



Installation of the Chancellor of The Most Venerable Order of the Hospital of St John of Jerusalem

08 September 2021

– Installation Address –

**Your Royal Highness, Lord Prior and distinguished members of the Order of St John,
Johanniter and Sovereign Order of Malta, friends, and family,**

Thank you for taking the time to come here today. Without your presence and the support of many St John volunteers together with the ceremonial team, the International Office, and the Priory Church of England, we would not have been able to enjoy the celebration of our community and its continuity represented in the installation of another of its Great Officers. People all over the world will we hope be able to enjoy this event online for which I am grateful because respected members of the Order including the Lord Prior and Sub Prior cannot be with us physically due to government-imposed travel restrictions.

Like a university accountably holding publicly accessible degree ceremonies, this is our own equivalent despite family jokes about Professor Snape and Harry Potter. Postulants for Investiture later in this service may know that Her Majesty The Queen herself was presented with a Service Medal in Gold plus Bars for 65 years of active service in 2020. There is a beautiful photograph of the moment among the St John International webpages. Please find that webpage, bookmark it and return to it regularly to keep yourself up to date.

I'd like to welcome everyone, whether friend and supporter of a postulant; the choir, who are linking in a subliminal way in their anthem by the poet Peter Abelard the present moment in the twenty-first with the twelfth century – a connection which takes us back in time, expressing longing for both the earthly and heavenly Jerusalem a vision of part of the motivation for the underlying foundation of our work.

What does a Chancellor actually do? I hear you cry.

I am still finding out after fourteen fascinating months, visiting every continent remotely from the comfort of my own home and being kept in line by my Great Officer colleagues, the Honorary Legal Officer, the Secretary General and the Head of Chancery.

It is my role, as a member of this team to reflect on and sustain the culture and the governance of our Order and the primacy of its voluntary nature: to be alive to equity and fairness in all our regulatory and honours dealings and sensitive to culturally different emphases around the world in the life of the Order of St John. It is my job on all our behalf to keep the regulations consistent and the appeals fair; to assist in the admission and promotion of people who have made and will continue to make sacrifices to bring through first aid, lives saved, ambulances paid for and maintained; channels primed. It has been tremendously satisfying to participate in the early months of the setup of the gender diversity women's leadership project.

And significantly, as Chancellor, it is also my privilege, standing on the shoulders of very distinguished, respected and loved predecessors to continue to build strong links between the Alliance of the three Johanniter Orders in Europe, the Sovereign Military Order of Malta and ourselves. I would like again to welcome guests from these fraternal Orders on behalf of us all.

To the text, kindly read by the Karl, Vice-Chair of the newly established international Youth group of the Order: IYAN: whose Chair, Tom is in Australia and whose Secretary, Jenny lives in Kenya.

A boy offers bread and fish in what seem hopeless, transformed by the action of God.

You might have expected one of the many miracles of healing which are recorded as more suited to our calling. Etymologically, through 'salvus' the themes of spiritual and physical salvation were connected in the theology and practice of the early Christian church where, in the surrounding ancient Roman world, there was no history of communitarian philanthropy towards the sick. Christ the Healer was a significant trope. It is for this reason that monasteries, like St John the Baptist in Jerusalem which followed the Rule of St Benedict put so much emphasis on hospitals and healing – it was a way of expressing the character of God, reaching out, demonstrating the faith, making resources available which dramatically alleviated the suffering of the sick and the poor, a transforming metaphor of the new Jerusalem.

The theme of the feeding of many hungry people in this passage is however instructive in a different way. The boy stepped up. A trusted adult mediated. (The Bible does not record that the trusted adult was in St John uniform but for our purposes she or he might be.) We need the unexpected offerings of young people to be accepted.

On the subject of attempts to recruit the young over 45 years ago, during the Cold War I was given a British cultural scholarship to travel from the University of Oxford to the Soviet Union, spending three weeks in the most beautiful city of Leningrad, blowing most of my allowance on ice cream and theatre tickets. One of the compulsory lectures for our group of postgrad students was to listen to a very eminent Russian Professor of Aesthetics, Ethics and Atheism expounding the philosophical basis of Soviet Materialism, a system of inexorable and reductive logic. I'm sorry to say his conclusions felt forced and sterile, utterly inflexible; unresponsive to the human complexities which attract me personally to the study of literature and theology; I am sorry to say we found it exhaustingly dull: unable at any level to generate the new Jerusalem it proposed.

In great contrast to the tedium of the Atheism lecture, the loaves and fishes text read to us today is full of hope, surprise, creativity and the astonishing action of God.

The situation in this text bears comparison with the one we face now, a worldwide pandemic: impossible and overwhelming need. How do billions of people receive first aid, vaccines, support, help. We have to recognise: we can't do it.

I find a couple of points in the loaves and fishes narrative instructive:

1. The lad, the boy, a child had no status or voice but held the answer (as an aside St Benedict, our indirect founder, wrote in his monastic rule: 'attend to the voice of the youngest monk').
2. An intelligent and trustworthy adult, the disciple Andrew, bridged the gap. Spoke up. Took a risk on behalf of a younger person. 5 loaves and 2 fishes. What is that among so many? He raised the question.
3. The action of God in this narrative is hidden. We are only given the result: twelve baskets full of what was left over.

If we look at the history and the present experience all over the world of the Order of St John we can see twelve baskets, to be exact eleven Priors, and the Eye Hospital, you could say twelve baskets in itself, Associations and Establishments covering over 40 countries.

St John is a serving Order and resources vary among us from those supporting the Ambulance work throughout the Covid crisis and beyond in person, those generously offering financial support and those quietly faithful to an aspect of the Order which is largely unappreciated, the St John Fellowship friends of St John over many years of dedication. I have suggested earlier that the ceremonial team also participates in a psychological act of communal healing. The Order Librarian is forming a heritage and history group which together with the Museum opens it up archives, enabling writing and reinterpreting of our history for scholarly and digitised examination of the treasures of the past. All this is service and offering. We out to engage in the tradition of our foundation with the needs of the sick and the vulnerable of the world in the face of challenges including climate change pandemic and transitional post-pandemic employment patterns among volunteers.

Under the leadership of the Lord Prior the Order is developing and rolling-out a new strategy, with a focus on first aid and meeting community healthcare needs. Part of the practical outcomes will involve working towards a global regional structure, trusting our federated entities to new dynamic configurations with slightly altered patterns of local responsibility chains. We are opening up to diversity, to the newly established International Youth organisation, and the women's leadership project. I am interested in ventures in Canada to relate to the Inuit and in New Zealand to Maori first aiders, and in thinking about how they might be integrated into the honours structure. I am told by the Prior of Hong Kong that St John Hong Kong is establishing groups within China which has not traditionally had a tradition of volunteering.

Let us leave this service today with the resolve to offer up our own loaves and fish to God and our neighbour, sometimes daunted in the face of apparently impossible odds, supported by our trusted structures, and offer action. Back in Leningrad we were told that the philosophy offered was destined for global supremacy. Yet it turned out to last less than one lifetime.

It is my hope that the next few years of the life of the Order of St John and the Johannine Orders will, in great contrast, give stability to human growth and the further establishment of a first aid model which will continue to bring life to thousands of people, accepting the voluntary giving of ourselves, our medically refined first aid understanding and our faith in God to increase humane compassion among us.

Thank you.