

# THE ARCHBISHOP'S COMMISSARY



Bathed in late evening sunlight, the saints on the West Front of the cathedral gaze down on me as I walk past. I pause; look up at them, trying to see who they all might be. Mostly male, I notice, (but in my experience there are more women saints than men). They are in a variety of poses, one or two looking slightly self-conscious, as though they wish they could get down from their perches, go home and put on a pair of jeans and a sweat shirt.

But there they are, representatives of fragile and ordinary human beings like you and me, who have, nevertheless, made such an impact upon the world that they are for ever cast in stone. They are a kind of quiet welcoming party, beckoning us through the west doors into the cool beauty of the chancel and the nave. Or, if you prefer, reminding us that our home is, as it were, beyond the stars, with God and the saints in heaven.

I have loved the (rare) opportunities to stand at the West Front, recognising that I hardly know who many of the statues might represent. I make a note to myself that before I shed the task of being the Archbishop's Commissary, I really must get to know them. No doubt, someone will soon enlighten me.

But for the moment, they are a glorious and elusive gathering. They are the human dimension on a cliff-face of exquisite beauty. They bask in their surroundings and prompt our imaginations to take over... When the Close is wrapped in night-time stillness, do they whisper to each other? Do they tut-tut about what they have seen from their eyries? Do they weep for our mistakes and our strutting certainties? If they could descend, would they make their way in a noisy gaggle towards the city centre, joshing each other about who was going to pay for their meal? Do they pray for us?

They have kept watch as thousands of people have strolled past. They have seen countless processions, and have witnessed those great moments when a new bishop takes his place in the diocese.

Before very long they will witness another new diocesan bishop come into the cathedral. What will they say then? I think they will say little but will be especially still, deep in prayer, promising to watch and wait with him and all the people of the diocese as they witness to God's love in Jesus Christ.

Surrounded as we are by saints such as these who intercede for us, we can look backwards with thanksgiving for all that has been good in the past, and look forward with a light-hearted confidence to the future.

Meanwhile, there they stand, beckoning us towards what God would have us be. What a gift...

Give thanks for them; pray with them and with a loving, generous heart for your new bishop; and thank you for having made me so welcome, allowing me to stand and gaze at your Salisbury saints.

With my prayers and blessing,

**+ Christopher Herbert 2011**

(The former Bishop of St Albans, the Rt Revd Dr Christopher Herbert, is acting as the Archbishop of Canterbury's delegate until the new Bishop's installation, and we welcome his contribution to the Spire.)