



on the lookout

Let me transport you back 100 years or so. It is 1904. The Rector of St James's Church has been for the last 4 years Joseph McCormick, always known as Joe. He was a really keen sportsman, a particularly good cricketer. Joe stood six foot three in his stocking feet and had, they said, a powerful Irish voice. Friends of his got together with the churchwardens and in 1904 built this outside pulpit to their church in the hope that his strong voice would carry onto the crowds on Piccadilly.

For your information, I'm standing on a box.

Sometimes on a Sunday afternoon they would hold services outside and Joe or one of his sons would preach from this pulpit and over 100 musicians would form an orchestra grouped nearby. We don't quite have 100 ukeleles today but.... you never know....

Contemporary reports however say that the sound of horses' hooves and carriage wheels on the cobble stones of Piccadilly just outside the gates drowned out the sound of his voice.....

There aren't many churches with a pulpit outside. And pulpits have a chequered reputation especially in today's society, much less deferential than Edwardian Piccadilly when this one was built. In broadcasting our message from this outside pulpit, we might stand accused of spoiling the Sunday morning of a capital city still recovering from last night. We might be joining in the doom laden shouts of the Oxford Circus prophets who use tannoys and leaflets to tell us that the End is Nigh. But, for good or ill, we have this pulpit attached to the outside wall of our church. And to everyone who sees it, it says that at some point in its history, this congregation of St James's wanted to talk to all the people who were outside the church, not just wait for them to come inside the building.

Churches aren't the only places where pulpits are part of the furniture. On the front of many sailing boats, particularly fishing boats, there is what's known as a pulpit right out on the bow; a raised platform right at the front of the boat – if you stand on it, you are in a kind of lookout position – and you can easily reenact the famous scene from Titanic when Leonardo de Caprio and Kate Winslet are leaning out over the sea. This kind of pulpit is used in order to weigh anchor safely. In the

Nautical Dictionary it is described as *a lookout position featuring a secure railing extending over the bow of fishing boats and some sail boats*. Sailors use this pulpit to lean right out – to drop anchor safely or to tend sails.

And so, on St James's Day, taking our own cue from our architecture, might we see this outside pulpit not so much as a desire to talk down to the people of Piccadilly- six feet above contradiction – but by contrast, signal by this outside pulpit, that we want to be people who are leaning right out – on the lookout, scanning the horizon, remembering where we are anchored and being willing to plumb the depths of our life experience before God. To be willing to go deeper down and to look beyond the immediate issues of the day. To be attentive to the Holy Spirit which blows where it wills, and to tend our sails accordingly.

We are named for James. And James the Apostle himself had a nickname – Son of Thunder. A difficult nickname to celebrate in these days when religious fervour is viewed with such suspicion. St James's Church is named after a disciple who was hot headed, got things really wrong, was unattractively competitive, and clearly (in Matthew's gospel) had a complicated relationship with his mother. If you have ever got things really wrong, if you have ever made a mistake, if you have ever had a complicated relationship with your family, James is a saint for you.

Set as we are in central London, you and I know, because we're human beings, that being part of this church of St James's does not inoculate us to or protect us from the competitive, anxious, money-driven instincts that we find in ourselves and everyone else if we look hard enough. Churches are not full of perfect people – quite the opposite – churches are full of people who have somehow recognized that they need God.

We are not by any means perfect, but what we have said is that we want to be on the lookout – not for the next big thing or the next global star or the next economic trend – but leaning out, on the lookout for the deepest truths about God and about us. And to help us keep ourselves anchored and looking towards the far horizon, we try to do some important things together.....

In a noisy city we want to offer silence
In a relentless city we want to offer rest.
In a competitive and unequal city, we want to offer
a vision of utter acceptance and forgiveness
offered by Jesus Christ to everyone who comes.

In a city where many are lost – we invite you to be
found.

In a city where many are lonely, we invite you to
build community across different ages and
backgrounds, and find friends.

In a city full of distractions, we invite you to pray.

And when you have nothing left, when the fear
that you feel seems to have won, when all seems
lost and you are quietly despairing, we say that
there is no more authentic way to come to God;
you are *most of all welcome if you come like that*.

And you know, sometimes, although it's really
important to listen – and Christians should surely
spend much more time listening than speaking –
you know that sometimes it is important to speak
up – to say clearly, publicly and without
equivocation that our faith in Jesus Christ
persuades us that there is no barrier between you
and God so don't let the church or anyone else try
to build one.

We are gay, we are straight, we are trans, we are
wealthy, we are poor. We are vulnerably housed,
some of us have our own homes, some of us have
jobs we're not sure about, some of us love our
work and some of us are pretty desperate to find
some. Some of us have retired.
Some of us are not that well.

Some of us struggle with our mental health, some
of us struggle with our weakening bodies, even
though our spirits are strong. Some of us have
almost given up on life, some of us are bursting
with energy to make the world a better place. We
are aged nought to 95. What binds us is that we
have said we are willing to go deeper, go ever
deeper, looking for the depths and trying to face
the truths that we know are within us and that
connect us to God.

So to our central London parish, we say, because
we are Londoners ourselves, we know that you are
working hard, in the coffee shops around here or
in the hotels. We know that it's really hard to make
the rent, and that some of you live in situations
that make you really miserable, we know that you
are working hard in the offices here – and we know

too that some of you are making an eye watering
amount of money. We also know that for some of
you these streets and this church building is the
only home you know.

We also want to say from our lookout position,
from our anchored faith, that we believe you
matter – immensely – and that the gospel is good
news for all of us. A gospel of healing and peace.

The tradition of this parish being active in this city
goes right back to the foundation of the church
itself. In 1688, the year of the last Roman Catholic
king in England and 4 years after this church was
opened, the parish decided to establish a
workhouse for people who at that time were
known as the *able bodied poor*. By 1776, the
workhouse in Poland Street, Soho, a stone's throw
from this building, had grown into one of the
largest in the country. In the 1881 census this
workhouse had over 600 people living there.
A 19th century song was called the *St James's
Infirmary Blues* – derived from an English folk song
called *The Unfortunate Rake*. St James's Infirmary
Blues was recorded by, no less, Louis Armstrong,
Joe Cocker, Van Morrison, Hugh Laurie and more
recently, the band White Stripes. It's a powerful
lament for a young man or woman, cut down by
disease and tells the story of one of the young
people of this parish. But this story and this song
have now been sung all over the world. Taking into
account all the famous versions of this song over
the past 200 years or so, I tell you that there will be
no finer rendition of this song than that played and
sung by you later in this service. Although it is not
a usual song to sing during a service, and it is not
directly addressed to God, it tells powerfully the
story of one of God's people in this parish, and
reminds us of the absolute imperative to confront
injustice in our own lives and in the life of this city.

We are simply the latest generation of people to
be the St James's church; and there will be others
here in the future who call this courtyard theirs -
whose names we will never know - after every one
of us here has died.

And so leaning out from our lookout perspective,
with James as our companion in Christ, let us now
sit for a moment in silence and listen to the sounds
of the city, and to the sound of our own beating
heart as part of it and know that here, even here,
even now, God is with us. Amen.

Lucy Winkett