

July 2017

Remember that it is not you that supports the root, but the root that supports you: Dedication thoughts from Father Charles

Paul speaks to the gentile Christians of Rome

This morning the reading at Morning Prayer was written in Paul's Epistle to the Romans (11:13-24) and contained a wonderful reminder, delivered to the population of Christians with a non-Jewish background. Sternly, he commands them not to 'vaunt themselves', and not to 'become proud', over God's chosen people, the Jews, because we are all of the same stock. Moreover, he reminds them, God has the power and capability to graft them back into the olive tree if he so chooses.

Rather, says Paul, it is better to stand in awe.

It is a theme we have picked up a number of times over the last year. The reminder that we don't simply stand upon the foundation of God's relationship with his chosen people of Israel, but that as people of the New Covenant we are immersed in the teaching and history of God's long relationship with humanity.

The Jewish Feast of Dedication

At this time of year, when we celebrate the Dedication of All Saints (50 years ago, on 1 July 1967), and the original church 149 years ago, we are reminded again of the significance of our Jewish roots. Much of the liturgy we engage with during our Festival of Dedication points toward the Jewish Feast of Dedication.

Our 'Feast of Dedication' recalls that ancient ceremony, marking the purifying and rebuilding of the house of God, the dedication of the Temple; and what we celebrate, in the first place, is the dedication of this temple, this particular church building as a particular place of God's presence with us in Word and Sacrament. But there are several levels of meaning. According to the Scriptures, the Temple means not only the building, but also the spiritual community which gathers there - "a spiritual house". Peter, in his first Epistle reminds us of this when he says that we are "a royal priesthood, a holy nation, a people of God's own possession".

The Temple is the sacred building - the Temple is the spiritual community. And there is still a further dimension as the Dedication liturgy reminds us, the Temple means also the house of God within each one of us, for we ourselves are "living temples" of the Lord, "holy and acceptable to him". On all these levels of meaning, the Temple is the locus of God's presence, the place of the meeting of the soul with God, in knowledge and in love, and the building which we celebrate is, as it were, a sacrament - an outward and visible sign of that gracious indwelling presence.

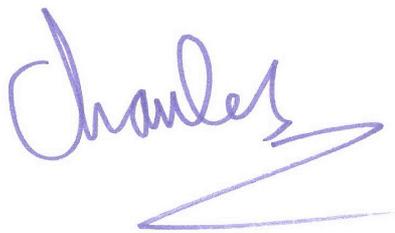
All Saints, Clifton

Our building stands here as a sign, a reminder, a call to recognise a sacred space, a remembrance of the holiness of God. In our secular culture, with its secularized institutions, and in this community ASC acts as a continual reminder. This building, this sacred space, and all that belongs to it, and all that goes in it and goes on in it, must reaffirm the sacred.

Think of everything that goes on here, day by day - the faithful recitation of common prayer (Morning and Evening), the daily Mass, the use of this space for sacred purposes, all the words, actions and all the music of our liturgies, the faithful keeping of the festivals.

These are all reminders: a remembrance of the holiness of God and our part in the missio Dei. At this time of our Feast of Dedication this must be our dedication. That we grow and care for the life, tradition, work and worship of All Saints and that we continue to make it fresh for new generations.

With prayers and blessings,

A handwritten signature in blue ink, appearing to read "Charles". The signature is written in a cursive style with a long, sweeping underline that extends to the right.

Yet for our sake.....

+Mike June 2017

As I write the Church remembers St. Barnabas – referred to by St Luke as a “son of encouragement.”

The background is as simple as it is challenging. We’re told that a quickly established practise in the early church, with no welfare state in sight, was to sell their goods and possessions and lay the proceeds at the apostles’ feet for distribution to those who had need. We are not told what kind of need, or indeed, whether that need was the outcome of irresponsible behaviour. Quite simply, where they saw need they wished to alleviate it and that process of alleviation meant personal sacrifice.

Indeed, we’re told that “No-one claimed that any of his possessions were his own, but they shared everything they had.” This is a commitment to communal living which modern life has largely squeezed out. Those who are called to the religious life experience the joys and struggles of communal living and there is one church in Bristol that has around 130 people living in community.

There is something very challenging about this, but there is also something very different than the way believers think today. Of course we have a taxation system that funds a welfare state; the early believers paid tax to the Roman Government which didn’t have anything that could be described as a welfare state, but they took on the additional responsibility of caring for those who had need.

Quietly I smile to myself when this political party or that claims to be the creators of social care and social action. Christians have been at the heart of this for centuries!

In the light of the recent General election, it is worth noting that the Bible doesn’t have a huge amount to say about Christian Citizenship. The weight of New Testament evidence would call on Christians to support the ruling authorities unless those authorities ask something of Christians that on the basis of our beliefs we could not agree to. So, when the ruling authorities banned the preaching of the good news about Jesus, Peter replied, “Judge for yourselves whether it is right in God’s eyes to obey you (the ruling authority) or God?” (Acts 4:19)

In the book of Jeremiah we read these amazing words, “But seek the welfare of the city where I have sent you into exile, and pray to the Lord on its behalf, for in its welfare you will find your welfare.” Jeremiah 29:7. Surely, this is a forerunner of Paul’s words in Acts 20:35 “In all this I have given you an example that by such work we must support the weak, remembering the words of the Lord Jesus, for he himself said, ‘It is more blessed to give than to receive.’”

Clearly when we exercise our vote we should be thinking about the welfare of the city (Greek 'polis' from which our word 'politics' derives) and err on the side of gracious generosity. But this isn't just about a way of voting, it's about a way of life. We're told in Acts 4 that the 'much grace was upon them all.' (v33)

My old ethics teacher used to insist that Christian ethics are the ethics of response. Until we understand the grace of God described by Paul in these terms "For you know the grace of our Lord Jesus Christ, that though he was rich, yet for your sake he became poor, so that you through his poverty might become rich." (2 Corinthians 8:9), we will struggle to be gracious to those in need. Graciousness never makes excuses for ungraciousness.

When we seek the welfare of others, Jeremiah tells us, we shall find our welfare. Personal sacrifice in giving will bring a sense of blessing that I believe nothing else will bring to us.

Lord, let your grace fall afresh on me that I might be gracious to those in need. Amen

The temple is where God is

Sermon preached by Jessica Smith at evensong with benediction on Dedication Festival Sunday 6th July 2014

"I was in Bristol on the night of the disaster. The following evening Fr Tomkinson had asked me to supper. I shall never forget the two of us standing in the smouldering ruin, the smell of burnt wood, the water, the devastation ... It seemed impossible that such a fate could have overtaken our beloved All Saints ... But as I look back I can see there was a lesson to be learnt. Perhaps we had become too dependent upon a building."

Those words, as I hope you will have realised, are not mine. They were spoken by the then Bishop of Southwark, Mervyn Stockwood during his sermon at Mass on the day of the dedication of the present building, July 1st 1967. Those words seem a little stark, harsh even, to recall 74 years after the destruction of the first parish church on this site and 46 years after the dedication of the rebuilt church. Taken too literally they could seem to point to some kind of "divine judgement", though I doubt that was the intention. The substance of Bishop Mervyn's sermon that day was to encourage his listeners not to look back to glory days but to look forward. In former days, All Saints had drawn crowds because it was one of the few parish churches at that time, certainly in this Diocese, which taught the full Catholic faith. By 1967 that was no longer true, partly owing to its pioneering work.

Cyril Tomkinson, the parish priest here in 1940, wrote in the Parish Magazine of January 1941, very soon after the blitz, "*There, down the road, is the wreck of the natural body of All Saints; but you, living and immortal souls, are the spiritual body of All Saints*", and by the grace of God that spiritual body will stand." He spoke of 'down the road' from Emmanuel church in Guthrie Road, now a block of flats, which afforded the congregation here a refuge in which to worship in the immediate aftermath.

It seems that the congregations here, down the last 146 years, have needed reminding, prompting and refreshing about people as temple being more important than building as temple. Perhaps it is a caveat more needed in parishes of our tradition than others. We have, quite rightly, a very high regard here for our temple building and the liturgy which happens here. I remember asking Fr Kim earlier this year what first attracted him to All Saints as one from a somewhat different tradition in the Church of England, and he replied “a sense of the numinous in worship”.

Fr George Bennett, in his farewell sermon at the end of his curacy in March 1982, quoted words we heard in the OT passage this evening when he said “*There is the danger, in a church where worship is the top priority, that overemphasis on the trappings of worship will lead to... ritualism. All Saints’ will be great, not when it chants, “We are All Saints’, Clifton, the temple of the Lord, the temple of the Lord”, but when it cries aloud, “Glory to Christ our Saviour.” For all its glory, this beautiful church is just a piece of equipment for pilgrims, and the beauty of the liturgy just the merest shadow of the glory to come.*” Bold words again, no doubt borne of at least a modicum of experience of the ‘ritualism’ to which he referred.

By now you may have gathered that I have access to a collection of old parish magazines which I have mined over the last few days. For several years I trawled through them regularly to find passages from the relevant months which might resonate with, or even amuse, the current congregation. The exercise taught me a lot, principally “plus ça change plus c’est la même chose”. We can get caught up in minutiae and we do often need reminding who we are - the body of Christ - and whom we serve.

However I’d like gently to make three counter-points - if I may term them thus - with different perspectives of time and status. The first is that I favour the simple definition that the temple is where God is, because it broadens our concept of temple beyond a building, beyond the people who worship there, beyond the worship itself. St Paul, in this evening’s NT lesson, writes to the Church in Corinth, “*According to the grace of God given to me, like a skilled master builder I laid a foundation, and someone else is building on it. Each builder must choose with care how to build on it. For no one can lay any foundation other than the one that has been laid; that foundation is Jesus Christ.*” The other side of the not dwelling-on-the-past coin is that there’s also a danger of not heeding the past enough. We are indeed commissioned to proclaim the gospel afresh in every generation, and we should all take that seriously, not just those who preach. Our primary task is to cooperate with our loving God in the coming of his kingdom. But in doing so we cannot disregard those who staked their lives and reputations in founding and developing All Saints as a centre of Catholic worship. We have to work out what that might mean in each generation, and since we are poised for a new era with a new parish priest, it is all the more à propos. The temple is where God is - in a holy building, in holy relationships, in Christ himself as the incarnate God. You could say that it’s about ‘holy bodily insides.’

The second point pertains to the Blessed Sacrament. When the old All Saints’ was destroyed, the Vicar wrote in his letter to the Parish Magazine the following month, “*The Blessed Sacrament was saved and most of the portable treasures.*” Notice the order in which he put those things. Someone, probably Fr Tomkinson himself, had considered the Sacrament was the most important retrieval to be made on that night. The temple within the temple? One of the most distinctive functions of the temple where we now are is that it houses the consecrated Body and Blood of our Lord Jesus Christ. In John 2, when Jesus

drives out the market men from the temple in Jerusalem, he says “*Destroy this temple and in three days I will raise it up.*” John explains that he was speaking of the temple of his [risen] body. I do sometimes wonder whether we have lost some of the reverence and awe accorded to the Sacrament by the founders and forebears of All Saints.

That brings me to the third and final point, which is also a huge part of what All Saints has always embraced: the Communion of the Saints and the life everlasting. The departed remain very much a part of the body of Christ, another reason why we must not sweep away the past in the name of progress. Our foundation is Christ and the saints have been the builders in their generations. We must continue to build as carefully and humbly as they did.

IN THIS MONTH ... JULY 1977

The Vicar, Revd J C Norton, writes on the 10th anniversary of the re-built church.

My dear Friends,

I first set eyes on the re-built All Saints on March 28, 1968, the day when I came down to Bristol to have a look at this job the Bishop of Bristol had written about. I never saw the original church, but I used to come up to the “little church”, particularly for my confession, when I was a Curate at St Mary Redcliffe, from 1952 to 57.

As I am not a very diligent reader of the *Church Times* I did not even realise that the church had been re-built. So you can imagine my surprise - and delight - when Canon Luetchford drove me down Pembroke Road from the south and I saw the splendid angles of Robert Potter’s church unfolding (or building up) in front of me. It must have taken great courage and imagination for the Vicar and PCC to have adopted this design - but how right they were!

In fact, on that March 28 I had little idea that this might be a possible job for me. I had come down from the north because it seemed only polite to do so. The splendid new church played little part in my decision-making, at least until it was explained to me that it was proving to have a real drawing power in itself (not true of many buildings, I think) and that it would be the focus point for a considerable re-think about how the Catholic religion could be presented in the Church of England. I was also assured that the drift of families away from Clifton had been halted, even reversed.

I have put in this bit of autobiography because it has something to do with our celebrations on July 2 when we offer Thanksgiving for the first ten years of the new building. For me, thanksgiving will centre round the extent to which the new All Saints has been able to encourage people to witness to the Risen Christ in our world. Without the witness the building would be a white elephant.

It is difficult for us humans to be happy and jubilant without also seeming to be complacent. I know that the many people who have been responsible for planning our open day would all wish it to be thought of as being entirely “open-ended”. We have taken the odd step, here and there, in working out what it means to be a Catholic Christian in these late-twentieth century years. We have a long way to go in finding out how to share, lovingly, humbly, but confidently, what we are discovering for ourselves.

We love our church. We know it exists for many others besides ourselves.

JOHN NORTON

Abbey House, Glastonbury

The trustees of Abbey House, where the annual All Saints’ silent retreat has been held for many years have told us that Glastonbury Abbey will not be renewing their lease and that retreats booked for 2018 will have to move elsewhere. This is a sad piece of news. Abbey House has been the perfect venue for this requisite cornerstone in the spiritual life of All Saints.

Many of us have happy memories of the place: the creaky corridors, getting locked out after an illicit visit to the George and Pilgrim, the double booking with the whirling dervishes who were not silent, the idiosyncratic plumbing system, the sound of clergy snoring a sheet of gyprock away from the retreatant’s own (resistant) pillow, the peace of the chapel as gales blew, the twig and pebble worship phase.

One can only hope that the house will in some way retain its special peace and presence for those who use it in its new phase, the first change in purpose since 1931.

We should remember those who work there now as they digest the news.