

St Mary's Stoke D'Abernon – Church Hall dedication

Sunday 9th July 2017

Nehemiah 2:17-20

Matthew 5:2,13-14

Our collect this morning voices the prayer: that we may 'so pass through things temporal, that we lose not our hold on things eternal'. Here we are, gathered to dedicate a building, the epitome of things temporal, visible, material, practical. How can we ensure that this material temporal church hall helps and does not hinder our hold on things eternal? And helps others in this community to find and take hold of the eternal good news of Jesus Christ?

There's a romantic strand in Christian tradition that resists 'buildings' because they're temporal. It points to the fact that God's work of creation in Genesis never included buildings – humankind was the summit of His work on the 6th day – and God is closest to his people in the great outdoors, where they're unencumbered by buildings: in the garden of Eden, when they're pilgrims en route for the promised land, when they're fishing on the sea of Galilee. This strand sometimes points out that even Paul, planting lots of churches, didn't focus on building buildings – but rather on gathering people, on preaching the Word, and on tent-making. Building the church wasn't and isn't about buildings. Is this the way to pass through things temporal and not lose our hold on things eternal?

There are plenty of good arguments for this view. Garden is organic and natural, whereas a building is 'man'-made. Too often buildings can be used as symbols of power – take the very first building in the bible, for example, the tower of Babel. Equally, Englishmen are known for treating their home as a castle: a fortress for keeping enemies out, and defending ourselves from outsiders within. If we avoid buildings then we avoid ownership responsibilities and maintenance issues. Meeting under a tree – as is common, in my experience, among churches in South Sudan – allows for an openness and 'ecumenical bonhomie'. Though perhaps this extreme presents a danger of all eternal and no points of connection with things temporal – where, let's face it, most of us are engaged most of the time.

So there are plenty of arguments against this romantic view and *for* buildings: afterall, didn't it ever rain in Palestine? (It only works for churches to meet under a tree where it's warm!). If the church does not own and provide buildings, then arguably it is dependent on other community structures, a sort-of parasitic presence – when shouldn't the church help support and sustain – underpin – other aspects of community? And owning property – does that so require a temporal focus that we deny eternal realities? Surely there *are* some institutional and bureaucratic aspects to owning property – financial, legal, organisational

aspects – that we need to manage, and manage well, if we’re going to go that route. But in managing those things, can’t they become the means to demonstrate they’re not the be all and end all?

A rather different tradition is offered in other parts of the Christian tradition. If ‘Rome wasn’t built in a day’ then Jerusalem wasn’t built in a year. But both were *built*. And of course Rome was built as a new Jerusalem, and the old Jerusalem was built in the Old Testament, as visible symbols, theological signs. More than a symbol, the Temple was understood to be the place where heaven touched earth, where God was understood to dwell. In the Nehemiah reading the Israelites are determined to rebuild Jerusalem for just this reason – it’s embarrassing that this symbol of God’s grace and goodness is in tatters, when the God of heaven is alive and well. They rebuild precisely to demonstrate how the eternal dwells in the midst of the temporal. Others mock and ridicule when Nehemiah begins the mammoth task of rebuilding – because it seems a hopeless task – but Nehemiah’s response is to point to the eternal in the midst of the temporal. ‘The God of heaven is the one who will give us success, and we his servants are going to start building’...

I wonder at what points the building of the Church Hall felt like that. A hopeless task in terms of the effort, the cost, and community opinion? Were there any Sanballats and Tobiahs and Geshems, I wonder, who mocked and ridiculed – or perhaps who told you you were crazy because the church is fading away? This building stands – as does the church itself built by saints long before us – as a result of those who were determined to raise a marker of things eternal in the midst of the temporal. Because some people – in the case of Nehemiah, a very few people – commit themselves to the common good. Others thought he was crazy in the face of the economic climate, the needs of the poor, the extent of the devastation. There are always other worthwhile causes that compete when we dare to address the *common* good. There are always viable reasons *not* to go ahead with a big risk especially when the responsibility requires some consensus and collaboration.

But St Mary’s has gone ahead. You’ve taken the risk of faith, of putting money where your heart is, of staking a claim to the eternal reality that God has touched down into the messy temporal stuff of life at Stoke D’Abernon, that God takes this community and its needs seriously. This building is a visible symbol, a theological sign, that God loves and cares, that God is alive and kicking, that God is present in and through this branch of the body of Christ, St Mary’s.

It is not either/or to things temporal or things eternal; but both/and.

But buildings are, in the end, bricks and mortar. For their symbolism to speak, for their meaning to become tangible, they must be inhabited. They are spaces for action, they are the stage for a story, a play. God’s love is not an abstract noun. It is hands and feet, it is dollars and pounds, it is sweat and toil, it is demanding and stretching, it is patiently caring, it is giving and giving again.

For this temporal building to become the pointer to eternal love, it must be the site of encounter, a venue for transformation. Such transformation is temporal AND eternal, but it begins with the temporal. With toddler groups for ragged parents, with food collection for

distribution to a local food bank or refugee centre, with spaces to welcome a variety of groups seeking to support the community – from the candidates in a hustings once every election-round to Alcoholics Anonymous once every week. Pray God this might be a place where strangers meet and leave as friends; where vulnerable children find a safe haven; where each of us are stretched to discover life here in greater fullness - comfort in our earthly struggles, and healing and direction in our pain – and yet worship the Divine. That's the reason that churches have spires – not to house the bells but to point to the eternal. And church halls: so our churches are not so eternal that they lose sight of things temporal.

It is not either/or, temporal or eternal. With Jesus Christ, it is both/and. Life here, now, bursting in all its fullness, and life eternal. And so it is love now, amidst all its challenge and complexity,

What matters is that we cling to the living God – the one who is above and beyond our temporal world, who offers perspective to the hamster-wheel of our lives, who – we trust- carries this fragile earth in his strong but gentle hands, who holds out to us the promise of eternal life. Yet who came to earth. By his incarnation he took on the temporal, he fully embraced the material, he became one of us with need for food and clothing and a place to lay his head – in order to show us how best to pass through things temporal that we lose not our hold on things eternal...

Amen.