

Sunday 19 February 2006: BBC Radio 4 Sunday Worship

The House of the Lord

Address 1

In the Black Mountains just north of Abergavenny in South Wales nestles the tiny church of Patrishow. It's dedicated to the holy hermit Ishow or Issui who had a cell nearby and who baptised pilgrims in the tiny stream of Nant Mair that flows through the dingle below the church. Legend has it that Issui was found murdered in the well he had built and because of his holiness, the well acquired healing properties following his death. A wealthy pilgrim who was cured of leprosy at the well left a hat full of gold to build the first Patrishow church.

There is an extraordinary sense of the other, of the unknown about that cool quiet valley today. Entering the church, it's possible to feel, hear and see the echoes of Isaiah's vision resounding in the very fabric of the richly carved 15th century rood screen: "Holy, Holy, Holy is the Lord of hosts; the whole earth is full of his glory".

But look a little harder and you discover that the holiness of God dwells amidst the often unclean history of God's people. While the rood screen survived the destructive excesses of the Reformers, the walls of the church were apparently whitewashed during this period to hide a number of paintings. In the centuries since, some of those paintings have emerged from the whitewash – the most prominent being the figure of doom dating from the 14th century and vividly conveying the ravages of the Black Death. The walls of this tiny church have been soaked, not just in whitewash but in the prayers, hopes, fears, dreams and conflicts of many generations.

The books of Ezra and Nehemiah in the Hebrew scriptures tell of the rebuilding of the Temple of Jerusalem after the period of exile in Babylon. The narrative is a curious mix of practicalities and idealism, of community vision and community memory, of the mundane and the "might-be". It's no wonder that we've found intriguing resonances for our own building work here at St Martin's more than twenty centuries later. One of the prophets of the exile, Ezekiel, in one of the most striking of the curious images that characterise his writings, tells of the glory of God departing the Temple – lifting its wings and leaving the city of Jerusalem desolate. For a community in exile, the destruction of the Temple encapsulated their shattered dreams, their loss of identity. And the vision of God's glory departing from the holy place symbolised a life of struggling with God's absence in a strange land.

When the exiles returned to Jerusalem, they brought with them that sense of loss of place and loss of God. The older members of the community brought with them memories of the first temple. And the whole community brought the hopes of Ezekiel's later vision of restoration and renewal where the glory of God returns and the temple becomes a place where the water of life flows freely. Even as they laid the foundations of the new temple, Ezra tells us, the stones echoed to the sound of both weeping and joyful shout.

The Jerusalem Temple of 500BC, a 13th church in the isolated Welsh countryside, and this building seeking to renew itself in the heart of 21st century London – these and countless others all tell the story of a vision of holiness, and a history of human struggle. Of walls soaked with loud laments at the apparent absence of God yet echoing with the joyful shouts of praise to the glory of God which dwells there. All tell of a community of place and time, of past and present, gathered in the presence of God in our midst.

Address 2

On the Greek island of Patmos stands the monastery of the Apocalypse enclosing the cave where St John the Divine is reputed to have received the visions which inspired the book of Revelation. The physical limits of this small cave appear not to have restricted the imaginative capacity of the writer. Whether we find ourselves inspired or bewildered by the extraordinary depth and range of the images and symbolism John uses, his words convey a vision of a holy city beyond physical limitations and with the throne of God at its centre.

In Dickens novel “Hard Times” it’s not physical limitations but the framework of “facts alone” which restrict the vision of Thomas Gradgrind and the family on which he imposes his censorious discipline:

“No little Gradgrind had ever seen a face in the moon ... (or) ever learnt the silly jingle Twinkle Twinkle Little Star..... No little Gradgrind had ever associated a cow in a field with that famous cow with the crumpled horn who tossed the cow who worried the cat who killed the rat who ate the malt, or with that yet more famous cow who swallowed Tom Thumb: it had never heard of these celebrities, and had only been introduced to a cow as a graminivorous ruminating quadruped with several stomachs”.

Solomon, in his great prayer at the dedication of the first temple, acknowledges God as one whom heaven and highest heaven could not contain and yet continues “May your eyes be open day and night towards ... this place where you promised to set your name.” (2 Chron 6:20). In the very act of building a place of physical limitation as the focus of community prayer and worship, Solomon recognised the function of the Temple as pointing to the source of life, the one beyond limits of time and space, yet who chooses to make his dwelling place with humanity.

The Hebrew scriptures describe in great detail the structure of the Temple itself, giving us clues to their understanding of the nature of God and the nature of worship. At its heart stood the Holy of Holies, the place of unity, the hidden heart of creation, the throne of God. This was separated from the rest of the Temple by the Veil, representing the material world screening the presence of God from human eyes. To pass through this veil, as was the role of the Great High Priest in the worship of the Temple, was to be transformed.

Christian imagery picks up this symbolism. In the letter to the Hebrews, Christ as the High Priest has entered within the veil; and in Christ, we, as a familiar Christmas carol reminds us, “veiled in flesh, the Godhead see”. In the Gospel, Jesus speaks of himself as the true Temple, the one who in his birth has made the holiness of God visible in human flesh, and who through the transforming act of his death and resurrection has made brought the possibility of eternity within the reach of human experience.

Our buildings, our temples today are places where we are called to connect the vision of heaven and the daily reality of our human lives. It’s rarely the physical limitations of our buildings that restrict us in making that connection. It’s more likely the Gradgrind-like failure of our spiritual imaginations to see beyond the stones, bricks and mortar to the Holy One who dwells in our midst.

May we pray today for a new spirit of revelation, a new vision of the God who, in Christ, has and continues to fulfil the promise of a new heaven and a new earth: “See the home of God is among mortals. He will dwell with them: they will be his peoples, and God himself will be with them.” (Revelation 21:3)