

# ST KATHARINE CREE CHURCH

## The 373rd Lion Sermon

Preached by The Revd Josh Harris, Priest-in-Charge

Thursday 13<sup>th</sup> October 2022

We gather today for the 373rd Lion Sermon preached in this church. As the Priest in Charge of this Guild Church of St Katharine Cree, I welcome you today and I give thanks for the opportunity to say a little about the new chapter of this church's life and purpose we have begun. So we pray

...may the words of my mouth and the meditation of all our hearts be acceptable in thy sight, O Lord, my strength and my redeemer. Amen.

Of the facts we may know about lions, we all know that they are hunters. They do not harvest or scavenge or graze. And hunters must focus, making deliberate and careful use of their energy to pick out the best target as their prey. Lions do not charge into the midst of a herd. That is a sure way to get beaten back, trampled - to lose the hunt. Instead, lions carefully identify and isolate their prey before the chase - choosing the weakest, the slowest, the one on the periphery of the herd, the one in danger of being left behind.

Peter knew this about lions when he wrote in his letter: *Be sober, be vigilant; because your adversary the devil, as a roaring lion, walketh about, seeking whom he may devour.*

The crises we face in our nation, and here in this City of London, are like lions. The waves of covid which beat against the shores of our society did not treat all

alike. While the covid virus was no respecter of persons it was a respecter of circumstances. Those who were already on the margins were hit hardest both by the illness and the effect of the lockdowns.

Likewise, the overlapping and deepening crises which are hitting our energy bills, our food bills, the costs of rent and the expenses of mere existence do not affect all of us the same. Like a lion stalking the vulnerable as its prey, the precarious existence of those who work here in the heart of our City but live on the frayed edges of our economic and social fabric are far more vulnerable to these costs than those of us with secure incomes, secure homes, a secure place from which to weather the storm and resist the attack.

There are moments when we might be tempted to praise ourselves for the security we have built ourselves. Our security can be a measure of our prudence. Like good stewards, we've taken careful risks and made wise decisions.

Sir John Gayer, a successful London trader and merchant, was no doubt such a careful and wise steward. And yet one night in October 1643 in the Syrian desert, separated from his travelling companions as night drew in, Sir John's terrifying encounter with a lion brought him face to face with his own vulnerability.

Suddenly the proud merchant was the prey. We can only wonder what raced around his mind as he watched the lion prowl in the gathering gloom of night, what fears pressed in on him as he longed for the morning to come. The lion was indifferent to Sir John's status or position, his ingenuity and wisdom - none of these protected him. Instead, like Daniel in the Babylonian lion's den, Sir John was saved by the grace of God. Like Daniel, we can hear Sir John crying out in relief that morning as his companions found him untouched and safe, *My God hath sent his angel, and hath shut the lions' mouths.*

Sir John experienced the grace of God which revealed to him his own vulnerability. This experience led him to deeper trust in Jesus Christ, and to the service of others. His will asked that this sermon be given annually, but his will also established an annual sum of money to be given to the poor of this neighbourhood. Sir John's experience of need gave him a renewed solidarity with those who also felt need. Those needs were different, but both the pauper on the streets of Aldgate, and the City merchant on a trading venture abroad, could recognise the limits of their self-sufficiency.

What could our City become if like Sir John we heard clearly St Peter's words, *Yea, all of you be subject one to another, and be clothed with humility: for God resisteth the proud, and giveth grace to the humble*. What if more of the City - recognising the limits of our own self-sufficiency - placed the building of solidarity at the heart of our work?

We might begin with generosity, as many gathered here have already. As winter draws in and the current crisis deepens, there will be many opportunities for generosity, following Sir John's example. City institutions are famous for their philanthropy. There will be ways those of us with much can give to those with little.

Today here at St Katharine Cree we are relaunching the second part of Sir John's request in his will, that alongside this sermon being preached there would be a distribution to those in need in this neighbourhood.

The Lion Appeal is raising funds to provide a warm space in this church over winter for those who have nowhere to go. And it will contribute to work across the City for those workers in our midst who are hard pressed by the prowling lions of hunger, cold, and despair. Your gifts to the collection today - whether during the

final hymn or using the card machine at the back afterwards or online - will go towards this appeal. Your generosity and partnership today, and your ongoing generosity to many such causes across the City, is deeply appreciated.

But generosity alone cannot build the bonds of solidarity on which the future of our City depends. Instead, solidarity must be built through relationship.

Sir John's trip to Syria was a trade mission with the Levant Company, and trade depends on mutual exchange. Markets cannot function without exchange – and in the end successful trade requires and forges bonds of trust and respect, and can strengthen relationships even across deep difference.

Such bonds with those we do business with, as clients or contractors, business partners or team members, councillors and liverymen - might be obvious and visible to us. But we have learned through the crises of recent years that we are bound to many others for our success and safety.

Think of what we've seen during the recent pandemic. Women and men who laid down their lives on the frontlines of confronting covid, the nurses and doctors and carers, all those who accompanied the sick and frightened. The others who kept coming to work, on our transport system and in our supply chains, warehouse workers and street cleaners and security guards, keeping the City alive even as many of us worked in our homes far from here.

Prosperity is sustained not by building walls around our own kingdoms of comfort, but weaving together the many diverse strands of the modern City into seamless and strong relationships of trust and dependability.

We all have our different vulnerabilities; but we all have strengths to offer; we all have a part to play. On the foundation of solidarity we can build a better future beyond crisis.

As the Guild Church for workers in the City, we want to play our part in reweaving the fabric of our City here, by supporting workers to gather together to share their stories, to encourage each other, to pray, to build relationships of trust and mutual respect and exchange. Recently we held several workshops with Latin and South American women, many of whom work as cleaners in this area. One of them wrote afterwards of their experience, *'I don't feel alone anymore. I know there is someone I can share my story with'*.

There will be opportunities for generosity. But some of you today will also want to come and be part of building solidarity in our City, to strengthen relationships of trust and exchange with all those who work and live in this great City. If that is you, please come and speak to me today after the service to find out more.

Come and be part of this Guild Church's work among workers, as we seek to build a community where those who are often hidden from sight but on whom our prosperity and success is built, are brought from the edges where lions prowl and instead take their place at the heart of our City's future.

We do this because, like Sir John Gayer on that October night in the desert, we have encountered the grace of God which reveals our vulnerabilities and our need, but also helps us find a way forward together. The grace which, Peter prays, might *'make you perfect, 'stablish, strengthen, settle you.'*

This grace is what I pray for each of us today. Grace which reveals the ways in which we in fact depend on others, and which leads us into building solidarity with one another.

How we each respond to this grace, and the call to solidarity, is for us to determine. Some of you will want to become more involved in our work here, but that is not the call for everyone. Crises are times in which we make choices. So I pray for all of you, that like Sir John in the desert, you might know the peace and protection of God in your life in the crises to come, and that in the choices before you, he leads you in the way of life.

Amen.