

# CANTERBURY CATHEDRAL

## C. 1167

“The story begins on ground level, with footsteps.”

—MICHEL DE CERTEAU

**THE VIEW FROM THE TOP** of Canterbury Cathedral is absolutely breathtaking. Looking out from Bell Harry Tower, the view extends to the horizon in every direction, with the English Channel to the south and London to the west. From the top of the 235-foot tall bell tower, even the enormous nave of the cathedral seems small. Further down below the nave lies the town of Canterbury, founded by the Romans nearly two thousand years ago. The Roman walls still mark the circumference of the city center, encompassing a street plan that largely dates from the Middle Ages. There is layer upon layer of ancient, medieval, and modern history in Canterbury, and at the center of it all, just as it has been for more than fourteen hundred years, is the cathedral. After soaking in the view from the tower, I headed down inside the cathedral, entering through the western portal, moving slowly eastward through the nave, the transept—where the two axes of the cathedral intersect, the choir—where wooden stalls serve as seating for worship leaders, the high altar, and finally to the Trinity Chapel. The cathedral interior is jaw-droppingly beautiful. The vaulted ceilings seem to rise all the way up to heaven as light pours into the space through the tall stained glass windows. Every surface is

covered with highly detailed artwork, which all together proclaim the glory of God and reflect the beauty of heaven. It nearly overwhelms the senses and the soul. After taking in this celestial experience, I exited the cathedral and meandered through the streets surrounding the cathedral precincts checking out the local shops and cafés, marveling at how the modern rhythms of life pulse through this medieval town.

Like other pilgrims in this digital age who can't make a physical journey to the storied religious site, I took this excursion through Canterbury online—from my laptop, sitting at my dining room table—taking a virtual tour on the cathedral's website<sup>1</sup> and checking out the city on Google Street View. It is a far different pilgrimage than that of Chaucer's pilgrims to Canterbury: the knight, the miller, the cook, the pardoner, the wife of Bath, and the parson, of *The Canterbury Tales* fame, traveling to venerate the shine of the murdered archbishop, Thomas Becket. Nonetheless, the advanced technologies used to create the virtual tour make the cathedral accessible for digital pilgrims like me. There's another important difference: Chaucer imagined the *fictional* characters of the *Tales* in Canterbury. My pilgrimage was neither fictional nor, in the sense of grounded, embodied experience on High Street, exactly entirely "real" in any conventional pre-digital sense. It's not quite the same as being there with travelling companions, hearing choral music echo through the great building, but the high resolution and three-hundred-sixty-degree views of the cathedral provide some sense of immersion and the ability to linger over the fine details of the cathedral's art and architecture.

Canterbury Cathedral is one of the greatest and most beloved cathedrals in all the Church. It is the mother church of the Church of England and the Anglican Communion. And, subtly to remind you of that, Canterbury Cathedral's Twitter handle is @No1Cathedral. When I learned that, I tweeted "Love that Canterbury Cathedral's Twitter handle is @No1Cathedral #werenumberone . . . ,"<sup>2</sup> which the cathedral favorited, and to which the dean of Durham Cathedral, Michael Sadgrove, replied

“But NB<sup>3</sup> this cathedral has six times as many Twitter followers. It’s not a competition. @durhamcathedral”<sup>4</sup> Not a competition at all! Here, at the outset of this project and in the spirit of my digital pilgrimage, I was able to cross three thousand miles with a single tweet and connect with both Canterbury and Durham Cathedrals, which became, then, an occasion for them to engage in some playful digital ribbing.

This brief exchange had the effect of making this book project and cathedrals themselves much more personal for me. These were no longer distant, historic buildings and institutions to be studied, but real places and real people to be understood and engaged. It engendered in me a genuine affection, which sustained and informed my work. Months later, as I was finalizing my manuscript, I had the occasion to correspond with the staff of the Canterbury Cathedral archive. They were incredibly helpful and gracious. And so, nearly six months to the day after that first exchange, I tweeted back to Canterbury once again, this time expressing my gratitude: “Cool book writing moment: corresponding with the very helpful @No1Cathedral archives today for research on @thedigcathedral.”<sup>5</sup> Our relationship, like this project, had come full circle.

## PLEASE PARDON OUR APPEARANCE DURING CONSTRUCTION

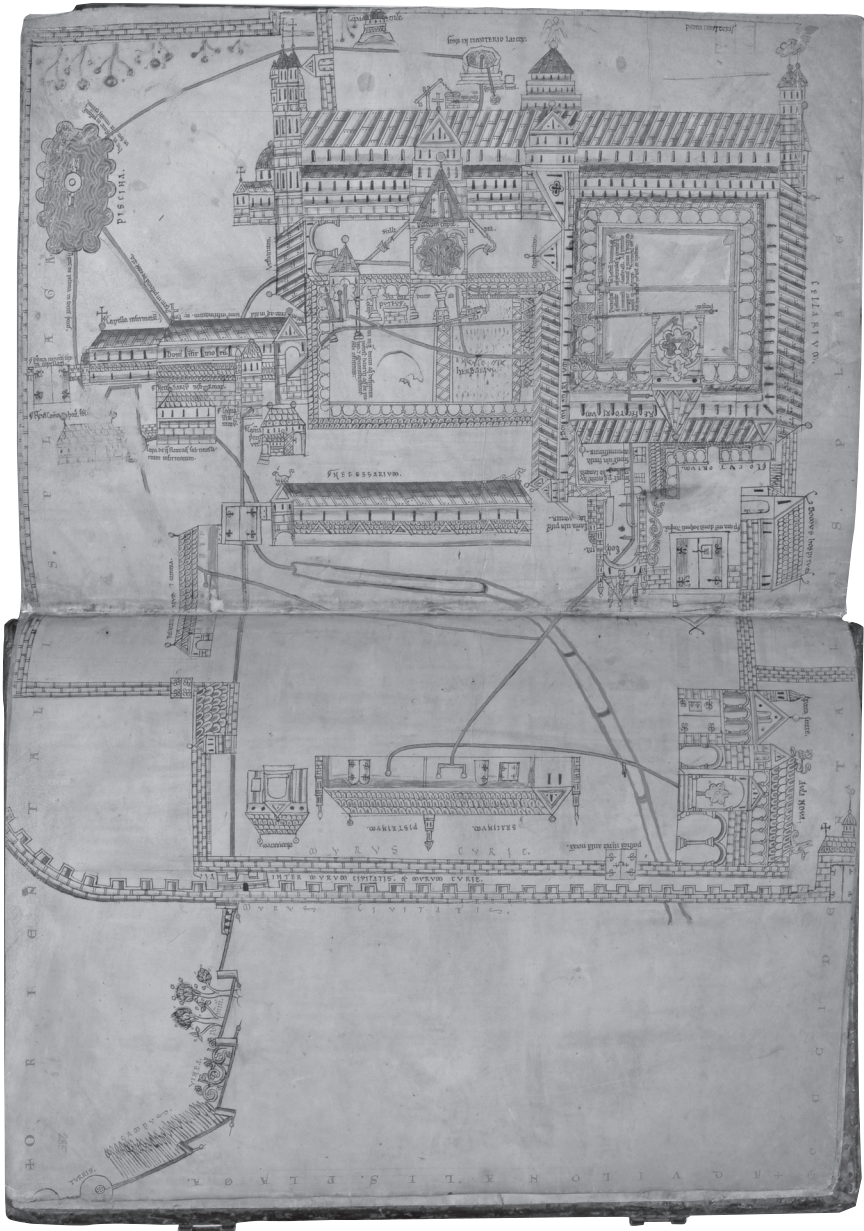
Exploring these sorts of digital relationships draws on the ethos of cathedral life that goes back at least to the early Middle Ages. Although the origins of Canterbury Cathedral can be traced as far back as 597 CE, we will look particularly at the era from the eleventh century through the end of the twelfth century. It was a defining time for Canterbury. In 1067 the Anglo-Saxon iteration of the cathedral was burned and completely destroyed by Vikings; it would take a decade to rebuild it under the direction of Archbishop Lanfranc. When he arrived in Canterbury from France in 1070, “Lanfranc found a community in a ruined

church holding their services by the tomb of St. Dunstan, huddled under the eleventh century equivalent of a tarpaulin.”<sup>6</sup> The new Romanesque-style cathedral was completed seven years later, and a series of building improvements immediately ensued under the direction of Prior Conrad and Prior Wilbur.

Prior Wilbur is not one of the great legendary figures in the history of Canterbury like Lanfranc or Thomas Becket, but he made enduring and important contributions to the cathedral and its history. One of those contributions is a drawing of the system that supplied the cathedral precincts with water. Known as the Waterworks Drawing from the *Eadwine Psalter*, it dates from around 1167, the last year Prior Wilbur was Abbot of Christ Church, and illustrates how water was piped in from a spring outside the city walls to the water tower that still stands on the northeast side of the cathedral to be distributed throughout the precincts.

The color-coded plan, using green for fresh water, orange-red for used water, and red for sewage, shows how the water flowed into the cathedral precincts first to the water tower and from there to the infirmary, then to the great cloister, where monks could wash before services, on to the *lavatorium*, and then out to the kitchen, bakery, and brewery, before being deposited into the fishpond. From there it was carried back to flush away the waste at the *necessarium* (the monastic latrines) and finally emptied into a city ditch.<sup>7</sup> Looking at the drawing today, the lines indicating the location of pipes seem more like lines of fiber optic cable networking the buildings to one another. Indeed, the Waterworks plan shows just how interconnected the cathedral was to its precincts—the buildings immediately surrounding it—those who worshipped and worked there, and the town of Canterbury itself.

The Waterworks may not have been remarkable in its engineering compared to other monasteries. However, “what is exceptional is the quality of the cartography by which they are recorded. Decorative and apparently accurate, it constitutes most of the evidence for the disposition and architecture of the



The Waterworks Drawing from the Edwine Psalter, c. 1167. Courtesy: Trinity College Library, Cambridge, UK

cathedral and monastic buildings in the mid-twelfth century.”<sup>8</sup> It is so accurate that “if we were to cut around each building, the drawing would become a pop-up model for the monastery.”<sup>9</sup> But it’s notable for more than just its accuracy. Maps—especially, as French philosopher Michel de Certeau notes, medieval maps—are not just static documents, but communicate movement, an active story. He writes, “What the map cuts up, the story cuts across.”<sup>10</sup> The Waterworks Drawing opens up for us a larger story of life and people in Canterbury.

Take, for instance, the story of Ingenulph the plumber, who worked for the monastery during this time and probably helped to maintain the Waterworks. He made twenty-five shillings a year as the staff plumber, a trade he inherited from his father, Norman. He lived near Burgate with his wife Eldrith, herself a brewer (a common job for women at the time). She supplied the monastery with beer for eight pounds a year, four times her husband’s annual salary.

Or, meet Feramin the master physician, who tended to sick monks in the infirmary, also served by the Waterworks. He was among the wealthiest citizens of Canterbury, one of only about thirty residents who could afford to live in a stone house. He is reported to have had two religious visions of St. Thomas Becket—one in the cathedral crypt, which he saw filled with young queens weeping for Thomas’ approaching death, the other near the former bell tower as the monks made their procession at Pentecost riding through the precincts of Canterbury, again foretelling Thomas’ future glory. Later, he would found the hospital of St. Jacob for leprous women near the part of town called Wincheap.

Then there is the story of Godefrid, who worked in the bakery indicated on the Waterworks, along with his co-workers Roger and Walter. He lived on Orange Street not far from the Christ Church Gate, and tended a couple of acres outside the city walls. He was married with three sons. His family was also touched by the cult of St. Thomas. It is said that his sons were cured by the touch of a rag that had been dipped in Thomas Becket’s blood when he died. In fact, “one of the early Miracles of St. Thomas is

the recall to life of the dying child of Godefrid the baker, by virtue of the holy blood, while the saint saved two other children in this somewhat sickly family.”<sup>11</sup> Godefrid was also the notorious ring-leader of a revolt by the monastery servants against the cathedral monks in 1188.

These snapshots of the real and complex lives of average people in Canterbury are not the ones typically found in official histories of Canterbury or other cathedrals. These stories are compiled from medieval rental records of the priory of Christ Church dating from the late twelfth and early thirteenth centuries. Canterbury was administered by Christ Church Benedictine monastery until the mid-sixteenth century, when King Henry VIII dissolved the monasteries during the English Reformation. The monks were responsible for the construction and care of the cathedral, as well as the administration of the cathedral properties.

It is estimated that the monks of Canterbury Cathedral were the lords over between one-third and one-half of all the domestic property in Canterbury, collecting rents and recording payments—and they kept all their receipts. Thus, many of the three thousand or so residents lived as tenants of the cathedral.<sup>12</sup> The stories of Inguelph, Feramin, Godefrid, and their families begin to open up for us the life of this thriving town of three thousand souls, which,

By 1234 had at least two hundred shops, ranging from “holes in the wall” to more substantial edifices, of which over a hundred owed rent to Christ Church. There was a full range of markets—cattle, butter, fish, timber, oats, salt, and perhaps wine—some of which have left traces in the present day topography (Wincheap, Oaten Hill, Salt Hill) and the various trades and professions necessary to service the monastic communities within and without the city walls as well as the citizens: butchers, bakers, brewers, mercers . . . saddlers, wool merchants, weavers, plumbers, masons, glaziers, and carpenters.<sup>13</sup>

Along with the cathedral and Christ Church monastery, there were two other monasteries, a convent, twenty-two parishes with

eighty priests, and even a synagogue spread throughout the city. There were potters, masons, millers, bakers, spinners and weavers, mercers (cloth traders), metalworkers, tanners, butchers, shopkeepers, the poor, goldsmiths, and government officials. Although marriages and baptisms and much of the worship life in Canterbury were celebrated in local parishes, as we have seen, many of these people were connected to the monastery and cathedral through rental obligations. Many others were also connected by their work constructing or servicing the cathedral building, commercial dealings, family ties to particular monks, or religious and spiritual devotion. Throughout the cathedral's history, it and the town have had a symbiotic relationship. Today, the city's identity and self-understanding continue to be shaped by the cathedral.

It's almost impossible for us today, cloistered and separated as we are in our private homes and widely distributed workplaces, to imagine the expansive and profoundly interconnected nature of life in a cathedral town such as Canterbury (or, of course, Durham). Here, people lived life fully "in cathedral"—in relationship to one another within an expansive, everyday understanding of "church." The phrase "in cathedral," coined by Elizabeth Drescher, is a play on the term *ex cathedra*, literally "from the chair" of the bishop installed in the diocesan church—that is, speaking from his official station. By contrast, "in cathedral" speaks to the often overlooked spirituality of everyday life in Christian community in distinction from the formal spirituality of the institutional church. As we begin to see all of life as "in cathedral," we move from the historical equivalent of the virtual tour on the cathedral website, standing high atop the cathedral bell tower, looking at the surrounding town from a distance, to something more akin to Google Street View, taking in the everyday life that surrounds and shapes the cathedral.



This all became embodied for me as I was sitting at a table in the sidewalk patio of the Hungarian Pastry Shop, a small café, at Amsterdam and 111th Street in New York City. I had stopped





Mural at the Hungarian Pastry Shop, Morningside Heights, Manhattan. Photo: Keith Anderson

at the café for a quick bite before a day of exploring the Cathedral of St. John the Divine, the seat of the Episcopal Diocese of New York and the third largest church in the world. As I enjoyed my coffee—and an utterly life-changing cheese Danish—while gazing across the street at the massive cathedral, I watched the neighborhood of Morningside Heights on the Upper West Side of Manhattan spring to life. Delivery trucks and tour buses had already begun stopping outside the cathedral. So had the traffic cops who were keeping tabs on them. Dog walkers were on their beat, as were young parents outfitted with chest-mounted baby carriers. A fruit and vegetable stand was set up just across the street to entice visitors and locals. Early morning cathedral visitors were flowing back and forth to the pastry shop, taking in both spiritual and physical nourishment. The cathedral and

pastry shop offered something of both. In fact, the first religious artwork I saw that day was not at the cathedral, but the pastry shop itself, as paintings of angels and the mystical covered the exterior of the shop.

This would be my first visit to St. John the Divine and I planned to spend the entire day absorbing life “in cathedral” here. I took two tours and attended the daily noontime Eucharist, but, mindful of Wilbur’s Waterworks, I was equally interested in exploring the surrounding neighborhood. Like Canterbury and its cathedral, St. John and the neighborhood of Morningside Heights grew up together, the development of both dating from the late nineteenth century. For some time the neighborhood was referred to as Cathedral Heights. Still today, West 110th Street, and the subway stop along it, is known as Cathedral Parkway.

Just outside the doors of the cathedral—its modern-day precincts—are Mt. Sinai St. Luke’s hospital and emergency room, the Engine 47 fire company, a convalescent home, and an assortment of apartment buildings, restaurants, and cafés. In the surrounding blocks, students from nearby Columbia University hustled off to class. Homeless people with shopping carts stuffed with bags sat at the entrance to Morningside Park. During my tour of the neighborhood, I would walk past a small neighborhood street fair, a farmers’ market, and softball games in the park—people and places that all fell “in cathedral.”

The stories I heard on my tours inside the cathedral—stories of its history, art, and architecture—continually pointed outside the cathedral to the city. There were stories of local artists and work they had done not just in the cathedral but also throughout the city, such as the famed Guastavino tiles that also adorn the Oyster Bar at Grand Central Station, public bath houses, and subway stations. With my companions on the cathedral tour, I learned that the crypt below the nave of the great cathedral was home to, of all things, a basketball court where children from the cathedral school played and where meals for the homeless were served. We heard how in the 1970s and 1980s young adults from

the neighborhood were trained in cathedral construction and helped to build the cathedral for a time. **What I learned from our tour guides at St. John the Divine was that the story of a cathedral, any cathedral, cannot properly be told without telling the story of the neighborhood and city that surrounds it.**

## WHERE'S GODEFRID?

### OUR ECCLESIASTICAL BLIND SPOT

Cathedral historian Robert Barron acknowledges that in the study of cathedrals there is often too much focus on the building itself, and too little about the life and people around it. He says, “Too often, while recounting the histories of individual cathedrals and great churches, scholarly works mention in passing only the scantest details about the larger social, political, religious, and cultural contexts out of which the impetus to build each one grew.”<sup>14</sup> Often we hear the stories of kings, priors, archbishops, master builders, or deans, but miss the stories of people who lived and worked in the shadow of the cathedral. We can fall prey to that same impulse when it comes to the way we think about our churches today. Our church buildings or activities can be so much in the foreground of our work and consciousness that we don't see the people and stories just outside our doors. Like the villagers of medieval Canterbury, who have been largely obscured from view by the distance of history, our neighbors today can be hidden by our limited perspective and narrow understanding of what constitutes “church.”

I'm convinced that one of the major challenges for today's church leaders is a matter of perspective. For ministry leaders, the church, whether by that we mean the building or the institution, is often at the center of our time and focus. People in parish ministry spend most of our time there, along with much of our emotional, spiritual, and intellectual energy. This is a good and noble thing. However, we can become so focused on the interworking of our congregations that we miss what is going on down the block and across our communities. We miss the Inguelphs,

Eldriths, Feramins, and Godefrids—the Hungarian Pastry Shops—just beyond our doors. This myopia is especially dangerous in a time of institutional decline. Debates and worry over the fate of church institutions, while acknowledging the mortality of the institution, which seems a good and healthy thing, paradoxically reinforce the focus on the institution itself rather than pushing us to look beyond its boundaries. Even as the number of people present in our congregations dwindle, our fixation on the institution grows. We spend more and more time worrying over the internal operations of our institutions, even as fewer and fewer people attend and belong. Thus, we inhabit and concern ourselves with an ever-shrinking piece of cultural and spiritual real estate.

Moreover, we often operate with a totalizing view with the church at the center and everything else running out into the horizon. The church is so in the foreground of our experience that everything is interpreted in relationship to the church. We see Sunday morning sports as a threat rather than an opportunity to connect with people's daily lives. We tell a story about Nones turning their backs on the church, rather than appreciating the way in which they make meaning and practice their spirituality. We conceive of our faith communities too narrowly, not taking into account the broad expanse of community in lived Christian experience beyond our buildings. We curse the problems with church as institution, but, because we are so stuck in that frame, we propose institutional solutions, when the problem is institutionalism itself. For many leaders, this has created a kind of ecclesiastical blind spot, what Cynthia Baker has called an "anopticon"—a perspective that renders people and places invisible to our gaze.<sup>15</sup>

*The Digital Cathedral* is an invitation to shift this perspective. It is an invitation to see all of life as "in cathedral" and claim a much broader understanding of who belongs to our community, and where church and faith happen. The work begins by placing ourselves outside of our church buildings or ministry offices, both digitally or physically. When we do, as The Rev. Emily Mellott, national coordinator of Ashes to Go—a collection of

congregations offering ashes outside their church buildings on Ash Wednesday—says, we are “practicing thinking differently” about place, the architecture of community and participation, as life more broadly “in cathedral.”

## WALKING THE CITY

In his masterful essay, “Walking the City,” Michel de Certeau argues that if we only look at a city from a great height or distance, writing as he did in the late twentieth century from the World Trade Center in Manhattan, or the distance of history, a city remains a concept, a “read-only” computer file that can be viewed but not interacted with by the user. To understand the city, he writes, one must enter into the midst of it, walking the streets, taking in the sights, sounds, and smells, and absorbing its nuances and contradictions. Only then, he says, can we experience the complexity, creativity, and heart of the city—and, for that matter, the cathedral. He writes, “The ordinary practitioners of the city live ‘down below,’ below the thresholds at which visibility begins. They walk—an elementary form of this experience of the city; they are walkers . . . whose bodies follow the thicks and thins of an urban ‘text’ they write without being able to read it.”<sup>16</sup> To understand the city, indeed, to create the city itself, one must walk the city and engage with others in “practices that invent spaces,” just as I did that day in Morningside Heights.<sup>17</sup> To fully engage in our world today, we too must be willing to leave the safety and protection of our church buildings, our pulpits, our offices, and walk the streets, visit local and digital gathering places, in order to connect with those beyond our buildings, and to see what God is up to in the world.

## HUMANS OF NEW YORK

If Certeau were alive today, I imagine he would have enjoyed the Tumblr blog called Humans of New York. Begun by Brandon Stanton in 2010, Humans of New York (HONY) is a collection

of pictures, quotes, and short stories that offer “daily glimpses into the lives of strangers in New York City.”<sup>18</sup> HONY has more than twelve million followers on social media and has spawned a series of best-selling books. Every day Stanton walks New York City streets taking pictures of strangers. He says, “It became more about picking a random person off the street no matter where they happen to be and celebrating them on a stage every night.” With a photo and accompanying short text, he captures the humanity of the city that is missed from a distance. He says, “One of my favorite compliments is, ‘Man, you take photographs of things people walk by every single day and don’t notice and somehow you photograph them and make them beautiful.’”<sup>19</sup> It is a simple yet profound idea: tell the stories of people who often remain invisible. In the process, Stanton captures the beautiful and sometimes heartbreaking complexities of life, as in a picture of a man standing on the subway platform with the caption, “She got pregnant with another man, then asked me to be the godfather.”<sup>20</sup> A single person’s story can be deeper and higher than skyscrapers that surround him, and just as sacred as a great cathedral and its precincts. Storytellers like Stanton are leveraging new digital technologies to reconnect us to our neighborhoods and to each other. Perhaps it should be no surprise that Humans of New York has become such a phenomenon and captured the imagination of millions of readers and followers on social media. That is the invitation of the Digital Cathedral: to put ourselves in places to encounter others, to appreciate the depths of the everyday, and to name it holy.

## IN CATHEDRAL

This larger understanding of both church and cathedral is essential for life and leadership in the Digital Cathedral. Rather than standing at the church door looking out, we need to be present in the places people work, live, and play, to enter into the sanctity of everyday life and understand the ways people make meaning

there. We cannot define our culture, our community, or individuals from the literal or figurative perspective of the institutional church. We must put ourselves in the places where life happens, and recognize all of life as being “in cathedral.” In the next chapter we will see how ministry leaders are embracing that perspective and how, through their ministries, they are making their neighborhoods their cathedrals.