

CHICHESTER CATHEDRAL

Date:	12 October 2025
Service:	Eucharist, St Wilfrid
Preacher:	The Very Revd Dr Edward Dowler, Dean

As many of you will know, we have a very splendid panel painting in the south transept by a sixteenth century artist called Lambert Barnard. It is particularly familiar to members of the choir who line up in front of it before every choral service.

Barnard depicts two parallel scenes related to the life of Chichester Cathedral. In the right-hand section, King Henry VIII gives to Bishop Robert Sherborne a formal confirmation of his bishopric of Chichester. In the left-hand section, King Caedwalla of Wessex, clearly an animal lover judging by the pet monkey near his feet, gives St Wilfrid of Northumbria in the 680s the land at Selsey to be the site of the episcopal see in this area. This was of course later relocated to Chichester.

May I share three brief reflections about this scene.

First of all, at least three out of the four people depicted in this painting were probably not very nice. With Henry VIII, this rather goes without saying. But the Anglo-Saxon King Caedwalla who at one point resolved to kill every single inhabitant of the Isle of Wight in order to replace them with his own stooges may even have been worse. St Wilfrid of Northumbria was known throughout the land as a monk and prolific builder of churches, but was perpetually turbulent and quarrelsome. So the first reflection is that the painting displays that building the Church is always a work of God's grace, working through this unlikely set of people who laid the foundations of where we are today. And his grace also works through us, unlikely though we are, to have some part in building his holy people and witnessing to his love and his kingdom.

The second reflection is that these two parallel paintings of a king and a bishop (Caedwalla and Wilfrid on the left; Henry VII and Sherborne on the right) make an unmistakeable statement about the alliance and interdependence of Church

and state. It is in this way a particularly Anglican picture of the established church because in its very structure it stresses the relationship between king and bishop; between church and state. According to Barnard's picture, the state – embodied by the king – gives the Church freedom to pursue her mission of bringing Christ to all people; but the Church remains accountable to the state. Neither is independent on the other: reciprocity and mutual accountability are built into their relations with one another. It is not and never could be a perfect system and a lot will always depend upon the people involved who may like those in the picture, leave a lot to be desired. But in some way it holds the Church and the society it is called to serve together, and recognises the rights and responsibilities of each.

A third and final reflection is about mission and vocation and relates to each one of us. For these are two pictures about particular individuals: St Wilfrid and Bishop Sherborne being called and sent out. Sent out – yes – by the two kings Caedwalla and Henry, but before they ever came across those two kings, they heard the call of God in their lives. He had specific tasks for them to do: tasks which the two kings recognised but certainly did not initiate. As for every Christian, the particular task that each was given was unique: it was entrusted to nobody else in quite the same way. And so for each of us, the work that we are called to do whether in the Church, in the family, in some particular profession, or indeed in the many opportunities and responsibilities that retirement brings is unique. As today we celebrate Wilfrid, our co-patron, let us recommit ourselves to those today through the grace of the God whose power is made perfect in our human weakness.