

## WHAT ARE CATHEDRALS FOR?

We are all familiar with Jesus' entry into the Temple – His fury at the money-changers and pigeon sellers are a rare example of an apparent loss of self-control as He overturns tables and chases people outside; 'You have made my house a den of robbers'.

Predictably this passage makes us very cautious about the permissible uses of consecrated space. No room for ringing tills or credit-card readers in Church thank you very much.

Accordingly we put on concerts of 'serious' music, and permit the occasional flower festival, but that is usually the limit.

So it may come as a surprise to hear what they are doing in Chester Cathedral this month. For some years now, they have allowed the nave to be taken over by a model railway show no less, which is now a fixture in the calendar. It has become a tradition almost instantly, which all sounds very counter-intuitive. But should it actually surprise us? Firstly, North-west England needs a bit of cheering up at the moment. Secondly, it's a hobby which carries social benefits. (There's research which suggests it's an ideal pastime for at-risk neurodiverse teenagers). Thirdly, Cathedrals are notoriously expensive to run and to maintain, so folk are presumably happy to pay an entrance fee. Lastly, and most importantly, these buildings were designed to be public spaces, to be open to all. Even though there's a background hum of debit-card readers on this occasion. Chester would not be doing this if it did not bring joy to many people.

And is that word 'joy' the yardstick?

Yes, Jesus clearly intended there to be limits. Enough of our daily lives are now commercialized. A Cathedral is not a shop –least of all for pigeons- and we should be very careful not to impose financial barriers to entry into what we proclaim to be God's house. So joy could indeed be the yardstick. Joy that is inclusive, joy that signifies welcome, joy that makes our sacred spaces open to all. Joy – as CS Lewis argued – is a source of surprise.

So as we prepare for our earthquake strengthening project, let us think about the uses to which a modernized Cathedral can be put in the 21<sup>st</sup> Century. We have been gifted an incredible site and a wonderful building. What joys await us inside?