just a few things
that made this restoration such a success.

Forgive me if I have missed any.

It's not malice, just bad memory.

We can open our eyes this Michaelmas Eve
and see the hillsides of this steep valley
covered with all these feisty if not fiery donors.

It looked as if we were finished,
but then they all rose up and saved us.

Those who are on our side
have indeed proved so much more
than those who are against us.

Just two post-scripts.

Exactly 11 years ago tomorrow

I was put in as vicar here.

During that time we have never really needed to run a freezer,
because we could keep all our foodstuffs in this church
which would have bestowed upon them a positively arctic chill.

We use incense at Helmsley:

we never need it here,

because your breath condenses

in great clouds of steam on even the mildest days.

I'm afraid we'll have to buy a freezer now,

because no more can we rely on St Mary's,

which has become as warm as toast.

And that is really due to one donor,

Tim Dewhirst,

who together with his late father
very, very generously
funded the bulk of the heating's installation.
We baptised his nephew here
two or three winters ago
and I guess the fact that we had to break the ice in the font
before the Christening could go ahead
somehow sowed the seeds of his tremendous generosity.

The second PS is about the spire being finished off
with the Rievaulx cockerel,
brilliantly created by blacksmith/metalsmith Bob Leete
and brilliantly if not scaringly installed by him
at the top of the spire.

The cockerel both finishes off the place
and also harks back to the abbey's glory days.

And supremely harks back to that night
when our Lord was betrayed
and his best friend Peter
denied ever knowing him.
'I tell you I do not know the man,'
Peter screamed.
And at that moment the cock crowed,
and Peter remembered the words of Jesus:
'Peter, this very night before the cock crows,
you will deny me three times.'
And Peter went out and wept bitterly.
The cockerel catching the sunlight
is both a reminder to each and every one of us
of how we fall like Peter,
but also can be restored like Peter.

If the treacherous Peter
could go on to be the first pope,
there really is hope for us all
in Christ.

Our second lesson might have seemed an odd choice.
But all that removing of the tiles stuff
to let the paralysed man get to Jesus
seemed irresistible
for a situation where we had our tiles stripped.
Before the tiles were taken off in our story,
they were all waffling on.
But the tiles being removed
let in need and healing and restoration
and allowed Christ's glory to shine,
his gracious forgiving glory:

'My son,
my daughter,
your sins are forgiven you.
Take up your bed and walk.'

Today we do not just mark the end of this church's restoration,
but the beginning of our restoration.
The stripping of this roof has let in Christ.
What we do with him,
and how we share him
with those needy, searching souls
who visit here
is the next chapter
and the next century.