

Sermon on Sunday 14th September: Heritage Week Linda E Hunter

Today, we have an opportunity, not just to look back, but to give thanks, to pause, to reflect, and to look forward.

We gather in a place where prayer has been offered for over thirteen and a half centuries. Where the name of Jesus Christ has been spoken in faith through every season of life: through peace and conflict, famine and feast, plague and pandemic. This building has stood through the rise and fall of empires and the turning of generations. And it still stands, quietly and confidently declaring: God is here.

As you look around today, you'll see display boards filled with photographs and stories, not just a record of a building, but a testimony to a living community shaped by worship, service, and faith. Every church has its own story. And today we ask: What is ours, here at St Andrew's in Corbridge?

It's easy to think of history as something distant, fading photographs, stone walls, stained glass. But the truth is, we are part of that story now. We belong to this place and this people. We have inherited a tradition not only of a sacred space, but of the living presence of God among his people. So, in this holy place, we don't simply remember history, we continue it. We step into a sacred conversation that has been going on for more than a millennium, and we offer our voices, our prayers, and our lives to the next chapter.

The prophet Jeremiah wrote to God's people at a time of deep disruption. Exiled in Babylon, far from Jerusalem and the Temple, they had lost everything that had once grounded their faith. And yet, what does God say?

"Build houses and live in them. Plant gardens... take root... seek the welfare of the city where I have sent you—for in its welfare you will find your own." (Jeremiah 29)

This is not a call to despair, or to nostalgia. It is a call to faithfulness. Even in exile, God is present. Still speaking. Still calling his people to live faithfully, fruitfully, and visibly. Rather than withdraw, they are told to plant and build. To settle and seek peace. To trust that God's purposes are not confined to familiar places, but continue even in uncertainty. That calling still echoes for the Church today. Even when the world around us changes, even in seasons of change and doubt, we are called to be rooted, to remain faithful, and to bless this place where God has planted us. And that is exactly what generations before us have done here in Corbridge. They stayed. They prayed. They served. They bore witness, not simply by preserving a building, but by embodying the Gospel in their own time.

We live today in a fast-changing, world. There are many places people call sacred, cathedrals, temples, forests. What makes a place holy is not its architecture, but what happens there: tears shed, vows spoken, prayers whispered, lives transformed. A holy place is where heaven touches earth. And for us, that place is here.

Jesus echoes this in the Sermon on the Mount:

"You are the salt of the earth... You are the light of the world. A city built on a hill cannot be hidden... Let your light shine before others, so that they may see your good works and give glory to your Father in heaven." (Matthew 5)

This is our calling, not just to guard our heritage, but to live it. Not simply to honour the faith of our ancestors, but to embody it, visibly, courageously, and generously, so that others may glimpse the love and grace of God reflected in us.

As we look back on the long history of this church, we honour those who let their light shine: the builders, the worshippers, the intercessors, the servants, those who lived the Gospel here with quiet faithfulness. But this is also a time to reflect on our own vocation, our place in the story. We may not feel like saints or heroes. We may feel tired, ordinary, uncertain. Yet God's call remains the same:

St Andrew's has never just been about stone and timber. This place is holy not simply because of its age or architecture, but because God is present among his people, gathering, transforming, sending. Not just in the building, but in this moment, in this season, in this community. And Jesus says to us: *"You are the light of the world."* Not *they were*. **You are**. This is our time to shine. Our time to serve. Our time to bear witness to a faithful God in a changing world.

So, what is our part in the story? We know the Church today faces real challenges: declining numbers, generational gaps, cultural change. Through it all, God remains faithful.

To build the future, we are called to three things:

Remember where we've come from. Not to dwell in the past, but to be shaped and inspired by the faith of those who came before us.

Be present to this moment, to see the needs of our neighbours. To pray for the village of Corbridge and this church community and whilst doing that notice where God is already at work.

Commit to the future to continue as salt and light. To listen for God's voice and to trust that the story is still unfolding, and that we are part of it.

I remember hearing, quite a while ago hearing the Rev. Isabelle Hamley, former Chaplain to the Archbishop of Canterbury, say in an interview, and it has stuck in my mind:

"If we don't pray, there's no point in doing anything that we do here. We have to be rooted in prayer, so that we can be rooted in God, and in the story we are trying to tell..."

The St Andrew's 1350th Prayer says this so beautifully:

"God of the ages, we praise you for your faithfulness to us over 1350 years here in Corbridge..."

Yes, we honour the legacy of St Wilfrid. Yes, we are inspired by St Andrew, who brought others to Christ. But the prayer also looks forward:

*"Make us as a city set on a hill, whose light cannot be hidden,
the light of your glory in the face of Jesus Christ our Saviour."*

In other words, shine through us, here, now, in this generation, in this place. The story is not over. We are not the final chapter. We are the living link between memory and mission. And as long as we remain rooted in Christ, the light will not go out.

So, as we walk past the displays and photographs, fragments of history carved in stone and captured on paper, let us remember: We are part of this story too. Not only inheritors of a great tradition, but its stewards. The ones entrusted to carry the light forward. To bless the place where we are planted. To live the Gospel faithfully in our time.

Today, we recommit ourselves to the God of the ages the one who still walks with us, who still calls us to shine, and who is always faithful.

"You are the light of the world. A city built on a hill cannot be hidden."

So let us shine for the glory of God, here in this place, now in this time.