

Refection - God is in this place

Archbishop Justin Welby urged churches to open their doors and welcome people into 'the presence of God' during a service celebrating 60 years of the National Churches Trust. Also video link.



Readings: Genesis 28:10-17; 1 Peter 2:4-9

It's a great privilege to preach at this service, and to be part of a thanksgiving for 60 years of service and of contribution to the life of the churches of this country.

The readings, of course, have their own particular character, with lots of stones in them. And the Old Testament reading comes at a stressful moment in Jacob's life. He is fleeing his brother, and he ends up with a

stone for a pillow. I can think of more comfortable sleeping conditions, but I can't think of a dream more striking or more life-

changing. As if by accident, Jacob encounters God's extraordinary holy presence: which leaves him tingling with joy – and overwhelmed and knowing that God is with him – despite the circumstances. He declares, 'Surely God is in this place



and I did not know it!' The presence of God has transformed a dry desert sleep-out into a gateway to heaven. The presence of God has transformed a guilt-ridden teenage tearaway into an aspiring future leader.

And I hope that is an encounter for which we all long – for ourselves, for our teenagers, for those who sleep out? It follows from Jacob that we may declare – in a desert or in this abbey, or anywhere – 'Surely God is

in this place'. It follows from Jesus that we know definitively that God is with us.

Our churches – old ones and new ones – are built in this conviction.

Those who give their savings to buy Liverpool Cathedral brick by brick did so as a statement of faith, right through the Second World War. To build a 'house of God' is one tangible way to testify that God is with us. Old churches, ancient churches, like Escomb

Saxon Church near where I used to live in Bishop Auckland, in continuous use since 640 AD, become 'thin' places – where the presence of God is quite tangible. We had a prayer day there once and a tourist came wandering in. The sidesman, thinking he might be someone local she didn't know, welcomed him warmly, gave him the prayer sheet and sat him down before he had a chance to get away. He spent three quarters of an hour there, and as he went out, he said, "I never believed in God until I came to this place." Surely, God was in that place.

But so do even the normal parish churches, perhaps new-ish by English standards, only a few hundred years old. I used to open my parish church every day all day, seven in the morning until seven in the evening, and people from the parish wandered in and out; but they often said, "Surely, God is in this place".

So we give thanks today for the work of the National Churches Trust, for their 60 years, as well as to the many others who are committed to caring for these tangible signs of God, so that they may continue to be shared. 16,000 churches, perhaps 12,000 listed, is both an opportunity and a challenge for the Church of England.



The opportunity is for them to continue to offer to their communities a place to meet God. This involves a complex dance for any church, a dance between the past and the present. On the one hand there is the remarkable history of our churches, a tradition of people meeting God over the generations, a long line of 'Jacobs' who have been transformed and surprised.

And then there is the living church of today. Peter speaks of the church as living stones – that is us, the people, the Christians – who are called to declare the wonderful works of the one who brought us out of darkness into His marvellous light. We are a missionary people, an evangelistic faith. We are here to declare – and so are our churches. Out of the overflow of God's love and creativity we seek to persuade others of the reality of the love of Jesus. We serve the poor, we build beauty and

enhance it with arts and music and with all the wonders of God's holy magnetic presence.

And the last of our dance partners in our buildings is the community, living in

the shadow of their towers and spires; going there perhaps occasionally at the great moments of life – of baptism, of wedding, of funeral – to whom the building should reach, to whom the building

should throw open its arms and welcome into the presence of God.

So as you might expect from an archbishop, my longing is to engage all who love and care for the church in this dance between past and present, between members of the church and living communities around it. I am convinced it is important that we look after our fragile buildings. That conviction is about witness – to proclaim that

‘God is with us’ in all his transforming glory. God has not retired! But it is also quite pragmatic: I long to ensure that our unused buildings stand ready for the time when we

grow to the point where we need them afresh! When that day comes, not if, we are unlikely to be worrying for their maintenance. Full churches do not fall down.

But not only is there opportunity in this extraordinary heritage we have – there is also challenge.

The challenge is to ensure our church buildings function as servant not master. Our historic stones exist to serve our living stones. They make a wonderful servant, but a very bad master. When the buildings dominate our agenda, when the issue of minor change or normal maintenance are the waking thought and regular nightmare of clergy and

people, then the building has become an idol which must be dethroned, and put back in its place.

Empty and cold churches, evidently struggling to keep going, do not proclaim “God is with us”; they may suggest that “God was with us”. God has not fossilized! The church in many places is growing in number and in depth of spirituality and love. All over the country there is a new fire spreading through the life of the

people of God.

Buildings are being refurbished, reopened, as places which call again with living hope to their communities, more than at any time in the last hundred years. Cathedrals

are commissioning more art than in living memory. Go to great historic cathedrals like Chichester and see there the wonders of their art. These are all signs of the Spirit of God at work – for where he is at work his creativity overflows into our buildings, our lives, our people, our communities.

Our buildings are opportunity and challenge, but handled well, the opportunity knocks the challenge for six. This Trust has served them well: long may it continue to do so! More churches are in better condition than for many years.

EM Forster in *Howards End* writes “Only connect the prose and the

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passion, and both will be exalted,
and human love will be seen at its
height. Live in fragments no longer."

Churches at their best have the
prose of maintenance and the
passion of being places of meeting
God. Too much of our discourse is
often about the fragments. Only
connect – join the dance! - and not
merely human but the divine love of
Jesus Christ will be seen at its
height.

Video at - vimeo.com/80593622