

**2018 26 June at 5pm in St Paul's Cathedral celebrating the 200<sup>th</sup> anniversary of the Incorporated Church Building Society.**

Genesis 28.10-17 and 1 Peter 2.4-10 and Psalm 127.

If God is, God is everywhere. So we can worship God up a mountain or by the sea as easily as in a church. But we need places set apart, holy, "made valid by prayer"; thin places where it is easier to pray.

"How awesome is this place. This is none other than the house of God, and this is the gate of heaven" (Genesis 28.17)

It is the text engraved on the glass doors of this cathedral. It is inscribed on the marvellous Murray and Maguire mid-Twentieth Century St Paul's Bow Common in the East End. In the West End it was the preacher's text in 1725 at the dedication of St Martin-in-the-Fields "pitched half way 'twixt heaven and Charing Cross". The foot of Jacob's ladder, God's house on earth and the gate of heaven, is *the* text for every church.

Church buildings and institutional religion can be a mixed blessing. The high places in ancient Israel were corrupted and needed reform. Our churches and cathedrals sometimes seem rather distant from the simplicity of Jesus of Galilee. Yet we also know our fallible, frail Church and our church buildings hold something inestimable. Our churches, the people, are an extraordinary part of the social capital of our country, and our church buildings are its cultural treasure in every community within it. Some churches are so beguiling it is easy to be absorbed by them, which is how they become idolatrous, but at their best they point beyond themselves to the God we see in Jesus and to an account of what it is to be fully human. What churches point to is to love God and love our neighbour as ourselves in the way of Jesus Christ.

In an age of prolonged austerity, in which there is deep anxiety about our global politics, fake news, alternative facts and the disturbance of democracy, nothing is more important than a place and people committed to being about our Father's business. We are not here because we are perfect but because we are loved and stand for and are judged by the values of God's kingdom – truth, justice, peace, love.

Two hundred years ago, not long after the Napoleonic wars had disturbed the politics of Europe, at a time of industrial revolution, great poverty, political ferment and social change, the Incorporated Church Building Society set about

building and enlarging thousands of churches and chapels to provide hundreds of thousands of free pews for a rapidly growing population.

At about the same time John Constable was painting Salisbury Cathedral, six great canvases, all now very well known. The one of 1823 from the garden of the Bishop's Palace, now mercifully the cathedral school, has the bishop and his wife with their soon to be married daughter, looking towards the cathedral, the bishop waving his stick in its direction.

The art historians say, "The bishop is master of all he surveys" but how wrong they are. Salisbury, like all our great cathedrals, like St Paul's, like every church is so much bigger than any of us. Did even Christopher Wren 'master' St Paul's? He set something free. It has its own life. In the intimacy, beauty and grandeur of these great buildings we find our place, what it is to be finite beings with infinite hope. I am not the centre of the story. In church I find my place with you and all creation in God's story.

Philip Larkin's 'Church Going' recognises the enduring significance of church as place, "A serious house on serious earth it is", but he is less than sure about what faith will endure church *going*.

A generation on and for many the debate is about whether you can have the community and values without the belief. Imitation is the highest form of flattery but Alain de Botton's secular Sunday Assemblies don't have the underpinning that sustains a church, but then a bishop would say that wouldn't he?

I love the beginning of Larkin's poem. It is much less quoted:

Once I am sure there's nothing going on  
I step inside letting the door thud shut.

And off he goes exploring, as Simon Jenkins has encouraged us all to do finding,

...a tense musty unignorable silence  
Brewed God knows how long.

A National Churches Trust survey found that nearly 60% of the population have been inside a church in the last year.

Today, as in every day, there is an awkward question about how our churches are paid for.

When I was vicar of St Martin-in-the-Fields, I did what I thought would be a 'soft interview' for Songs of Praise about the successful buildings renewal. There was a friendly conversation as we set up, the camera switched on and with a smile of steel the interviewer said, "£36 million, on a building? It's a lot of money." "Yes", I replied, "it is a lot of money *and* it is less than half the cost of Cristiano Ronaldo" who got a yellow card in Portugal's match last night's in Russia.

What we spend our money on says a lot about what we believe and value. Thanks to a familiar combination of hard work and generosity, the National Churches Trust distributes about £1.4 million a year and those grants to churches and chapels of every denomination across the United Kingdom have an astonishing capacity to match and lever other funding - £90 million at today's prices since 1953 to 12,000 churches.

Even more important is the NCT's encouragement to explore churches, spread knowledge, expertise and good practice and the development of the new Maintenance Booker

Individual parishioners contribute around £100 million a year to church repairs. The Heritage Lottery Fund has in the past contributed around £20 million a year and the Government through schemes such as the roof repair fund has been generous as they have with the reclaiming of VAT but the future is uncertain. The Taylor Review on the sustainability of English churches and cathedrals is important but there will be no more grants to mark the centenary of the end of the First World War and the funding of roofs has come to an end. The decision of the Heritage Lottery Fund not to fund churches as a specific category means that for the first time in forty years there is no public money ring-fenced for churches.

In many communities the church is the building around which the community has been formed. In Salisbury, in the wake of the poisoning of the Skripals and the violation of the city, the cathedral and the churches have been the places of gathering and have given stability. Similar happened in Southwark and Manchester, as after every public atrocity.

The 200<sup>th</sup> anniversary of the ICBS is not an exercise in nostalgia or *just* a thanksgiving for what has been achieved in the past, good and important though that is. This is an opportunity for us to say why churches matter in the present and for the future. We rededicate ourselves, for mixed motives, to

good purpose, because our society, God's world, would be so much the poorer without them. Church buildings are to God's glory and the common good. We value them highly, give thanks for all who care for them, today especially the Incorporated Church Building Society and the continuing work of the National Churches Trust.